Syria's Civil War Explained

By Al Jazeera, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.22.17
Word Count **675**
Level **800L**

A displaced Syrian child, fleeing from Deir Ezzor besieged by Islamic State (IS) group fighters, hangs on the back of a woman as she walks through a refugee camp in al-Hol, located 14 kilometers from the Iraqi border in Syria's northeastern Hassakeh province, February 1, 2017. Photo by: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images

Syria is a country in the Middle East. The Syrian Civil War began in 2011. Since then, more than 450,000 Syrians have been killed. More than a million have been injured. Over half of the country's pre-war population has fled their homes.

In January 2011, protests began in Egypt, spreading throughout the region. This was known as the Arab Spring. Eventually, peaceful protests erupted in Syria as well. People were angry after 15 boys had been tortured for writing graffiti in support of the Arab Spring. One of the boys was killed. He was 13 years old.

The Syrian government, led by President Bashar al-Assad, responded to the protests violently. It killed hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoned many more. In July 2011, a rebel group called the Free Syrian Army formed. Its aim was to overthrow the government. From there, Syria began to slide into civil war.

What caused the uprising?

People in Syria were having difficult times. It was hard to get a job and earn a living. There was a lack of basic freedoms, and people were angry at the government. The government's harsh crackdown on protesters increased public anger. Successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt gave activists hope.

Climate also could have played a role in sparking the 2011 uprising. From 2007 to 2010, Syria got very little rain. Many people lived in rural areas and worked as farmers. But without enough rain, crops failed. This caused as many as 1.5 million people to migrate from the countryside into cities. This made poverty and social unrest worse.

There are many branches of Islam. Sunni and Shiite are the main ones. Most Syrians are Sunni Muslims. Still, Syria's leadership has long been dominated members of another branch, the Alawites. Most of the rebels fighting against the government are Sunni Muslims. The Shiites and members of other minority religious groups tend to support the government.

The majority-Shiite countries Iran and Iraq support Assad's government. Meanwhile, Sunni-majority states including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia strongly support the anti-government rebels.
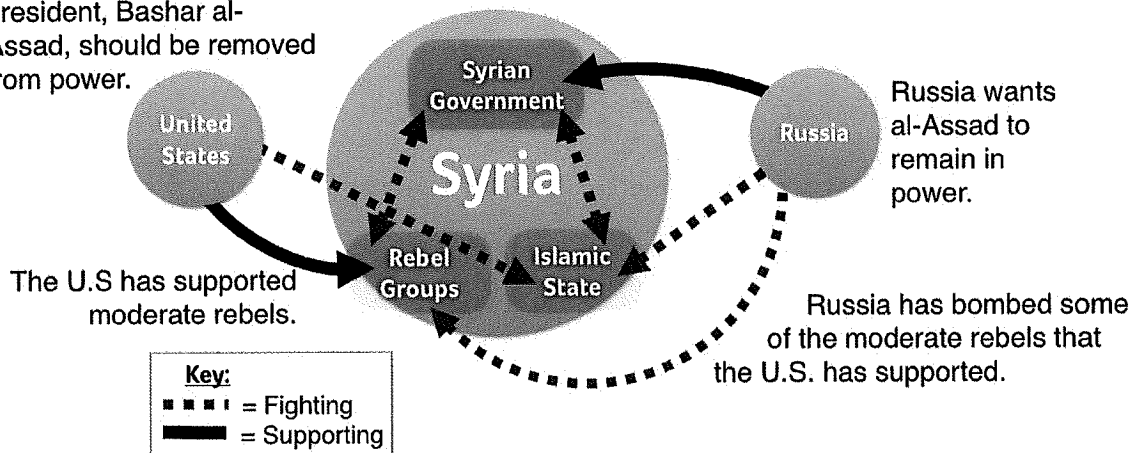
The role of foreign involvement

The United States has bombed Islamic State targets since 2014.

The Islamic State is an extremist group. It emerged in 2013 in northern and eastern Syria after overrunning large portions of Iraq. The group quickly gained international notice for its brutal executions and its use of social media. It has attacked both government and opposition forces.

Syria's Civil War: Foreign Involvement

The U.S. thinks Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, should be removed from power.

Russia wants al-Assad to remain in power.

The U.S has supported moderate rebels.

Russia has bombed some of the moderate rebels that the U.S. has supported.

United States

Syrian Government

Russia

Syria

Rebel Groups

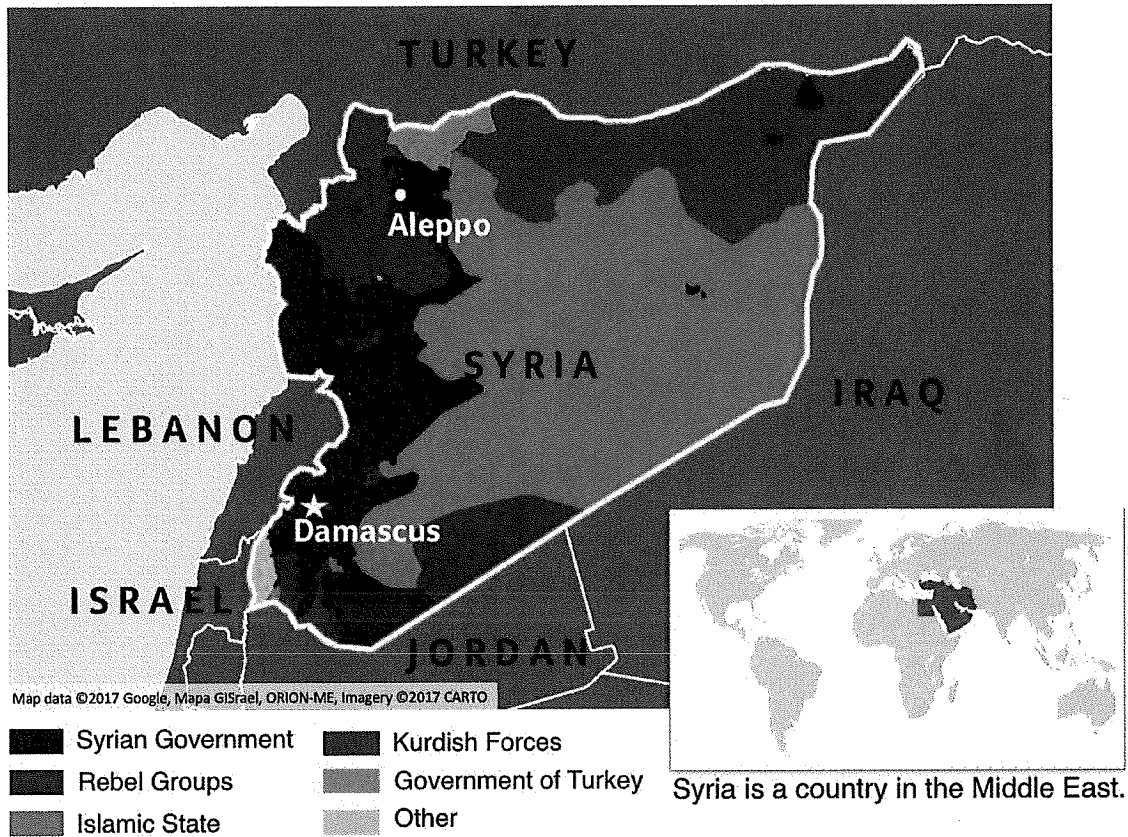Islamic State

Key:
■ ■ ■ ▮ = Fighting
▬▬ = Supporting

Russia has also gotten directly involved. In September 2015, it started bombing what it referred to as "terrorist groups" in Syria. Russia targeted the Islamic State, but also rebel groups backed by the United States.

The United States has stated its opposition to the Assad government. However, it has hesitated to involve itself deeply. This was even after the Assad government used deadly chemical weapons. President Obama had previously called that a reason to get involved.

The situation today

Before the war, Aleppo was the largest city in Syria. It has been the sight of major battles between rebel and government forces. In November 2016, the Syrian army invaded Aleppo and regained control of it. The Syrian government also currently controls the capital, Damascus. It also controls parts of southern Syria near Lebanon, and the northwestern coastal region.

Syria's Civil War: Who Controls What?

	Syrian Government		Kurdish Forces
	Rebel Groups		Government of Turkey
	Islamic State		Other

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Syria is a country in the Middle East.

Rebel groups, ISIL and Kurdish forces control the rest of the country. Kurds are an ethnic group primarily centered in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey.

Rebel groups frequently fight each other. The Free Syrian Army has weakened as the war has progressed. Meanwhile, extremist groups became more powerful.

The war is creating deep effects outside of Syria as well. Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan are now housing large and growing numbers of Syrian refugees. This is also impacting European countries.

Fighting has occasionally spilled over from Syria into Lebanon. Several rounds of peace talks have failed to stop the fighting.

With much of the country in ruins, millions of Syrians have fled abroad. Its population is deeply traumatized by war. Rebuilding Syria after the war ends will be an extremely difficult process.