WHO’S WHO IN THE SYRIAN WAR FACT SHEET

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BACKGROUND

The war in Syria, which has been raging since 2011, is much more than a local, national issue. Millions of Syrian refugees have flooded into neighboring Jordan to the south, into Lebanon to the west, and into Turkey to the north. In addition, sectarian violence\(^1\) between Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities has spilled over into Lebanon, and the conflict has exacerbated the cycle of violence in Iraq.\(^2\)

In 2011, peaceful protesters motivated by socioeconomic and political grievances called for the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the province of Dar’a. Syrian security forces responded with mass arrests and violence. Turmoil in Syria led to the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA), which led to the start of the war.

In 2012, the conflict became more violent, as the Syrian government attacked opposition groups with fixed-wing aircraft and artillery. Attacks by extremist groups such as the Nusra Front increased, and bombings in Damascus led the U.S. to close its embassy in the capital of Syria.

The city of Raqqah fell to Syrian rebels in 2013, and the Syrian government conceded most of its northeast territory to rebel factions. Later in 2013, the Assad government received support from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. Consequently, the U.S., European and Arab Gulf states, and Turkey began to support Syrian rebel factions. In April of 2013, evidence of the Syrian government using chemical weapons was reported to the United Nations. As a result, an agreement between Russia and the Syrian government to dispose of its chemical weapons was reached to prevent a military response by the U.S.

In 2014, Al Qaeda cut ties with the Islamic State, which resulted in IS militants seizing swathes of territory in Syria. The U.S. launched operation ‘Inherent Resolve’ to dispose of IS militants in Iraq and Syria, and began airstrikes in August of 2014.

1 [http://www.aawsat.net/2014/03/article55330324](http://www.aawsat.net/2014/03/article55330324)
In 2015, significant territory lost by the Syrian government provoked Russia to enter the conflict. Russia’s involvement in the civil war led the U.S. to establish a Train and Equip program for Syrian rebels.

In 2016, Russia and the U.S. signed a cessation of hostilities (CoH), which was later violated by all parties involved. In late 2016, the city of Aleppo fell to Asad’s forces, which marked a significant turning point in the Syrian civil war.³

TOTAL CASUALTIES (MINIMUM ESTIMATES)

- Over 300,000 people have been killed (December 2016) ⁴
- Approximately 13.5 million have been displaced (December 2016) ⁵

Human rights abuses that have been confirmed include but are not limited to:

- Chemical Weapons attacks on civilian areas⁶
- Barrel bombing civilian areas⁷
- Widespread use of rape as a weapon of war⁸
- Summary executions of prisoners, including children⁹
- Mutilation and display of corpses, including crucifixion¹⁰
- Torture, including of children¹¹

³ https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf
⁵ https://twitter.com/UNHCRinSYRIA
⁸ http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/04/syria-has-a-massive-rape-crisis/274583/
¹⁰ http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/
¹¹ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/05/syria-children-maim-torture-assad-forces-un
INTRODUCTION

Because of the extremely fluid situation on the ground, as well as the dangerous conditions for journalists that exist, accurate up-to-date information is difficult to obtain. Six years of fighting and horrific human rights abuses\textsuperscript{12} have led to an increasingly sectarian\textsuperscript{13} patchwork of groups, beset by shifting alliances and power struggles.

This is a brief guide to the major factions currently involved in the Syrian war. Only the most prominent are presented for the sake of simplicity.

THE REGIME

\textbf{Who:} Forces fighting for President Bashar al-Assad  
\textbf{Ideology:} Baathist, Secularist, Arab Nationalist  
\textbf{Supporting States:} Russia, Iran, China  
\textbf{Goals:} Preserving Assad’s regime.

President Bashar al-Assad inherited Syria from his father, Hafez al-Assad in 2000. Resentment at his autocratic rule boiled over during the Arab Spring protest of 2011. After he refused to heed calls to step down, protestors and deserters from his army began an open insurrection, beginning the war. He has remained steadfast in his position that he is the legitimate President of Syria and that his enemies are terrorists.

\textsuperscript{12} \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/middleeast/both-sides-in-syria-are-targeting-civilians-un-report-says.html?_r=1}  
\textsuperscript{13} \url{http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012122015525051365.html}
COUNTRIES SUPPORTING THE REGIME

RUSSIA

Commanders: President Vladimir Putin, Colonel General Valery Gerasimov, Colonel General Viktor Bondarev, Lieutenant General Alexander Zhuravlev

What: The Russian Federation

Goals: Regional dominance, powerful player in global foreign affairs.

Side: Regime

Ideology: Global superpower, alliance with Nationalist states such as Syria and Libya\(^\text{14}\), to block American influence to reshape region\(^\text{15}\)

Component Groups: Air Force, Army, Navy

Estimated Strength: 4,000\(^\text{16}\)

Strengths / Tactics: Conventional military, intelligence, cyber threat actors \(^\text{17}\)

In September of 2015, Russia entered the Syrian civil war, and has primarily aided the regime through the air. Russia has also deployed military advisers\(^\text{18}\) and special forces to aid the regime.\(^\text{19}\)

Russian jets have conducted over 17,800 sorties and 71,000 air strikes,\(^\text{20}\) primarily using two precision guided munitions (PGMs), the Kh-25 laser-guided missile, and the KAB-500S Glonass satellite-guided bomb.\(^\text{21}\)

The Humaymim Air Base in the Latakia province has deployed units such as the II-20 electronic intelligence (ELINT) platform, Su-24M2s, Su-25SM2s, Su-30SMs, and Su-34s. These units are supported by rotary-wing aircrafts and Mi-35 and Mi-24 attack helicopters, as well as Mi-8 utility helicopters.

\(^\text{14}\) http://english.dohainstitute.org/file/get/89ef19ad-46dc-4a19-b5d2-21a0a6360422.pdf
\(^\text{15}\) http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/29/world/meast/syria-iran-china-russia-supporters/
\(^\text{16}\) http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/22/graphic-russias-military-involvement-in-syria/
\(^\text{17}\) http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-dangerous-russias-military-16981
\(^\text{20}\) https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201612221048867683-russia-jets-syria-campaign/
\(^\text{21}\) https://janes.ihs.com/janes/Display/1319109
Russia has also conducted strikes from Iran’s Hamadan Air Base, consisting of Tu-22 M3s accompanied by Su-30SM and Su-35S fighters.\(^{22}\)

The Russian Navy has increased its presence in the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas. Ships in the Mediterranean Sea include Ropucha and Aligator-class large landing ships, ro-ro cargo vessels, the Slava-class cruiser Moskva, the cruise missile-equipped Project 636, and the Novorossiysk submarine. In 2016, the Kuznetsov aircraft carrier was deployed to the Mediterranean Sea accompanied by MiG-29s and Su-33s to prepare for strikes against rebel factions in Homs and Idlib.\(^{23}\) In the Caspian Sea, long-range missile frigates have included the Dagestan, Grad Sviyazhsk, Uglich, and Veliki Ustyug, which utilize Kalibr-NK cruise missiles.

The role of Russia’s army has been limited, and only few “Special Designation” Spetsnaz have been deployed to Syria for intelligence gathering and “limited assault missions.”\(^{24}\) Russia’s involvement in Syria has provided a year of positive combat experience for the Russian Federation, and has transformed Russia from a “minor actor” to a “lead player” in the Syrian civil war. Victory in Aleppo has boosted the morale of Russian troops, and has furthered Russia’s mission of asserting itself as a major player in international affairs.\(^{25}\)

### CHINA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commanders:</th>
<th>President Xi Jinping</th>
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<tr>
<td>What:</td>
<td>The People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals:</td>
<td>To “seize the initiative in a conflict”(^{26})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Side:</td>
<td>Regime, Russia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology:</td>
<td>Political resolution in Syria, counter-terrorism efforts against ISIS.(^{27})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Component Groups:</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army (PLA), People’s Liberation Navy (PLAN), People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) People’s Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF)(^{28})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Estimated Strength:** Reliable estimate unavailable

**Strengths / Tactics:** Counter-space capabilities, elite cyber threat actors

In August of 2016, China announced that it would provide training, equipment, and humanitarian aid to the Syrian government in the form of 40 million yuan (6.18 million US dollars).\(^{29}\)

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\(^{22}\) [https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319109](https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319109)<br>
\(^{24}\) [https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319109](https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319109)<br>
\(^{26}\) [http://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-us-military-comparison-2016-8/#chinas-military-goals-14](http://www.businessinsider.com/chinese-us-military-comparison-2016-8/#chinas-military-goals-14)<br>
\(^{27}\) [https://www.rt.com/op-edge/356281-isis-china-russia-iran-syria/](https://www.rt.com/op-edge/356281-isis-china-russia-iran-syria/)<br>
\(^{28}\) [https://jamestown.org/program/the-strategic-support-force-chinas-information-warfare-service/](https://jamestown.org/program/the-strategic-support-force-chinas-information-warfare-service/)<br>
\(^{29}\) [http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/960353.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/960353.shtml)
China and Syria have a longstanding military relationship, and a former U.S. defense official has noted that Chinese military advisors have been in Syria “for quite some time.” The Syrian government has purchased sniper rifles, machine guns, and rocket launchers from China, and has received training from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) on how to operate these weapons.

China seeks a political resolution in Syria, and is primarily concerned with counter-terrorism efforts against ISIS. China and Russia are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has shifted its focus towards countering terrorism. As such, China supports Russia’s counter-terrorism efforts against Salafist-jihadist groups in Syria.

In 2017, China will continue to support the Syrian government and Russia, and will likely seek to assert itself as a global superpower by increasing its role in the Syrian civil war.

REGIME AFFILIATED ARMED GROUPS

SYRIAN ARMED FORCES

**Commanders:** President Bashar al-Assad, General Fahd al- Freij, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, Major General Ali Mahmoud, General Taleb al-Barri

**What:** The National Armed Forces of the state of Syria

**Goal:** Preserving the Assad regime

**Side:** Regime

**Component Groups:** Syrian Arab Army (SAA), The Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF), Syrian Arab Navy (SAB)

**Estimated Strength:** 80,000-100,000

**Strengths / Tactics:** Ballistic missiles, Buk-M2 (SA-17 ‘Grizzly’) medium-range and Pantsir-S1 (SA-22 ‘Greyhound’) 

Syria’s armed forces have deteriorated since the outset of the war in 2011, and are likely to remain depleted. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) remains dependent upon operational support from Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia. Iraqi militias such as Al Nujaba (“The Noble Ones”) have also

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30 http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinas-syria-agenda/
31 http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1001150.shtml
32 https://www.rt.com/op-edge/356281-isis-china-russia-iran-syria/
33 https://janes.ihs.com/janes/Display/1303410
35 https://janes.ihs.com/janes/Display/1303410
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supported the Syrian government, and an estimated 2,000-5,000 militants are currently fighting alongside the SAA.

The Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF) has upgraded its MiG-23MLDs, MiG-SMs, Su-24M2s, Mi-25s, and Ka-28s, and has carried out strikes against rebel factions such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The SAAF has suffered heavy losses, and remains dependent upon Russian air support. The Syrian Arab Navy (SAB) has contributed in a limited capacity, targeting rebel factions with anti-submarine bombs (PLAB-250-120) fired from KA-28 ASWs.

Russian ground, air, and naval support have contributed significantly to regaining territory held by rebel factions. The Syrian armed forces will rely heavily on Russian manufactured equipment and support in 2017.36

AL-QUDS FORCE AND BASIJ MILITIA (IRAN)

Commanders: Major General Qasem Soleimani37 Brigadier General Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar38
What: Iranian Revolutionary Guard Special Forces39 and Paramilitary Support Units40
Goal: Iranian regional hegemony
Side: Regime
Ideology: Shi'ite Islamist, Iranian Nationalist
Component Groups: Al-Quds Force, Basij Militias
Estimated Strength: Quds Force: 15,000 total, Basij Militia: 90,000 (300,000 reserves) 41

Strengths / Tactics: Elite infantry force, superior training and military intelligence

The Al-Quds force is the elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, set up after 1979 to safeguard the Islamic Republic. It has been sent to secure Iranian interests in propping up Assad. Aside from battlefield support, Iran also supplies weapons, intelligence, training and strategic advice. They do not merely serve as soldiers, but have input on a higher strategic level.

Serving under the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, The Basij (Mobilization of the Oppressed) militias are considered the “backbone” of the IRGC ground forces, and consist of 740 regional battalions.

36 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1303410
37 http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/09/30/130930fa_fact_filkins?currentPage=all
39 http://www.cfr.org/iran/iran-revolutionary-guards/p14324
40 http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force
41 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319240#Basij
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The primary battalion, Imam Hussein, deals with the most significant threats to the country. The secondary battalion, Beit al-Moqdas, is a rapid mobile defense unit also known as the “morality police.”

The Basij militias often engage in barbaric acts that the IRGC would rather not “dirty their hands with,” including beating protesters with clubs and opening fire on non-combatants at peaceful events. Basij members embrace the culture of martyrdom, and have even turned against their fellow Iranians to achieve this “glory.”

NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF) & ALLIED PARAMILITARY GROUPS

Commanders: Fadi Saqr Brigadier-General Ghassan Nassour,43 Mihrac Ural44
What: Militia groups supporting Assad's regime. NDF is the best known and largest.45
Goal: Maintaining Assad’s regime
Side: Regime
Ideology: Shiites, Alawites, Baathists, Sunnis, Communists,46 Christians

Component Groups: NDF, Ba'ath Battalions (BB),47 TSR, Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP)48

Estimated Strength: 100,00049

Strengths / Tactics: Brutal, guerrilla tactics

43 http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215
46 http://www.aymennjawad.org/13866/syrian-resistance-pro-assad-militia
47 http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54167
48 http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215
Militia units that support Assad have been organized and combined into the National Defense Force. These militias provide infantry to support the army. Due to fears over the loyalty of the army and the risk of defections, Assad typically sends regular units into battle alongside loyal militias such as Suqur al-Sahara (The Desert Falcons).50

Hundreds of militias and paramilitary organizations are used as auxiliaries in the field. 51 Pro-Assad militias come from a variety of sects and political strands. The Baath Battalions, created by Aleppo party chief Hilal Hilal, is considered to be the “armed wing of Syria’s ruling party.” 52

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) operates in both Syria and Lebanon, and has fought alongside the Ba’ath Battalions to help the regime assault Aleppo. 53

HEZBOLLAH

Commanders: Hassan Nasrallah54 Sayyed Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyed

What: Lebanese Shi’ite terrorist group formed to fight Israel

Goal: Supporting Iran/Assad strategic alliance. "Confront the terrorist project."55

Side: Regime, Iran

Ideology: Shiite Islamism

Estimated Strength: 45,00056

Component Groups: None

Strengths / Tactics: Well-trained, disciplined fighting force which turned the tide for the Regime at Qusayr57 and Yabroud58 battles

50 http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/desert-falcons-elite-pro-assad-force/
51 http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215
52 http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215
53 http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215
54 http://themuslim500.com/profile/seyyed-hasan-nasrallah
56 http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.706956
Originally founded to fight Israel in southern Lebanon, the Shiite militia force\(^59\) joined the conflict in 2013. Its name translates to "Party of God." Assad has long been a backer of Hezbollah and allows Iran to ship weapons\(^60\) to the terrorist group through Syria. Hezbollah forces provided much needed reinforcements which have been instrumental\(^61\) in recent regime gains. In particular Hezbollah’s support was critical in the battles to recapture Qusayr in 2013, and Aleppo in 2016. \(^62\)

Hezbollah’s military wing has benefited from Russia and Iran, and the group is considered to be one of the most effective forces engaged in the Syrian conflict. \(^63\) Hezbollah recently acquired Russian SA-17 “Buk” medium-range air defense missiles, and is believed to have over 100,000 rockets.

These missiles are likely to be stored in Syria, and will compromise the national security of Israel due to their range and capabilities. \(^64\) Israel has repeatedly carried out airstrikes against convoys within Syria to prevent Hezbollah gaining advanced weapons shipments. \(^65\)

\(^{57}\) http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr
\(^{58}\) http://syriadirect.org/main/36-interviews/1284-activist-80-of-rebel-fighters-have-left-qalamoun
\(^{59}\) http://www.idfblog.com/hezbollah/
\(^{60}\) http://www.jpost.com/Defense/In-Depth-How-Iranian-weapons-go-through-Syria-to-Hezbollah-314313
\(^{61}\) http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/hezbollah-syria-assad-win-conflict
\(^{63}\) http://theweek.com/articles/601435/russia-teaching-hezbollah-some-terrifying-new-trick
THE REBELS

Who: Forces fighting against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. A combination of Sunni Islamists, secularist forces as well as Kurdish and other militias.

Supporting States: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, USA

Goals: Removing Assad from power, many groups aim for the creation of an Islamic state, Kurds aim for autonomy

There are a myriad of different factions fighting Assad. Protests against his rule spread across the country in 2011 and were met with heavy repression.

At the beginning of the war, most of them were, at least officially, secularist and democratic in outlook. As the war has progressed the rebels have become increasingly Islamist.
REBEL AFFILIATED ARMED GROUPS

ISLAMIC FRONT

**Commander:** Umar Abdullah

**What:** A coalition of Islamist brigades

**Goal:** The removal of Assad and orthodox Islamic State.

**Side:** Rebels, Islamists.

**Ideology:** Sunni Islamism

**Component Groups:** Ahrar al-Sham, Suquor al-Sham Brigades, The Tawhid Brigade, The Haq Brigade, The Ansar al-Sham Battalions, The Islam Army

**Estimated Strength:** Reliable estimate unavailable

**Strengths / Tactics:** Suicide bombings

The Islamic Front dissolved in 2015, and was considered "Syria's most powerful insurgent bloc." The group was formed as a merger between various Islamist factions that shared a goal of establishing an Islamic State.

The coalition featured Islamist brigades that had a semi-unified command. Tensions existed between the Islamic Front and ISIS groups, which were rankled by ISIS's brutal application of Islamist principles and extreme violence. In particular, a series of high profile murders, including the murder of a commander from Ahrar al-Sham and seizures of weapons depots by ISIS fighters. The coalition fought variously against ISIS, Assad's force, and factions of the Free Syria Army (FSA). On and off it had cooperated with FSA banner coalitions such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF).

Frequently, however, battalions had refused to fight fellow jihadis in ISIS, and allowed FSA banner brigades such as those in the SRF to bear the brunt of the fighting.

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67 [http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/529](http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/529)

68 [http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183](http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183)
AHRAR AL-SHAM

Commanders: Abu Ammar al-Umar, Ali al-Omar

What: A coalition of militant Islamists opposed to the Syrian regime and Salafist-jihadism.


Side: Rebels, Islamists.

Ideology: Honor code, which makes “minimal reference” to Islamic Law, al-hadina al-shabiyya,

Sunni-majoritarian

Component Groups: Jaish al-Ahrar

Estimated Strength: 10,000-15,000

Strengths / Tactics: Suicide bombings, suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDs)

Weapons manufacturing capabilities.

Founded in 2011, Ahrar al-Sham is composed of former inmates held in the most hostile prison wing of the Syrian government. The group is backed by Turkey and Qatar, and has emerged as one of the most effective forces fighting against the regime. Ahrar al-Sham has been a lead player in pivotal battles such as the capture of Aleppo in 2012, and the assault on Raqqa in 2013.

Similar to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the group has distanced itself from Al-Qaeda, and is critical of Salafist-jihadist organizations. Ahrar al-Sham is strongest in Idlib, and is one of the only rebel factions with weapons manufacturing capabilities. Ahrar al-Sham has engaged in joint-military campaigns with various rebel factions in Syria, but has predominantly coordinated with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

The group is committed to resolving the conflict in Syria, and seeks to establish a “Sunni-majoritarian”, or a non-democratic ruling of Syria.

Source: Jane’s IHS

69 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/58592a35e4b0d5f48e165292?timestamp=148223871211
8
70 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1783678
71 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1783678
JAISH AL-ISLAM (ARMY OF ISLAM)

Commander: Issam Boudani

What: Coalition of Salifist-Islamists targeting the regime, ISIS, and Kurdish forces.

Goal: Replace Assad with Islamic government

Side: Rebels, Islamists

Ideology: Salifi Islamism

Component Groups: Over 50, including Liwa al-Islam

Estimated Strength: 10,000–20,000

Strengths / Tactics: Smuggling, human shields, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Improvised Rocket Assisted Munitions (IRAMs), Aerial Assault Improvised Explosive Devices (AIEDs), Modified Type-63 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), Modified 9K132 Grad-Ps

Formed in 2013, Jaish al-Islam (JAI) is a unique, highly effective force centered in East Ghouta. Ideologically, the group adheres to a flexible version of Salifi Islamism, and is not concerned with ruling outside of Syria. Jal is strongly opposed to ISIS, and considers the group to be “enemy number one of the Syrian revolution.”

In 2015, JAI engaged in a series of attacks against ISIS in Lebanon, which raised tensions with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

JAI utilizes underground tunnels in East Ghouta to transfer supplies and weapons, and to launch surprise attacks from behind its enemies. Jal’s weapon modifications have set the group apart from other rebel factions. The group uses improvised mortars known as “hell

72 https://twitter.com/islamarmy_eng3
73 http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/533
74 http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/533#note13
75 https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/03/22/the-economics-of-war-a-case-study-on-jaish-al-islam/
77 http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/533
80 http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/533#note13
cannons”, and improvised rocket artillery munitions (IRAMs) to shut roads used by the Syrian government.

The pinnacle of JAI’s artillery is the Sahm al Islam 3 (“Arrow of Islam”), which fires three 122m rockets from a 6x6 Ural-375D, and can carry two reserve 122m rounds. Factories in East Ghouta and Douma have provided JAI with the ability to manufacture mortar rounds, uniforms, saline solution, and firearms. Slaughter houses and poultry farms have provided food security for Jal, making the group immune to siege tactics and food insecurities that affect other rebel factions. 81

In 2016, the Syrian Arab Forces carried out successful assaults on JAI near the Hawsh Al-Dawahra farms, and have killed or wounded a “large number of Jaish al-Islam” militants. 82

The Syrian government will likely continue its assaults on Jal, and is planning to launch a massive attack on East Ghouta in early 2017. 83

81 https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/03/22/the-economics-of-war-a-case-study-on-jaish-al-islam/
JABHAT FATEH AL-SHAM (Formerly JABHAT AL-NUSRA)

Commander: Abu Mohammed al-Julani

What: Group focused on forming alliances with Syrian jihadist factions not affiliated with ISIS or Al-Qaeda.

Goal: Global Islamic caliphate, Jihad, Overthrow of Asad, and liberation of Syrian people.

Side: Rebels, Islamists.

Ideology: Sunni Islamism

Component Groups: None

Estimated Strength: 5,000-10,000

Strengths / Tactics: Suicide bombings

Formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the Front for the Conquest of the Levant) parted ways with Al-Qaeda in July, 2016. The goal of this split was to rebrand the image of the group, and focus all efforts on “liberat[ing] the Syrian people.” Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is dominant in northern Syria and Idlib, and maintains positive relations with non-IS groups such as Ahrar al-Sham.

The group has been highly influential over Sunni opposition in Syria, and will likely remain one of the most powerful rebel factions in Idlib. In January, 2017 the group merged with the Nour al-Din al-Zinki group, Liwa al-Haqq, Jaish al-Sunna and Jabhat Ansar al-Din to form a new Islamist rebel coalition, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Liberation of the Levant Committee).

Sources:

90 https://janes.ihs.com/janes/display/1774488
THE ISLAMIC STATE (AKA: ISIS, ISIL, DAASH)

Commander: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

What: Terrorist group seeking global Islamic caliphate governed by sharia law.

Goal: Global Islamic caliphate, the apocalypse

Side: Rebels, Islamists

Ideology: Salifist Jihadism

Component Groups: None

Estimated Strength: 15,000-30,000

Strengths / Tactics: Chemical weapons, suicide bombings, drones, suicide vehicle-borne IEDs (SVBIEDs)

The most notorious of Syria's many factions, this Sunni Islamist group seeks to establish an independent state in western Syria and northern Iraq, and has declared itself as such. Formed out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, called the Islamic State of Iraq, the group initially entered the Syrian Civil War to support the Islamist cause there.

Extreme violence and brutality in enforcing Sharia law have been the hallmarks of its presence. For example, in one incident they displayed the crucified bodies of their enemies in Raqqa. Its Emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had a personal dispute with the leader of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and with Al-Qaeda head Sheik Zawahiri, which resulted in the group being expelled from Al-Qaeda. ISIS then stopped providing Iraqi oil revenues to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.

Sources:

91 http://news.trust.org/item/20170128161652-xes7v/
94 http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/22/the-battle-to-retake-mosul-is-stalemated/
95 http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17291
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It has also engaged in fighting Kurdish militias and other brigades flying FSA banners. ISIS is comprised mostly of foreigners and very few ethnic Syrians. It has been accused of betraying the revolution to further its own ends and of collaborating with the regime.

ISIS has held territory in Syria and Mosul, but has lost ground over the past two years. The group lost close to 14% of its territory in 2015, and approximately 16% of its territory in 2016. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched an offensive on Raqqa in November, 2016, and are actively working to remove ISIS from the Euphrates Dam in northern Syria. For more information, please see our ISIS fact sheet. 101

FREE SYRIAN ARMY (FSA)

Commanders: Various leaders 102
What: Umbrella of broadly secularist rebel forces formed mainly from Syrian army deserters
Goal: End of the Assad regime, democratic state
Side: Rebels
Ideology: Broadly secularist, some Islamist elements/sympathies
Component Groups: Supreme Military Council, Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front, others

Estimated Strength: 15,000 103
Strengths / Tactics: Guerrilla warfare. 104

Founded in 2011, the FSA is the oldest of the Syrian rebel factions formed by Syrian army defectors. 105 The group has suffered heavy losses both to regime forces and ISIS. Fresh defections from the Syrian army have bolstered their ranks over the course of the war. Defections are estimated in the 'tens of thousands.' In response to the merger of the Islamic Front, a loosely western aligned coalition called the Syrian Revolutionary Front formed under the FSA banner, commanded by Jamal Ma'aruf. The Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front is another FSA banner coalition. On occasion these groups have fought

100 http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/syria-rebel-recounts-his-time-an-isil-jail-20143911113109123.html
101 http://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-territory-has-isis-lost-2016-10
104 http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/free-syrian-army
105 http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/free-syrian-army
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the Islamic Front and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and have joined both against ISIS and the regime.

The U.S. believed that FSA would become a force capable of challenging the regime, and provided weapons and funds to the FSA for several years. However, the FSA has failed to provide a unified front, and several nations including the U.S., Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have temporarily suspended their support for FSA. The Trump administration has suggested that it may end U.S. support for the FSA permanently, and some experts believe that the U.S. is likely to increase support for the Syrian Democratic Forces as a result.

INDEPENDENTS

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES (SDF)

Commander: Colonel Talal al-Silu (spokesman)

What: Coalition of Arab, Kurdish, Syriac Christian, and Turkmen focused on removal of ISIS.

Goal: Self-governing Syria

Side: Rebels, U.S.

Ideology: Kurdish Nationalist, Christian, non-jihadist Arab sunni

Component Groups: People’s Protection Units (YPG), Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), Sanadid Forces, Syriac Military Council (MFS), Jaysh al Thuwar, Kita’ib Shams al Shamal, Jabhat al Akrat, Liwa Jund al-Haramayn.  

Estimated Strength: 30-40,000

Strengths / Tactics: Intelligence, training, equipment, U.S. intelligence and air support

110 http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The%20Road%20to%20Raqqah%201D.pdf
111 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1760717
112 https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1030300/oir-commander-describes-counter-isil-campaigns-successes
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Formed in 2015, The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are considered to be the most effective partner on the ground for the U.S. The group has liberated close to three million people in Syria, and over 44,000 square kilometers of ISIS held terrain.

As the SDF continues to gain ground, the group continues to attract thousands of Arab recruits, including senior officials from the Free Officer’s Union. The YPG and Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ) account for the majority of this force, and the SDF is likely to depend on the experience of these fighters moving forward.113

Turkey views the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the SDF as terrorist organizations, which has led to conflicts between the SDF and Turkey. The U.S. will work to facilitate a working relationship between the two sides, as it believes that the “SDF is the only force...capable of taking on the Islamic State.” 114

POPULAR PROTECTION UNITS (YPG)

Commander: Sipan Hemo115

What: Kurdish and allied militia groups in northeastern Syria, some Christian allies

Goal: Kurdish autonomy

Side: Against Islamists, aim for autonomy from Assad regime

Ideology: Kurdish Nationalist, Christian

Syriac Military Council (SMC)

Component Groups: YPG, Syriac Military Council

Estimated Strength: 40,000-50,000116

Strengths / Tactics: U.S. military training and intelligence

Kurdish militia groups such as YPG have been fighting to protect their areas in the north of the country from the ravages of war. It was recently joined by the Syriac Military Council, a Christian militia group. Predominantly, they have been focused on driving out ISIS, who enforced brutal Sharia when they were in control of cities, as well as kidnapping local leaders and vandalizing Sufi mosques. They have also fought Nusra and other groups from the Islamic Front. They aim at unifying and protecting Kurdistan and are affiliated with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that operates in Turkey.

No calls have yet been seriously made for an independent Kurdish state.

114 http://rudaw.net/english/analysis/10112016
116 http://syriancivilwarmap.com/syrian-democratic-forces/
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TURKEY

Commanders: President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, General Hulusi Akar, General Abidin Ünal, General Salih Zeki Çolak, Admiral Bülent Bostanoglu, Fikri Isik

Goal: Removal of Assad and elimination of Kurdish forces

Side: NATO

Ideology: Clear border of terrorists, regional stability, removal of Asad.

Component Groups: Turkish Land Forces Command (TLFC), Türk Hava Kuvvetleri (THK), Turkish Navy Forces Command (TNFC)

Estimated Strength: Reliable estimate unavailable

Strengths / Tactics: Second largest NATO army, airstrikes, F-16s, F-4E Phantom II

Disputes with Syria over adopting a democratic ruling system led Turkey to join the Syrian conflict in 2011. Ankara has primarily engaged in airstrikes against ISIS and Kurdish militants, while aiding select rebel factions. Turkey’s relationship with President Assad has grown increasingly hostile since 2011. Events such as the murder of Turkish citizens by Syria in 2012, the downing of a Syrian helicopter by Turkey in 2013, and the downing of a Syrian Mig-23 by Turkey in 2014 have raised tensions between Turkey and Syria.

Following a suicide bombing in the city of Suruç in 2015, Turkey engaged in a series of airstrikes against ISIS, PKK, and YPG units in Syria. In 2016, Turkish F-16s targeted primarily Kurdish militants in Syria, eastern Turkey, and Iraq, raising concerns with the U.S., who supports Kurdish militants such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Turkey has backed rebel factions such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Ahrar al-Sham, and entered the Syrian conflict to remove Assad from power. In 2016, Turkey altered its agenda by prioritizing combatting ISIS and Kurdish YPG forces.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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117 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319137
118 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319320
119 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1322782
120 http://www.dw.com/en/whats-turkeys-military-goal-in-syria/a-36600491
121 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319137
122 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319137
Consequently, Turkey adopted a “hedging” strategy, which led President Erdogan to concede Aleppo to achieve its counter-terrorism goals. Turkey was granted permission by Russia to conduct “Euphrates Shield”, an operation aimed at ridding the city of Jarabulus of ISIS and PKK forces.

As a result of this deal, rebel factions allied with Turkey are now considering cutting ties with Ankara. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham leader Abu Mohammed al-Julani has proposed the formation of the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), which would include rebel factions such as Ahrar al-Sham, Nour al-Din al-Zinki, Suqor al-Sham and Liwa al-Haq. The formation of the SIC will likely end relations between these rebel groups and Turkey, according to Abu Mohammed al-Julani. 123

SAUDI ARABIA

Commanders: King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, General Abdulrahman bin Saleh Al-Bunyan, General Abdulrahman bin Saleh Al-Bunyan, Lieutenant General Abdullah bin Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Sultan, Lieutenant General Eid bin Awadh al-Shalawi, Prince Miteb bin Abdullah al-Saud

Goal: Removal of Assad

Side: Rebels, Western Coalition

Ideology: Wahhabi-Islam

Component Groups: The Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF), Royal Saudi Navy (RSN)

Estimated Strength: Reliable estimate unavailable

Strengths / Tactics: Coordinated airstrikes, intelligence

Since 2011, Riyadh has supported Sunni Arab rebel factions opposed to the regime, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA). As a Wahhabi-Islam state, Saudi Arabia has also supported Salafist groups such as Jaish al-Islam and Jaish al-Fatah, in an effort to deter them from embracing the narrative of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. 124 It is estimated that Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars on weapons for these rebel factions, and Riyadh has worked closely with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to train and arm these groups. These weapons include AK-47s and U.S. made TOW anti-tank missiles.

123 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/58592a35e4b0d5f48e165292?timestamp=14822387121
124 http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/fpi-bulletin-saudi-arabia-and-syrian-civil-war
Saudi Arabia will likely continue to support select rebel factions in 2017, and will place an emphasis on counter-terrorism measures to prevent a potential influx of ISIS fighters that may migrate to Riyadh as result of the war.

The United States of America

**Commanders:** President Donald Trump, Army Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, Major General Rupert Jones, Major General Scott Kindsvater, Brigadier General James S. O’Meara, Command Sergeant Major Benjamin Jones, Colonel John L. Dorrian

**Goal:** Removal of Assad, Elimination of ISIS

**Side:** Rebels, Coalition

**Ideology:** Regional stability, removal of Asad, elimination of ISIS

**Component Groups:** Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force

**Estimated Strength:** 3,780

**Strengths / Tactics:** World class air force, intelligence

Since 2012, the U.S. has engaged in multilateral efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria.

Concerns over an expanding Islamic State led the U.S. to launch operation “Inherent Resolve” in 2014. This coalition effort has been aimed at eradicating the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Since the operation was launched, the U.S. has conducted 6,191 airstrikes in Syria, and has used aircrafts such as the F-15, F-16, B-1B, F-22, A-10, and B-52. The U.S. has partnered with the Kurdish People’s protection Units (YPG), and launched a program to train and equip Syrian rebels.

In 2012, President Obama approved the Timber Sycamore program, which authorized the CIA to train rebel factions fighting against the regime in Syria. This program has helped rebel forces delay offensives by Russian and Syrian forces in several areas of Syria.

This program was designed to “promot[e] the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.”

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125 http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-Us/Biographies/
126 http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/03/31/exclusive-21-generals-lead-an-isis-war-the-u-s-denies.html
127 https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1319145
128 https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve
129 http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0SV23020151106
Failure to yield capable fighters led the Pentagon to dissolve the program in 2015, and the DoD and CIA are currently only supporting select rebel factions.\(^{130}\)

In 2015, the U.S. deployed Special Operations Forces (SOF) to support Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. These “expeditionary targeting force[s]” have been used to provide intelligence and reconnaissance for air strikes, and to conduct raids to free hostages.

In 2016, the Pentagon announced that it would send 200 additional SOF to Syria, and also deployed High Mobility Rocket Systems to Jordan, which have been used to strike ISIS in Syria.\(^{131}\)

In support of operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. Navy has deployed the USS *Arleigh Burke* and USS *Philippine Sea* to the Red Sea and North Persian Gulf. These ships have launched approximately 47 Tomahawk cruise missiles (TLAMs) from international waters.\(^{132}\)

The U.S. is likely to continue its counter-terrorism efforts against ISIS, and will continue to support select Syrian rebel factions.

Donald Trump has announced that he will hit the Islamic state “quickly”, and his administration will likely take a more aggressive stance towards ISIS in Syria and Iraq.\(^{133}\)

\(^{130}\) https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/are-cia-backed-syrian-rebels-really-fighting-pentagon-backed-syrian-rebels/

\(^{131}\) https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1322801

\(^{132}\) https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/1322789

\(^{133}\) https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2016-12-13/with-aleppo-falling-what-happens-next-in-syria-s-civil-war
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The Western Coalition (Operation Inherent Resolve)


Goal: Elimination of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

Side: Coalition, select rebel factions

Component Groups: 68 total partners

Estimated Strength: Reliable estimate unavailable

Strengths / Tactics: Coordinated airstrikes, intelligence, advanced weaponry.

The rise of the Islamic State sparked the launch of operation Inherent Resolve by the U.S. and partner nations in 2014. Operation Inherent resolve includes 68 global partners from Africa, the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and various other institutions.

The total cost of operations as of December 15th, 2016, is $10.7 billion. The coalition has conducted 10,850 strikes in Iraq, and 6,520 in Syria, a total of 17,370 strikes. The mission of operation Inherent Resolve is to “militarily defeat DA’ESH in the Combined Joint Operations Area in order to enable whole-of-coalition governmental actions to increase regional stability.”

In Syria, the coalition has sought out partners who are willing and capable of defeating Da’esh. The campaign consists of four phases, which include “degrade,” “counterattack,” “defeat,” and “support stabilization.”

134 http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-Us/Biographies/
135 http://theglobalcoalition.org/partners/
136 http://theglobalcoalition.org/partners/
137 https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve
139 http://www.inherentresolve.mil/campaign/
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## Coalition Partners

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OTHER RESOURCES

Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi
http://www.aymennjawad.org/

Dr. Joshua Landis
http://syriacomment.com/

140 http://theglobalcoalition.org/partners/