

# Everything You Need to Know About the Syrian Civil War

From how Syria got embroiled in a bloody civil war in the first place to why the U.S. is getting involved now, here's everything you need to know about the Syrian Civil War and President Obama's response.

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As the United States moves closer to a possible military strike on Syria, an already complicated international crisis is about to get even messier. From how Syria got embroiled in a bloody civil war in the first place to why the U.S. is getting involved now, here's everything you need to know about Syria, but were too afraid to ask.

At just 67-years-old, Syria is a nation that has endured the amount of political strife of a country more than twice its age. Following its independence from France in 1946, Syria quickly fell into a pattern of political instability and military coups for the first few decades of its existence.

The most prominent of these conflicts stemmed from Syria's involvement in the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, during which Syria and its Arab allies were defeated by Israeli forces. The conflict planted the seeds for future animosity to grow between the two countries, while giving way to the rise of nationalist sentiments and concentrated military power.

Continued political uncertainty in the region erupted in 2011 during the Arab Spring, and eventually manifested in Syria as protesters rose in opposition of the reigning Baathist regime.

## So, who's in charge?

Dating back to 1947, the Baathist party has ruled Syria for the vast majority of the country's existence (50 years, to be exact). The modern Ba'ath party is identified as a socialist movement and is currently led by Bashar al-Assad, who came to power after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad. Although the party has evolved its ideologies throughout its rule, it has maintained significant political power leading into the current civil war.

## Why are people fighting in the first place?

The 2011 Arab Spring activism in Egypt and Tunisia inspired Syrian protesters to take to the streets in demonstrations against Assad's regime. Syrians voiced their unhappiness with the stagnant political process and were advocating for democratic reforms. These protests did not go over well with the government, which responded with extreme measures including the kidnapping, torture and killing of protesters. Government troops began opening fire on civilians, who fired back in response. Civilian rebel forces then began organizing and

arming themselves to combat government violence, which led to government military powers destroying entire neighborhoods and towns. Combined, the rising tensions between the two groups created the current state of civil war. Recent allegations of the government's chemical weapon use on civilians have prompted the international community to contemplate serious intervention, but that doesn't mean the conflict has been limited to the Syrian population exclusively. Volunteer rebel fighters from various Middle Eastern countries have joined Syrian rebels in their cause. Some of these foreign fighters joined the action because they want Syria to undergo democratic, political change; others joined because of their personal religious opposition to Assad's secular regime.

### **So the rebels are the Twitter-hacking Syrian Electronic Army?**

No. The Syrian Electronic Army, or the SEA, is a group of pro-government computer hackers and are not officially endorsed by the Assad regime. Although computer hacking seems to be a stereotypically rebel-centric pastime, the SEA has labeled itself as a group of young activists who want to use their high-tech skills to squash cyber opposition of the Syrian government. So far, the SEA has mostly targeted western websites and media groups, including Twitter, The New York Times and The Onion.

### **Where does Russia stand on all of this?**

The Syrian Civil War has huge implications for the state of international relations, and not just in the Middle East, but across the world and even within the United States. On an international scale, the Syrian conflict creates a complicated diplomatic situation, especially in terms of Russian-American relations. As a long-term ally of the Syrian government, Russia has strong ties to the Assad regime and blocks the U.N. Security Council from allowing any foreign intervention against the current Syrian government without their blessing. Essentially, if the U.S. wanted to get involved in current Syrian affairs (as the White House is hinting it may want to do) it would need to do so without U.N. approval. On Saturday, [Putin](#) rejected the American evidence that [Syrian](#) forces used chemical weapons, calling the suggestion "utter nonsense." "While the Syrian army is on the offensive, saying that it is the Syrian government that used chemical weapons is utter nonsense," Putin told journalists in Vladivostok, according to Russia's Interfax news agency. He urged the United States to present its evidence to the UN Security Council and cautioned President Obama about the consequences of getting involved. "I would like to address Obama as a Nobel Peace Prize laureate: before using force in Syria, it would be good to think about future casualties," he said. [Read: Putin Rejects Syria Chemical Weapons Accusations as 'Utter Nonsense'](#)

### **And what about Israel?**

As Israel's strongest ally, the U.S. has pledged to defend Israel if the country is put under any kind of security threat. This means that if the U.S. took any kind of military action in Syria, the Syrian government might retaliate with strikes against Israel, which could then propel the entire region into a much larger Middle Eastern conflict, potentially even drawing Iran into action.

### **But if the U.S. did intervene, is there a plan? What would the targets be?**

As noted by ABC'S Luis Martinez, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel confirmed that President Obama asked the Pentagon to provide military options in Syria, but implied that the request was more of a "just in case"

scenario. "The Defense Department has responsibility to provide the president with options for all contingencies, and that requires positioning our forces, positioning our assets to be able to carry out different options, whatever options the president might choose," Hagel said, according to The Associated Press. Potential targets include Syrian military or government command and control facilities as well as delivery systems for Syria's chemical weapons, namely artillery or missile launchers. [Read more about the Pentagon's plans for Syrian strikes.](#)

### **Why are some members of Congress so angry at President Obama?**

The possibility of military action is under heavy scrutiny by members of Congress and White House officials alike, which creates some serious tensions given that Congress must approve the president's potential military plans. On Wednesday, Speaker of the House John Boehner [fired off a letter to President Obama](#) complaining about a lack of Congressional involvement in any decisions related to U.S. involvement in Syria. The two political leaders have since spoken about the situation, but next steps remain hazy. That said, if history serves as any kind of reference, the president can bypass Congressional approval. As ABC's Arlette Saenz notes, although the Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war, [Congress has not formally done so since World War II](#). U.S. operations in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya were all conducted without any formal declaration of war. The possibility of not being consulted rubs many lawmakers the wrong way, so much so that 116 of them have [sent their own letter to the president](#).

### **Where does the U.S. stand now?**

On Friday, both President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry addressed the current U.S. position on Syria. As ABC's Michael Falcone notes, President Obama said he has ["not made any decisions"](#) on whether to launch a military strike on Syria, and assured the American public that if he does, it will be a "limited, narrow act." In a more fiery response, Secretary Kerry argued in [favor of punishing Syria](#), stating that a chemical attack by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad killed 1,429 people, including 426 children. So, as of Friday afternoon, the Obama Administration was still deciding, but is skillfully laying down the groundwork for possible intervention.

### **What will happen if the U.S. does intervene?**

As reported by ABC's Colleen Curry, U.S. intervention [might lead to a much larger](#) chain reaction in the Middle East, possibly involving Syrian allies like Hezbollah and Iran. In a more dire situation, Syria could even launch attacks on Israel, a strong U.S. ally. "When you do a military strike it often has ramifications you don't anticipate," said Dan Byman, a senior fellow of foreign policy at Brookings Institute.