

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: A DECADE LATER

By Ben Winer

In early March of 2011, 14-year-old Mouawiya Syasneh and 18 of his friends painted graffiti on a wall of a local school in the southern city of Daraa, Syria.² What they wrote, and the events that immediately unfolded, sparked the decade-long Syrian Civil War that continues to ravage the country to this day.

“Your turn next, Dr. Bashar al-Assad,” the wall read.³ Inspired by the events that were unfolding in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—countries that became focal points during the Arab Spring—the teenagers were eager to foster similar political attitudes in their own country. Although they had not fully intended to, Mouawiya and his friends inspired others. Within days, large groups of local protesters assembled, demanding social equity, democracy, and an end to the oppressive Assad regime. Protests spread to other cities across the country, and to quell the upheaval, military troops fired upon demonstrators in the crowds.⁵

Ten years later, the Assad regime continues to fight opposition forces throughout the country. And with many international players hoping to achieve their own political and security goals in the conflict, the war appears to have no diplomatic end in sight.⁴

The beginning of international involvement came with the growing power of the Islamic State (ISIS)—an offshoot of al-Qaeda with an extremist fundamentalist doctrine.

At the height of its power, ISIS controlled nearly 40% of Syria, including major cities such as Mosul and Raqqa.⁶ The group utilized brutal tactics such as beheading Western journalists, terrorizing ethnic minorities, and tormenting anyone that opposed their fundamentalist view of Islamic society. By mid-October 2014, the United States initiated “Operation Inherent Resolve” with the mission of destroying ISIS through powerful airstrikes, aiding opposition forces, and working with coalition allies on the ground.⁶

To this day, the main foreign influences in Syria include Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States. While the elimination of ISIS had been a shared goal among these powers, now that the group has lost both its leadership and geographic territory, some international powers have new aims in mind.

On one side of the war is the regime. Assad has had the support of Iran and Russia, long-time allies of the government, who have provided military and monetary aid throughout the duration of the conflict. Russia has established air cover for the Syrian army through advanced missile defense systems and fighter plane protection, while Iran has shipped weapons and munitions and advised Shi’ite militia groups like Hezbollah to support the counterinsurgency.

The other superpower involved in the region is the United States, which has transitioned its strategy throughout the war, piv-



oting from hopes to support the removal of the Assad government during the Obama administration to prioritizing the elimination of ISIS. Beyond that, the Trump and Biden administrations have utilized bomb strikes on both government bases and jihadist strongholds to assert U.S. interests of stability.

In the northeastern part of the country, the Kurds—a Sunni minority in Syria with a presence in Iraq and southeast Turkey—have fought alongside opposition forces against the regime in hopes of attaining independence and statehood. Due to historic conflict, however, the Turkish military has skirmished with the YPG—the Kurdish militia—and tensions persist.

Meanwhile, in northwestern Syria, Jihadist forces, most notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and other opposition forces, like the Free Syrian Army, have fought endlessly to retain autonomy from the regime near the city of Idlib.

“We’re all tired,” one resident of Idlib said. “People here all say they’re tired, but despite this they’re living and fighting. Despite all the difficulties here, it’s still better than living under regime-controlled areas.”⁴

In addition to the current geo-strategic

military complexities, the most devastating aspect of the conflict has been the humanitarian crisis, displacing and impoverishing over 10 million civilians around the world. While 6.7 million refugees have been displaced internally within Syria, 5.6 million have chosen or been forced to leave the country altogether. In addition to the displacement of millions, the conflict has caused horrific loss of life. There have been 387,118 documented deaths and 205,300 missing people—numbers that make the Syrian Civil War one of the deadliest wars in the 21st century.¹

The conflict has also forced neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and many European countries to take in large amounts of refugees, resulting in various political, social, and economic problems. Lebanon has taken in over one million refugees alone, leading to Syrians comprising

over 25% of the total Lebanese population. With so many international players and interests remaining in the conflict, the war does not seem to have an end in sight. Moreover, with the regime’s success in taking back large swaths of territory, Assad has no reason to negotiate. Ultimately, it’s up to the regime, the opposition forces, and hegemons like the United States and Russia for the conflict to come to an end. The hope is that regardless of the political outcome, the Syrian people can live freely and peacefully.

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