

Information on the Situation in Syria

The United States has historically had tense relations with Syria. The United States has had Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism for decades, and has accused Syria of supporting Hezbollah and Hamas, two organizations the United States considers to be terrorist. Syria's ties to Iran are also unsettling to the United States.

In 2011, protests spread throughout Syria denouncing government corruption and demanding an end to the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad responded to the civilian protests with planes, helicopters, tanks, and snipers. This was the beginning of an ongoing civil war that has led to the deaths of over 100,000 Syrians, most of them civilians. Over six million Syrians have been forced from their homes by the fighting, more than a quarter of Syria's population. More than two million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries where they live as refugees.

In November of 2011, the Arab League expelled Syria as a member and imposed sanctions on the Syrian government. Fighters from Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran, have entered the fighting on behalf of the Syrian government. Israeli aircraft have attacked targets in Syria to prevent weapons from falling into the hands of Hezbollah. Extremist religious groups have entered the fight against Assad's regime. The ongoing violence and the danger of the conflict becoming a regional war have made Syria a top concern for leaders in the Middle East and around the world.

In late 2011, President Obama (and other world leaders) called on Assad to step down from power. Some politicians in the United States have called for U.S. military intervention or arming rebel forces. In August 2012, President Obama warned the Syrian government that if it used chemical weapons it risked provoking a U.S. response. Obama called the use of chemical weapons a "red line," meaning a line that Syria should not cross.

In spite of the "red line" warning, it became apparent in 2013 that chemical weapons had been used in the fighting. The United States claims that the Syrian army has used chemical weapons on several occasions in the fight against rebel forces, a claim that Assad denies. The U.S. government argues that Syrian forces used chemical weapons on August 21, 2013, killing 1,429 people including 426 children. The UN is investigating the attack in an effort to determine exactly what happened.

The Obama administration has made the case for a military strike against Syria, a decision that faces resistance at home and abroad. While much of the world has been horrified by the terrible images of Syrians killed in these attacks, there has been little international support for a military response to the events. Russia and China have signaled that they will block international military intervention proposed by the United Nations Security Council. Russia has proposed a diplomatic plan to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons. Given the division of opinion and the risks of military action, President Obama has decided to consider the Russian proposal and to seek authorization for any use of force from Congress.

"...I'm the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy. I've long believed that our power is rooted not just in our military might, but in our example as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.... I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress.... I believe that the people's representatives must be invested in what America does abroad."

—U.S. President Barack Obama, August 31, 2013

In the following activity, you will have an opportunity to take part in this important debate. You will consider four options for U.S. policy towards Syria. Each is based on a distinct set of values and beliefs. Each takes a different perspective on the U.S. role in the world and its stake in the Syrian conflict.