

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Key Players in the Syrian Conflict

**ISIS / ISIL / IS / Daesh** – Various names for the same group that split off from al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIS aims to create an Islamic state. Although it once controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, it has been pushed out of Iraq and controls a shrinking amount of territory in eastern Syria. ISIS has recruited fighters from the region and from around the world. It has been able to sustain operations through oil revenue, taxes, ransoms, and selling ancient artifacts from conquered territories.

**Russia** – Russia has strong historic ties to the Assad regime. The Russian government has provided Assad's government with troops, air support, weapons, training, and diplomatic support at the UN and in peace talks. Russia has an air base and navy base in Syria. Russia brokered a deal in 2013 to aid Syria in removing its chemical weapons stockpile under UN Security Council Resolution 2118. Russia intervened in Syria in October 2015 with the stated goal of targeting ISIS, but the United States claims that Russian forces have instead targeted non-ISIS rebel forces fighting the Assad regime.

**Iran** – The Iranian government has long supported the Assad regime in Syria. Iran, with a predominantly Shi'i population, is believed to have given the Assad regime military aid in the form of training, weapons, and intelligence sharing. Aiding Assad ensures an ally against Iran's regional rivals, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

**Assad regime / Syrian government** – Hafez al-Assad ruled an authoritarian military regime from 1970 to 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him and remains in power. The Assad family is part of a ruling elite made up of predominantly Alawites, an offshoot of Shi'i Islam, who make up an estimated 12% of the population. Sunni Muslims comprise 75% of the Syrian population, while Christians make up about 10%. Many Syrians oppose the Assad regime's brutal tactics in dealing with protests and opposition.

**Hezbollah** – An extremist Shi'i militia group based in Lebanon with historically close ties to the Iranian government and the Assad regime.

**Kurds** - Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a state. Kurds make up sizable minorities in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurdish militias have served as key U.S. allies in the fight against ISIS.



Source: Harris, Johnny, and Max Fisher. *The War in Syria, Explained*. Vox. 13 Apr. 2018. [www.vox.com/2017/4/8/15218782/syria-trump-bomb-assad-explainer](http://www.vox.com/2017/4/8/15218782/syria-trump-bomb-assad-explainer).

**Syrian opposition / rebels** – A variety of political groups and armed rebels – some with ties to extremists – make up Syria's opposition to the Assad regime. Sharp disagreements and a lack of unity have made it difficult for coalitions to unite and gain international support.

**Gulf states** – Early in the Syrian Civil War, many Gulf states (including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) viewed support for the Syrian opposition as a way to reduce Iran's influence in the region. As the Syrian conflict has continued and instability grows in the Middle East, there is increased division among Gulf states about how to resolve the Syrian conflict.

**Jordan** – The lengthy conflicts in Syria and Iraq have had a tremendous impact on Jordan. The more than 600,000 Syrian refugees who have fled to Jordan have severely stressed the country's resources and already-weak economy.

**United States** – After the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians in 2013, the Obama administration threatened military force. Instead, UN Security Council Resolution 2118 authorized the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to establish procedures for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. In 2014, the Obama administration led an international coalition fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The United States provided air support, special forces support, and weapons to Syrian rebels and Kurdish forces fighting ISIS. The United States largely avoided direct conflict with Syrian forces, but President Trump ordered airstrikes against Syrian air bases (April 2017) and suspected chemical weapons research and storage facilities (April 2018) in response to alleged chemical weapons attacks against Syrian civilians.

**Turkey** – From the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has been one of the main supporters of Syrian opposition forces. As part of the U.S.-led coalition, Turkish President Erdogan supported airstrikes against ISIS targets. Turkey opposes Kurdish gains in the region based on concerns that its own Kurdish minority will want more autonomy. Turkey has taken in an estimated 3.5 million Syrian refugees.

**Key vocabulary**  
**Proxy war** – A conflict in which countries that oppose one another do not fight each other directly, but instead support forces in another country aligned with their interests.