

Global Hot Topics

Syria: an update of the conflict

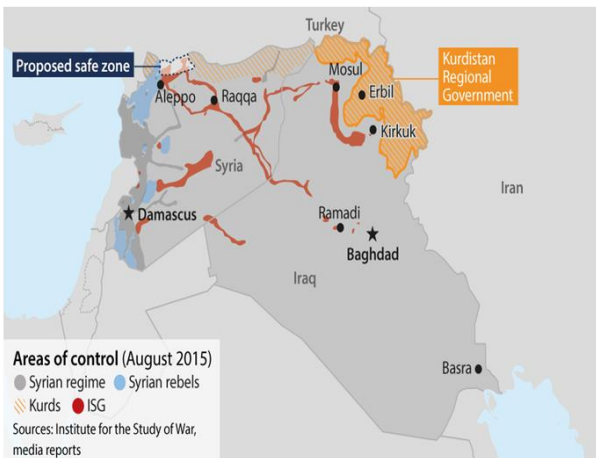
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Syria has become the most obvious proxy war arena of conflicting interests in the Middle East. Although the fighting capabilities of Bashir Al-Assad's Syrian Armed Forces have diminished since the beginning of the civil war, they are still supported by the regime's air forces and some foreign countries as Iran and increasingly Russia. Rebel and enemy forces continue to have competing interests. The recent change in Turkey's strategy and the spiral of the refugee crisis could prompt a turning point in the crisis but a change in Iran and Russia will be needed to really advance in the resolution of the crisis.

The Assad forces increasingly rely on "friends"

Syrian Crisis Map: Territorial control

Source: ISW and BBVA Research



The heavy losses since the beginning of the war by the **Syrian Armed Forces (SAF)** (to near 170000 from the initial 300000 individuals) and the increasing discontent of Alawite population is leading the Assad's forces to increasingly rely on foreign support.

Iran continues to be a reliable ally for Syria despite the Iran-P5+1 deal. They will continue to maintain its influence through both financial assistance and direct military support from the elite Al-Quds Force commanded by Iranian General Soleimani. Beyond this, the Lebanese Shiite group **Hezbollah** is also supporting the Iran/Assad strategic alliance and being very active in the South near Damascus.

Russia's involvement in Syrian civil war is increasing and they are sending military-technical experts to assist SAF personnel in using Russian military equipment. **The higher involvement of Russia could complicate a resolution of the conflict** which needs to include Iran and Russia. It led NATO to warn Russia on higher involvement.

The rebels: a mixed band of conflicting groups

Myriad different factions continue fighting Assad with competing goals and different geographic positions. **The Free Syrian Army (the initial rebel forces) maintains positions in the South of the country but they have weakened in the north.** In February 2014, many factions fighting against the Al-Assad regime united under the banner of the Southern Front, which is said to take support from a Military Operations Centre based in Jordan.

The rest of rebel and jihadist groups have been concentrated in the North-East of the country, fighting Assad forces or fighting among them. Competing Jihadist groups Al Nusra and ISIS continue to occupy the North East of the Country. **Al Nusra (the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria) is gaining momentum** in the North taking important positions from Assad. They are becoming one of the most effective and feared fighting forces in the war. They have prioritized the defeat of Assad regime over creating an Islamic state as ISIS.

This Sunni Islamist group ISIS now controls a wide range of territory in Syria. Some of the ISIS hardest battles have been against **the Kurds (PYD, YPG) which recovered some territories in the North.** The Kurds have proved to be effective forces to fight ISIS in the North and have become an important actor. Their gains in Syria have not been altogether welcomed by Turkey, as their affiliation with the PKK in Turkey itself is still active.

The outsiders: are we near a turning point?

Recent events in western foreign countries can imply a turning point for the Syrian crisis: the new role of Turkey in the conflict and the refugee crisis.

Turkey has finally decided to increase its support to the international forces to fight ISIS in northern Syria. They will provide military presence and logistics support (Incirlik airbase) increasing dramatically the efficiency of the attacks against ISIS. Besides, they will continue to push for a "no-fly zone". This would create a safe area to arm and train moderate rebels fighting Mr. Assad, allow an opposition government to reinforce and help to stop both the refugee crisis and the increasing presence of the Kurds in Northern Syria.

Finally, **the refugee crisis' spiral in Europe could change the view of Western countries on Al-Assad,** supporting a more direct confrontation with the Syrian regime.

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