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# Syria as an International War

Social Sciences

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## ABSTRACT

The war in Syria evolved from a civil war into an international war due to the involvement of foreign nations. Russia, Iran, the United States, and Israel were all key players in not only turning the conflict into a global one, but also one of the most complex. Russia and Iran supported the Assad regime, providing military aid and conducting airstrikes. Russia and Iran both supported the regime for their own reasons, but both had a preexisting relationship with the Syrian government. On the other side of the conflict the US opposed Assad and supported rebel groups like the Free Syrian Army. The involvement of the United States was heavily criticized due to the military still having active troops in the failing state building project in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States has had a presence in the Middle East for decades at this point, which was a critical component in the decision to become involved for some, such as Iran. The FSA (Free Syrian Army) was not the only group involved in the war. Militant groups like ISIS and Hezbollah further complicated the landscape of territory and conflict. The war in Syria generated the largest refugee crisis in the world which still remains a humanitarian crisis to this day. With millions displaced, the infrastructure and environmental destruction, and a war torn Syria it is clear that there were no winners of this conflict and that it still remains a large issue today.

## KEYWORDS

Syrian Refugee Crisis • Assad Regime • United States Intervention • Free Syrian Army • International Conflict

## Introduction

In a human rights council in September 2021, High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet presented that over 350,200 people died in Syria. Bachelet then went on to say that "Behind each recorded death was a human being, born free and equal, in dignity and rights" (United Nations).

The war in Syria has been ongoing for over a decade. Not only has this war killed thousands, displaced millions, but it also has destroyed the environment, infrastructure, and healthcare and school systems. What started as a protest by Syrian citizens to end the Bashar al-Assad regime quickly turned into a full-blown civil war that involved the regime killing its own people and many human rights violations. Although this started as a civil war between the government and the people of Syria, I argue that it rapidly turned into an international war. The involvement of foreign nations, both in support and opposition of the Assad regime, militant and opposition groups, as well as the ongoing humanitarian crisis of Syrian refugees highlights the argument that the war in Syria was no longer a domestic war, but an international war.

### Involvement of Foreign Nations

The support for Bashar al-Assad and his regime by foreign nations is one of the main reasons that the conflict in Syria became an international war, due to those countries becoming involved through both air strike attacks and ground fighting. Countries such as Russia and Iran are among two of the Syrian government's biggest supporters, both supplying the Syrian government with financial and military aid. Whereas countries such as the United States and Israel opposed the regime through their own attacks as well as support of regime opposition groups.

Russia became involved when Bashar al-Assad's regime seemed to be struggling against the fight with rebels. The Islamic state and other non-ISIS rebels were moving in on territory forcing the Syrian government to give up territory in order to protect more "important" areas. According to Christopher Phillips' book *The Battle for Syria*, Syrian officials asked for Russia's involvement and help to fight for the regime. As well as asking for Russia's help, Syria also gave Russia the use of Khmeimim, a strip of land that would be used for planes in and out of Syria in order to supply weapons and men to fight for the regime. It was from here that other foreign nations realized that Russia was becoming more involved than they were letting on. Weapons flown in as well as airstrikes to fight the rebels taking over territory were among some of the military moves made by Russia to support the regime (Phillips). Russian President Vladimir Putin had ulterior motives as well when he decided to get involved with Syria. Putin supported the Assad regime due to his own fears of violent Jihadist groups such as ISIS taking over if the regime were to fall. Part of this may have been due to Putin's own personal experience with the Chechens. The Chechens are an ethnic group that are a part of Russia, in what is known as Chechnya. The Chechen people are predominantly Muslim, which does not align with the rest of Russia. Putin had experience fighting with militant groups due to the Chechens creating their own version, known as the Chechen Rebels. Fighting for a free homeland out of Russia rule ended with Russia invading and demolishing some of the main cities. Putin's fear of militant groups in Syria caused Russia to use airstrikes that often killed civilians as well as demolished the city, this was something that was seen before in Chechnya.

Iran and Syria have a long history going all the way back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Syria stood by Iran which laid the foundation of their allyship. Iran and Syria also support the same militant groups that fight against Israel. Groups such as Hezbollah and HAMAS are among those that are supported financially by both countries (Hoffman). Much like Russia, Iran was crucial for the Assad regime in remaining in power due to its military presence. Unlike the other countries involved, Iran was involved in the war from the beginning, snipers and chemical weapons were tactics deployed by the Iranian government to discourage protestors as well as getting rid of those already protesting (Hoffman). Iran played a complex role in the Syrian war because although the Iranian government was fighting to uphold the Assad regime it was also a chance to support Hezbollah, an anti-Israel militant group. As well as Israel being a target for the Iranian government and supporting militant groups, the leaders of Iran also did not want western occupation in the Middle East, this was also a driving force in Iran becoming involved.

The United States decision to become involved in Syria was complicated due to some believing that it wasn't enough. The United States participated in airstrikes in Syria as well as backed regime opposition groups such as the Free Syrian Army. I believe that the United States was cautious to intervene due to how long United States troops had been in the Middle East. When the Syrian conflict began in 2011, the United States already had troops in Afghanistan for the state building mission and troops were only just now leaving Iraq. Afghanistan had consumed so much of the American government's time and money that there was most likely resistance about getting involved in

another conflict. The American war on terror is one of the reasons that the U.S. decided to ultimately become involved. ISIS was gaining power and territory, this was not only a direct threat to America, but to its allies. The airstrikes launched by the U.S. were designated for ISIS members, but just like Russia, also ended up hitting civilians as well as doing lots of damage to infrastructure. ISIS was gaining control over oil rigs and even destroying some. This was also a threat to the United States because oil was one of the resources imported from the Middle East.

There is controversy surrounding the U.S. government's decision to become involved in the way that they did. Many argue that the United States should've tried harder and put in the resources and money to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Obama's decision to act in a different way than the U.S. did in Afghanistan was seen as hands-off. Arguably the most criticized decision comes from the deal President Obama made with Russia to get rid of Syria's chemical weapons (Diaz).

Israel also played a role in the conflict in Syria which I think is one of the best examples of this civil war becoming internationalized. Israel was worried about the influence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria. Airstrikes were launched to bomb Hezbollah territory in order to prevent them from gaining more power, which would be a threat to Israel and its people.

## **Militant and Opposition Groups**

The war in Syria is different from a lot of wars due to the fact that it had so many moving pieces at one time. One part of the puzzle that categorizes the Syrian conflict as an international one is the presence of both militant and opposition groups fighting against the Syrian

government and even fighting against each other. Three of the main groups that were both prominent and powerful during the Syrian conflict are the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and the Free Syrian Army.

The Islamic State also known as ISIS was a key player in the war in Syria. ISIS started in Iraq as a part of Al-Qaeda but following the U.S. invasion went to Syria. The United States had run into ISIS fighters before, in the military operation in Iraq it is said that U.S. forces were responsible for the deaths of many fighters. ISIS gained strength by regrouping in Syria and even recruiting former government regime officials that were tired of Assad. The Islamic State was not only successful in capturing territory in both Syria and Iraq during the war, but they also managed to cause widespread fear across the globe. The Islamic state internationalized the brutality of the war and of militant groups in the Middle East specifically by extremely public torture and killings that were often videotaped and posted online for the rest of the world to see. The Islamic State According to the Terrorism Research Initiative Bashar al-Assad took an unprecedented approach to dealing with violent militant groups such as ISIS. Assad not only released some militant/ISIS affiliated members from custody but also purchased oil from territories controlled by these militant groups. Although this is a complex issue, it seemed from outside viewers that Assad was only fighting against the moderate opposition groups and not the violent militant groups (Becker).

Hezbollah is among other militant groups that actively participated in both the Syrian war as well as other conflicts in the Middle East. Hezbollah is based in Lebanon and emerged following the Lebanese Civil War of 1975 (Council on Foreign Relations). Although based in

Lebanon, Hezbollah played a key role in Syria due to their strong alliance with Iran and the Syrian Government. Hezbollah has allyship with Syria due to their extensive history. Once considered "Greater Syria" during the Ottoman empire, Lebanon had its own war in 1975. Syria occupied Lebanon to fight forces invading the country, and even later signed an agreement with Lebanon for cooperation and coordination (Korn). Since Iran funds and supplies Hezbollah, the militant group became involved in the Syrian conflict due partly to Iran backing the Assad regime. Hezbollah acts as a proxy for Iran, often carrying out attacks on Iran's enemies. According to the 2020 State Department estimate, Iran supplied Hezbollah with \$700 million per year as well as military grade weapons (State Department 2020). It came with no surprise that Hezbollah was able to successfully secure territory for the Assad regime and keep it in power. The involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian war only drew in more nations involved. Due to Hezbollah making Israel its main enemy and often the target of their attacks, Israel responded by also getting involved in Syria. Israel participated in airstrikes in Syria, specifically targeting Hezbollah in order to weaken the group. One of the reasons that it was so difficult to navigate the war in Syria was due to groups such as Hezbollah that were backed and funded by foreign countries.

Among the opposition groups fighting in Syria the Free Syrian Army also known as the FSA was one of the most moderate. The FSA had a goal of removing Bashar al-Assad from power as well as acting as the force for the peaceful protestors of Syria. The FSA was also an internationalized force because of the fact that it was backed by both Turkey and The United States. It was highlighted in Wendy

Pearlman's book *We Crossed a Bridge and it Trembled* that FSA fighters often were recruited just by seeing the horror outside their windows. In one testimony from Pearlman's book, it was peaceful protesters only using their voice to fight the regime and the government responded by killing innocent people. This senseless violence in the streets is what inspired many to fight for groups such as the FSA (Pearlman). Not only were civilians recruited to join, but former government officials also were known to join when they realized that the government was participating in state terrorism. The organizer of the Free Syrian Army was a defected Colonel named Ri'ad al-Asaad ("The Civil War in Syria: The Variety of Opposition to the Syrian Regime."). Despite the FSA having a good reason for fighting, the organization was never as strong as it could've been. The Free Syrian Army was a broad term to describe groups of fighters all with a similar mission. Due to this decentralization the FSA was weakened. Military operations as well as the allies, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States were unable to effectively utilize the FSA due to there not being one strong central group to coordinate with. Some FSA fighters also drifted to radical Islam and left the group to join militant groups such as ISIS, this could be due to members feeling like the FSA was not helpful to their cause and often militant groups offer financial compensation. Despite the fact that the Free Syrian Army was backed by multiple powerful countries that could provide both support and materials, it was ineffective against the force of the Assad regime and its supporters.

## Syrian Refugee Crisis

The war in Syria is an international war because of the involvement of foreign nations, but also due to there being an ongoing humanitarian crisis in which foreign nations are having to decide how to handle it. According to the UN Refugee Agency it is believed that since 2011 there are 6.6 million Syrians forced to leave their home country and another 6.7 million displaced in Syrian today (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Although not close to Syria geographically or culturally many refugees have fled to Europe in hope of a better life. Despite international refugee laws many Syrians who leave for Europe or even other Middle Eastern countries will be faced with their basic human rights being violated. Food, water, and shelter are all among those necessities that are not being met. Poor living conditions are only if they are able to make it inside the country. Many countries shut down their borders to prevent entry or even arrest refugees for illegally entering the country. This massive crisis was not something that the world had planned for and this showed in the treatment and distribution of refugees across the globe. In Hernan Zin's documentary *Born in Syria*, it is discussed that many countries were not pulling their weight. Thousands of refugees went to Turkey due to it being a neighboring country of Syria. In Europe, Germany took the most refugees whereas others were closing their border and refusing entry (Zin). It is worth noting that the countries that participated in airstrikes and military operations took in few refugees. This only highlights the fact that this war is an international one due to military campaigns performed by foreign nations such as the United States and Russia only

for the responsibility to be given to countries such as Germany to rehome the people that lost theirs.

## Conclusion

In Christopher Phillips book, *The Battle for Syria* he refers to the conflict in Syria as “the war that everyone lost”. No country involved in this war got anything out of the involvement, some even worse than before (Phillips). What started as a civil war quickly turned into an international conflict due to how many foreign nations were involved. Nations such as Russia and Iran were essential in maintaining the regime as well as the militant groups fighting in support of it. The involvement of these nations also triggered a response from other nations such as the United States, Turkey, and Israel to fund opposition rebel groups as well as performing military operations, such as airstrikes. The war in Syria was a domino effect that started as soon as there were peaceful protests against the regime. Finally, the refugee crisis is a perfect example of why Syria is an ongoing international conflict. Foreign nations such as Germany and Turkey saw a massive way of refugees into their country in search of a better life. The ongoing debate of which countries bear responsibility in humanitarian relief as well as rebuilding Syria only calls attention to the fact this is an international issue.

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