

Leader: President Bashar al-Assad; born September 11, 1965
Ruling Party: The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party - Syrian Branch
Capital: Damascus

Coat of Arms and President:



Bashar al-Assad has served as President of Syria and leader of the [Syrian Ba'ath Party](#) since the death of his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000. The government that Bashar inherited is a semi-authoritarian regime that cloaks itself in democratic rhetoric, while using its intelligence and security agencies to repress domestic dissent and reform movements. The Assad family comes from the [Alawite sect](#), an offshoot of Shia Islam, which is a minority in Syria, making up only around 12% of the population. The majority of Syrians, around 74%, are Sunni Muslims.

The Syrian conflict [began in March 2011](#) when the Assad regime responded to peaceful anti-government demonstrations with a violent military crackdown. As protests spread across the country, the regime labeled the non-violent demonstrators as terrorists. Within a few months, demonstrators began to organize and take up arms against the violence of the Syrian forces. Facing no real threat of direct international intervention, the regime gradually [escalated its tactics](#) from snipers, to tanks, to helicopters and warplanes, to barrel bombs, chemical weapons, and other non-conventional munitions. By mid 2012, defections, casualties, and Syrian soldiers' lack of motivation to fight, as well as the loss of airfields and decreased resupply capacity had severely weakened the Syrian military, and [many predicted the fall of the Assad regime](#). But due to increased support from Russia and Iran, that scenario never came to pass and the regime has since rebounded.

Iran has bolstered Assad by sending in [IRGC](#) advisors and forces [to reformulate the](#) Syrian military strategy and augment its weakened forces with much needed manpower. Iran pulled its proxy Hezbollah into the conflict, built and trained the paramilitary [National Defense Forces](#), and recruited an array of foreign sectarian Shiite militias. Additionally, Iran has extended Assad significant materiel support including weapons, military technology, oil, and credit. Syria's other major backer, Russia, has used its U.N. Security Council veto to protect Assad from criminal accountability and international intervention, and supported the regime with the shipments of weapons, spare parts for helicopters, and fuel, as well as economic investment and lines of credit. In September 2015 Russia escalated its role by deploying Russian armed forces to Syria and starting a campaign of air strikes [against the Syrian opposition groups](#) challenging the Assad regime.

The Assad regime has sought to validate its war efforts by portraying the opposition as terrorists and religious extremists. As early as 2011, the regime [began releasing known jihadis](#) from prison in a series of "[political amnesties](#)," even as it arrested peaceful protesters across the country. There are also documented [cases of tactical cooperation](#) between the Syrian Army and ISIS on the battlefield and of [oil sales from ISIS](#) and [Jabhat al-Nusra](#) to the regime. The Syrian military [rarely targets ISIS](#) and has been [known to withdraw](#) from certain locations, such as the ruins of Palmyra without contest, relinquishing them to ISIS. Both ISIS and the regime focus most of their military efforts on the rest of the Syrian opposition.

The Syrian government has been accused of a long list of war crimes including torture, the targeting of civilians and medical personnel, rape, starvation, etc. In one of the most notorious incidents of the war, on August 21, 2013 the regime launched a massive [sarin chemical attack](#) against opposition-held areas of the Damascus suburbs, killing nearly 1,500 people. In the aftermath, Assad agreed to give up Syria's declared chemical weapons stock – at the behest of Russia – to prevent U.S. intervention, but to this day the Syrian regime continues to launch [chemical attacks with chlorine](#) and other dual-use chemicals.

In 2014 the Syrian regime held [highly manipulated "elections"](#) in an attempt to strengthen Assad's legitimacy; but even so the regime's veneer of power has grown increasingly thin. Assad's [inner circle](#) has [eroded](#), and Iranian officials have been taking over key positions at the [highest levels of government](#) in Syria. Factors such as the government's inability to protect [besieged Shiite communities](#), the decrease of [public services](#), the increasing [presence of Iranian forces](#), and [forced military conscription](#) have lead to growing discontent among regime supporters. On an international level the regime has remained relatively isolated with the exception of its key backers. In February 2014 the Syrian government sent representatives to the Geneva II peace talks, which ended in failure and have not been reconvened since. The U.S. is currently spearheading talks among world powers, but as of yet there are [no signs that Assad is willing to concede](#) to the key opposition demand that he transition out of power.

Today, the Syrian regime has lost control of most of the country, maintaining its strongholds in the capital, Damascus, the traditional Alawite tribal lands along the coast, and in parts of the western central corridor that connect them. Despite these territorial losses, Bashar al-Assad is more comfortable in his continued rule than at any point since 2012, due primarily to the support from Russia and Iran. To highlight this point, Assad made a surprise visit to Moscow on October 20, 2015, leaving Syria for the first time since the start of the conflict. With both of Assad's patrons represented at the current round of [international talks](#) on Syria, and the U.S. quietly backing away from its support of the Syrian Arab opposition, Assad's current comfort may be justified. But as Iran and Russia slowly cement their control of the Syrian economy, government, and military, they ensure that the country that Assad clings to in the future will bear little resemblance to the one he ruled before the war.