



PERSPECTIVES

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Syria: The Decline of the Last Conventional Threat

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the Syrian state became a breeding ground for militant groups and foreign fighters. While Assad's allies managed to save his regime, those alliances came at a price. The declining state of Syria's demographic and economic stability combined with its deteriorating military power in the region has eliminated the need for Israel to view the Assad regime as a central threat to its national security, at least over the short term.

Over the years, Israel has considered a conventional war with Syria a likely scenario. Unlike Jordan and Egypt, Syria never signed a peace agreement with Israel, nor has it established any diplomatic or economic relations. Syria directly confronted Israel in 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982, and continued to require mass conscription.

In 2011, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated Syria's military standing at 295,000 soldiers (220,000 infantry, artillery, and armored; 5,000 navy; 30,000 air force; and 40,000 air defense) and its reserve military at 314,000 soldiers (280,000 infantry, artillery, and armored; 4,000 navy; 10,000 air force; and 20,000 air defense).

The unit that stood out in the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) was air defense. Syria's air defense unit included 25 air defense brigades and more than 4,700 surface-to-air missile systems, which constituted 14% of the SAF's standing military forces. Syria's artillery capabilities were also well developed, with more than 3,440 artillery pieces spread across numerous firing positions throughout the country. Syrian missiles covered Israel's entire territory. Cumulatively, prior to 2011, the SAF was capable of deploying more than half a million soldiers in a military campaign.

Another source of concern for Israel was Syria's WMD program. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative, Syria obtained the necessary technology as long ago as 1986 to produce nerve agents such as sarin gas. Indeed, in a 2002 CIA report, the agency confirmed that Damascus had acquired a substantial stockpile of sarin. Other intelligence reports indicated that Syria's chemical weapons arsenal included VX and mustard gas, and that it had the means to assemble chemical warheads on top of long-range ballistic missiles.

The most ambitious WMD initiative ever undertaken by Syria was its development of a nuclear program. That program was brought to an end in 2007, when Israeli fighter jets dropped 17 tons of explosives onto the reactor, destroying it completely. From that point onward, things have gone south for the Syrian regime.

In 2011, Syria became mired in a bloody civil war that quickly deteriorated into a morass of sectarian division and foreign intervention. In July of that year, Sunni defectors from the SAF established the Free Syrian Army, which called for the overthrow of the ruling Syrian regime. Local Sunni militias started cooperating with each other while foreign jihadist groups, including ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Jabhat al-Nusra, penetrated the country's vulnerable borders.

Against all expectations, the Syrian regime managed to survive due to massive Iranian and Russian support, but the war took a high toll on the SAF. From a potential pool of 500,000 soldiers in the SAF ground forces in 2011, only 90,000 soldiers remained active following the conflict and able to serve in the SAF infantry, artillery, and armored corps. The Syrian Air Force lost more than 60% of its combat aircraft fleet and is estimated to possess only 150–200 aircraft today. The Syrian armored corps also suffered heavy losses during the civil war; approximately 2,000 Syrian tanks were reported either destroyed or unusable at the war's peak. Reports of Syria's artillery capabilities at that point indicate that over 40% of the SAF's field artillery pieces were demolished or damaged as well.

Further, due to its use of chemical weapons against its civilian population, Syria was pressured to dispose of its chemical weapons stockpile and join the Chemical Weapons Convention. According to the agreement between Syria, Russia, and the US, the regime agreed to submit a list of all chemical weapons in its possession. International inspectors would then be permitted into Syrian territory to verify the list and eliminate Syria's chemical stockpile.

In October 2013, Syria formally joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and destroyed its chemical weapons production infrastructure. Ten months later, the US and Britain neutralized 600 tons of sulphur mustard agent and sarin gas precursor and 200 tons of various chemical weapons precursors (Nuclear

Threat Initiative, 2018). By January 2016, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that Syria's 1,328 metric tons of declared chemical weapons had been destroyed in full and the terms of the agreement had been met, though it subsequently transpired that the regime [had retained some of its chemical capabilities](#) (probably with Moscow's accord), using them against its civilian population as late as April 2018.

Beyond the loss of sovereignty, territory, and military power, the Assad regime faced the consequences of letting allied militias and countries into Syrian territory. During the onset of the civil war, the Syrian opposition and foreign Sunni militant groups, who received funding, training, and military aid from various countries, tilted the power balance against the regime. Assad had little choice but to cling to the lifeline offered by Tehran and Moscow. In 2012, the number of Iranian-controlled Shiite militiamen was estimated at 40,000; this figure increased to 100,000 in 2013 and to 150,000 in 2017. Indeed, the number of Iranian-controlled fighters has since surpassed the number of SAF soldiers. Some of these militias became the ruling authorities in their respective areas, making profit from the war and using fear to enforce their rule. There was also an entrenchment of organic Iranian units in Syria, mainly from the elite Quds Force. The Syrian government's overwhelming dependence on foreign fighters resulted in the inability of the Assad regime to enforce its authority over its own allies.

Russia's and Iran's conflicting interests might also be a source of instability in Syria. The interventions of both countries exhibited their own respective national interests. Russia's included promoting its influence throughout the Middle East by establishing a firm military foothold in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean. In return for Moscow's support, Assad has allowed it to extend its lease on the Tartus base by an additional 49 years, thus expanding Russia's capacity to operate large warships in the area. Iran's direct strategic interests, other than economic incentives, such as the lease on the port of Latakia it received from Assad, included promoting its aspiration to utilize Syrian territory both as a vital part of its envisaged land bridge from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean and as a front-line military stronghold against Israel. As both countries seek access to the Syrian economy, their competing interests have often led to costly disagreements between their proxies. This occurred in Aleppo in April 2019, for example, when pro-Iranian militias and Russian troops clashed.

Beyond the loss of sovereignty, territory, and military power, Syria's population has suffered mass displacement and the national economy has experienced unprecedented damage. More than half of Syria's population, estimated at 20.7 million in 2010, has been displaced as a result of the civil war.

According to a CIA report from 2015, 7.6 million Syrian citizens were forced to flee their homes but have managed to remain within Syria's borders, while an additional 3.9 million were forced to leave Syria entirely as a result of the conflict.

Syria's economy had been deteriorating over the course of the long war. Between 2011 and 2015, GDP spiraled downward by 61% and exports decreased by 92%. Syria's oil GDP contracted by 93% (from 386,000 barrels per day in 2011 to 9,000 barrels per day in 2015), while its non-oil economy declined by 52% in the same period. Approximately 538,000 jobs have been destroyed each year throughout the war, resulting in a 78% unemployment rate among Syrian youth as of 2015.

Overall, the declining state of Syria's demographic and economic stability, combined with its deteriorating military power in the region, has eliminated the need for Israel to view the Assad regime as a central threat to its national security, at least over the short term. The SAF suffered tremendous losses following the outbreak of the civil war due to the high volume of both casualties and defections. As a result, the regime lost territory and sovereignty to such an extent that it had to rely on foreign support to preserve its fragile rule.

While Assad's allies ultimately saved his regime, those alliances came at a price. Foreign militias numbering in the tens of thousands have remained in Syria, amplifying the demographic crisis and developing their own ambitions in alignment with foreign interests. At the same time, Russia and Iran continue to pursue a return on their investment in the Assad regime by securing leases on strategic ports and oil fields and gaining access to governmental infrastructure contracts. While the Assad regime has survived, its sovereignty continues to crumble along with Syria's ability to function as a sovereign state.

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