

SYRIA GOVERNMENT

Party Portrait

Since its ascent to power in 1963, the ruling Ba’ath Party has sought to forge a national identity based on a Syrian nationalism that, while incorporating elements of pan-Arab ideology, is rooted in the invocation of a specifically Syrian heritage. The government has simultaneously marshalled the Syrian region’s Arab-Islamic, pre-Islamic, and post-Ottoman past to craft this identity. Despite the regime’s desire for an ideologically-unified state, much of the population has not fully accepted the identity propagated by state officials. In particular, many Syrian Sunnis—the country’s religious majority—view the government as a vehicle for the interests and aspirations of Alawites and other religious minorities at their own expense. The Syrian military, which is predominantly staffed in its upper levels by Alawites, has remained fiercely loyal to the regime. This religious divide has contributed to the increasingly sectarian nature of the civil war. The Syrian government, headed by President Bashar al-Assad, controls large sections of central and western Syria—but seeks to assert sovereignty over all of Syria’s pre-conflict territory.

Key Interests

- Reassert government sovereignty over as much of its pre-war territory as possible
- Maintain full Syrian territory with no rival groups wielding political or territorial authority within Syrian borders
- Ensure that Sunni groups do not usurp power and thus pose a risk to the safety and prosperity of Alawites and other religious minorities

Sources of Leverage

Soft Power - Increasing prominence of hard-line Islamist groups in the Syrian opposition means the regime can claim to be a necessary bulwark against jihadi terrorism. International powers, particularly in the west, will be less willing to seek the removal of Assad from power.
Military - Has support from Russia and Iran, which greatly enhances military capabilities, also constrains military and political choices.
Geography - The government coalition currently controls most strategically-important areas of Syria, including the major cities, which places it in a strong bargaining position.

Regional Strategy

Maintain military action in an ongoing, large-scale, civil conflict with a range of groups to regain control of Syria. Align with Russia, invite it to deploy its military within the country in service of the regime’s goals, and build coalition with Iran, Hezbollah, other non-Syrian Shi’ite volunteers to increase military power. Engages in military operations despite internationally-agreed ceasefire agreements, expresses willingness to engage with opposition armed groups in (indirect) bilateral and potentially even multilateral negotiations, with the precondition that Assad remain in power.

Powerful Individuals

President Bashar al-Assad (President, son of Hafez al-Assad, the former long-time President), Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani (commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ elite Quds Force)

Potential Negotiation Moves

Negotiate - Engage in political negotiations on the condition that the process preserves its control over the country. More likely to engage in talks when it is in a position of military pre-eminence on the ground in Syria; views negotiations as a way of cementing its territorial gains. It is possible that Assad may be forced to make greater concessions in negotiations if losing militarily.
Gain American Support - Seek to gain the tacit support of America by emphasizing anti-ISIS focus, thus buttressing the government against international pressure

Internal Conflicts

Government presents itself as the legitimate, sovereign authority, assailed by an opposition backed by foreign forces. However, Assad regime increasingly presents itself in sectarian terms as protector of Alawites. Forces comprise military largely controlled by Alawite officers, Shi’ite auxiliaries from Iran, Hezbollah and other countries and groups. These groups are vital to their military capacity. Syrian armed forces, whose commanders are bound to the regime by their shared religion, are likely to defend the government to the end. There are signs that some Alawite Syrians seek to distance themselves from Assad and downplay the sectarian aspects of the civil war.

Memberships

ARAB LEAGUE (Suspended), IAEA, OIC, UN

Allies

YEMEN Houthis

Partners

LEBANON Hezbollah

Rivals

EGYPT Government, HOLY SEE, HUMANITARIAN ACTORS, IRAQ State of Law Coalition, JORDAN, PALESTINE Fatah,

Adversaries

BAHRAIN, EUROPEAN UNION, FRANCE, GERMANY, ISRAEL, KURDS of Syria, LEBANON Government, QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA, TURKEY, UNITED KINGDOM, UNITED STATES

Active Armed Opponents

ISIS, SYRIA Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, SYRIA Other Opposition Groups

Proxy

N/A

External Sponsor

RUSSIA, IRAN

Aid Recipient

UNITED NATIONS

Aid Donor

N/A