

# SYRIA

## Why it matters to the West and beyond

Even before ISIS made daily headlines, the horrors of what's been happening in Syria was enough to get the world's attention. With large numbers of civilians dying, with the alleged use of chemical weapons, with neighboring countries like Turkey and Jordan finding themselves swarmed by refugees, it couldn't be avoided from a practical and personal standpoint.

None of those concerns have gone away. Syria borders Turkey, a NATO member, as well as Jordan and Israel, two staunch U.S. allies. Besides the refugee issue, there is a constant threat that the violence will spill over the Syrian border. Even without that, a seemingly endless civil war in this part of the world is never good for most anyone, the West included.



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## SYRIA: What's going on

Syria's upheaval began in spring 2011, with protests in the nation's streets. President Bashar al-Assad's government responded with a deadly crackdown, an act that only seemed to fuel the unrest.

And it only got worse from there.

Eventually, the dissension and violence devolved into a full-fledged civil war. It's been a bloody war, with the United Nations estimating nearly 200,000 killed as of last August. It's been a disruptive war, with more than 3 million Syrians now refugees and

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It's not just that there's violence, it's who is behind it and, in many ways, thriving because of it. ISIS wouldn't be what it is without the Syrian civil war. That means it wouldn't be a focal point for U.S. President Barack Obama and his government.

Already, ISIS has beheaded a number of U.S. and British hostages -- all of them civilians -- and threatened more. There's also the real threat that the group may take its campaign out of the Middle East to strike in the West.

The West and some of its Middle Eastern allies are striking back with targeted airstrikes not only in Iraq, where the coalition has a willing partner, but in Syria, where it is not working with al-Assad. (In fact, Obama and others have said they want the Syrian President out of power.)

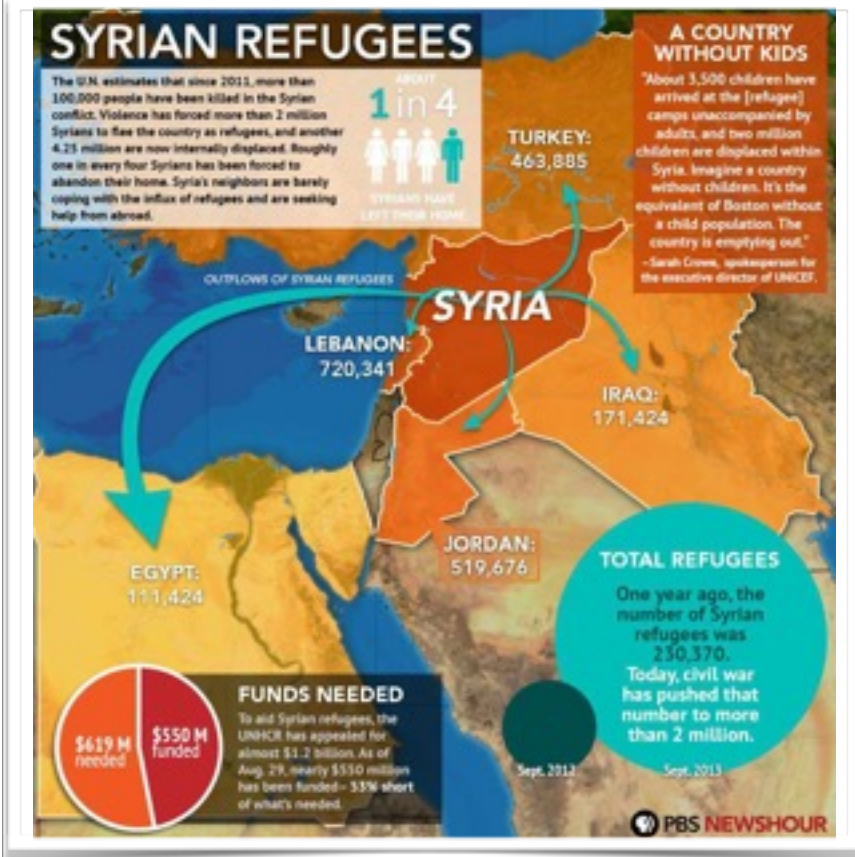
U.S. diplomatic officials said Thursday that estimates are that this coalition has killed more than 6,000 ISIS fighters. Yet their work is far from done. The group boasts upwards of 31,000 fighters, not to mention fresh recruits seemingly coming in regularly.

at least 6.5 million more displaced inside the country. And it hasn't been a simple war, given all the warring parties involved.

That's because there isn't just one united opposition group fighting against al-Assad, who is still in power and entrenched in Damascus. There are more moderate fighting groups, some of which have gotten support from Washington and beyond. And there are extremists who have been able to attract new recruits, gain more influence and take over territory amid the chaos.

One of them is al-Nusra Front, an al Qaeda affiliate the U.S. State Department has designated a terrorist organization that's taken over territory in northwestern Syria.

Another is ISIS, which first emerged in Iraq but got a second life in Syria thanks to the ongoing war. It has terrorized many in both countries in recent months, a time in which its taken over vast swaths of territory, established a de facto capital in the Syrian city of Raqqa and rebranded itself the Islamic State in accordance with its quest to be a caliphate governed under its strict interpretation of Sharia law.



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