

# Untangling the mess

The civil war in Syria, which began with Arab Spring protests in March 2011, has since drawn in other countries, threatening to destabilise a wider region. Here's a guide to the tangle of sectarian rivalries, overlapping regional conflicts and great power politics.

## SUNNI-SHITE RIVALRIES

- The governments of Shi'ite-majority Iran and Iraq, and Lebanon-based Hezbollah, have supported the Bashar al-Assad regime, while Sunni-majority countries, including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia supported anti-Assad rebels.
- Iran was the first to prop up Mr Assad, sending supplies and soldiers.
- Teheran sees Syria as crucial to its regional hegemony strategy: It provides access to Iranian weapons and other goods bound for proxy militias and allies, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.
- Saudi Arabia supported Syria's rebels in the hopes of replacing Mr Assad with a friendlier government and countering Iran's influence.

## US vs RUSSIA

- Russian forces intervened in 2015, at a time when the pro-Assad forces appeared to be losing ground.
- Syria is one of Russia's last remaining allies, and it is where Moscow maintains its only military bases outside the former Soviet Union.
- The US has repeatedly stated its opposition to the Assad government being backed by Russia but is wary of getting dragged into another war.

## TURKEY vs KURDISH REBELS

- Syria's Kurds have taken advantage of the civil war to seize control of large parts of their traditional heartland in the north, declaring autonomous rule.
- This has raised deep concerns in Turkey, which fears the Kurdish rebels – armed by the US to help fight terrorists – could mount insurgency attacks in Turkish territory.

## ISRAEL vs IRAN

- With the defeat of ISIS and major gains by pro-Assad forces, Iranian-backed fighters are creeping closer to Israel's border.
- The Feb 10 clashes were particularly alarming: It was the first time Iran openly engaged Israel, sending a drone into its territory; the first time an Israel combat aircraft has been shot down since 1982; the first time Israel openly targeted Iranian assets in Syria.

## LATEST CLASHES

### 1 AFRIN PROVINCE

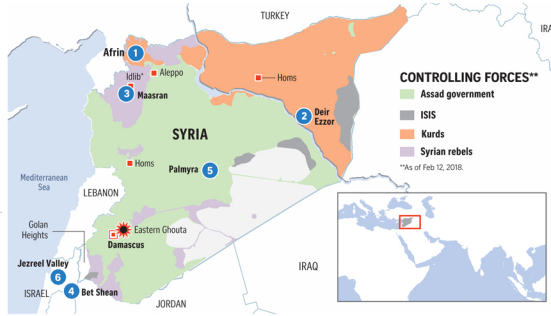
Turkish military on Jan 20 launched strikes on Kurdish fighters in northern Syria.



### 2 DEIR EZZOR

Scores of Russian contract soldiers were killed in a Feb 7 attack on a base held by US and US-backed forces.

NOTE: \*Idlib is the last province in Syria outside the control of Assad regime.



### 3 MAASRAN

A Russian Su-25 'Frogfoot' aircraft was shot down over the city of Maasran in Idlib province on Feb 3 by anti-Assad rebel forces. Russian lawmakers have accused the US of supplying the missile which destroyed the ground attack aircraft.



### 4 BET SHEAN

Israel on Feb 10 intercepted and destroyed an Iranian UAV that reportedly violated its airspace over the Golan Heights.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu showing part of the Iranian drone at the Munich Security Conference.



### 5 PALMYRA

Later on the same day, Israel conducted airstrikes targeting the drone's control vehicle at an airbase in Palmyra, a known joint basing area for the Russo-Iranian coalition.



### 6 JEZREEL VALLEY

- Syrian Surface-to-Air missile systems then engaged the jets during their return and successfully shot down an Israeli F-16 over Harduf in northern Israel in the first such combat loss for the Israeli air force since the 1982 Lebanon War.
- Israel responded with massive retaliation against a slew of Iranian and regime-affiliated military targets in Syria.