**Defendant:** Bashar Al-Assad, Syrian President

**Location:** Syria

**Dates Active:** 2000-Present Day

**Crimes Accused:** War crimes, crimes against humanity, use of chemical weapons, violations on international standards of acceptable weaponry in war, attacks on civilians

**Overview:** President al-Assad is the son of former Syrian President Hadez al-Assad, an influential former leader of Syria. Bashar had no interest in continuing his father’s political legacy, and instead went to medical school to become an ophthalmologist. His elder brother, Bassel, was supposed to inherit the presidency, however he was killed in a car crash. Bashar was recalled from medical school and began receiving lessons on how to be the leader of Syria. He was entered into the military academy at Homs, and became a Colonel in only five years, and served as an advisor to his father. Hafez died in 2000, and a law was passed that lowered the age required to run for president from 40 to 34, so that Bashar could run. He was elected in a public referendum to serve a 7-year term, only 10 days after his father’s death. He was now in charge of the country, his political party, the Ba'ath party, and commander in chief of the military, all roles that he never truly wanted for himself.

Initially, Syrians and the world were excited to see Bashar elected, he was well-educated and well-traveled and was seen as a leader who would break the mold of aging Syrian dictators that had controlled the country since the end of colonization. In his first year in office he hinted at ushering in democracy as a way to reform the country, and took a stance to end corruption. However, Syria was in debt and poorly managed by the large and ineffective bureaucracy. Syria also faced difficult challenges abroad, with rising tensions from Israel, a military occupation of Lebanon, water issues with Turkey, and not being a first-rate power in the Middle East like Iraq or Saudi Arabia.

The Arab Spring in 2011 touched Syria as it did all other countries in the Middle East. The desire for revolution and democracy swept through Damasasucs, as young hopefuls pined for a free and more Western Syria. Protestors filled the street, and Bashar responded by deploying the military to quell the insurrection. By the fall of 2011, many countries called for al-Assad to step down and allow for democratic elections. This was not followed by the government, and they began to kill civilians. In January of 2012, Reuters News Agency reported that more than 5000 civilians...
had been killed by a government-backed Syrian militia. By June 2012, a full-blown civil war had erupted in Syria, with the Army facing down against several different rebel groups. Al-Assad used the might of the Syrian Army and Airforce to decimate the rebels, who simply lacked the technological advantage to fight back. From tanks to jets, the Syrian army rained fire upon the largely disorganized rebel fighters.

The tipping point came in 2013 when it was revealed that chlorine gas was used against civilians, a clear war crime and violation of human rights. President Obama of the US and PM David Cameron of the UK threatened intervention, but were curtailed by a President Putin of Russia backing the legitimacy of al-Assad, and their offer to assist in dismantling of the Syrian chemical weapons program.

In 2015, Russia began to openly assist in military efforts to defeat the rebels. By the beginning of 2016, an estimated 470,000 people had died as a result of the fighting, with more than 2 million displaced both internally and externally, of Syria’s modest 17-million-person population.

In 2017, Syria again used chemical weapons against civilians, prompting President Trump of the US to order airstrikes on a Syrian airbase, drawing criticism from al-Assad and his allies in Russia and Iran. In 2018, reports suggest that Syria once again used chemical weapons by dropping oil barrels filled with toxic gas on the last rebel-controlled city of Douma, resulting in 50 deaths. This prompted President Trump to call al-Assad an “animal” and also to condemn President Putin. In April a joint team of American, British, and French special forces conducted strikes on Syria, disabling two chemical weapons facilities and a research center.

As of now, the rebels are all but defeated and al-Assad remains in power. Supporters of Assad claim that he was only doing what was necessary to protect his country and defeat the rebel forces who were supported by Western imperialists. However, there are many who would like to see Assad be tried for war crimes.