

WAR BACKGROUND AND TIMELINE

Euromaidan Revolution, the “Maidan” NOVEMBER 21 2013 – FEBRUARY 22 2014

In November 2013, in the capital of Ukraine, a peaceful protest formed in Kyiv’s Independence Square in response to then President Yanukovich’s sudden decision to rescind a promise of signing the European Union - Ukraine Association Agreement, instead favoring closer ties with Russia. Citizens called for the removal of Yanukovich and an end to decades of government corruption. The protests widely escalated after the violent beating of unarmed students by Ukraine’s riot police, the Berkut, and the government’s passing of an anti-protest law to quiet the storm. For three months, thousands stood side by side, through violent clashes with the Berkut and alleged “hired thugs” of the government. By the end, when Yanukovich fled to Russia on 22 February 2014, over 100 citizens were killed through brutal beatings and eventually through the use of live ammunition on the protesters.

Annexation of Crimea and Insurgency in the Donbas FEBRUARY – MARCH 2014

Within a week after Yanukovich’s exile, Russian militants, the “green men,” infiltrated and seized government buildings in Ukraine’s Autonomous Republic of Crimea and held an illegal referendum to annex the Crimean Peninsula and reunite it with Russia. A destabilized Ukrainian government, police force and ill-prepared armed forces did not react. Meanwhile, widespread protests in support of uniting with Russia broke out in eastern Ukraine, the Donbas; these protests were instigated by Russian special operatives disguised as locals. Shortly thereafter, the so-called Russian-backed separatists began seizing government buildings in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. In response, thousands of volunteers, many who participated in Maidan, self-deployed into the Donbas to stop the insurgency with the support of civil groups’ and individuals’ donations from around the world. Thousands of others rushed to enlistment stations to deploy with the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) or National Guard. Many were repeatedly turned away, leaving them to join the volunteers or to independently report to UAF units.

Declaration of Anti-Terrorist Operation, Volunteer Formalization APRIL – MAY 2014

Acting president Oleksandr Turchynov, in lieu of a war declaration, announced the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) on April 13, 2014, encouraging citizens of Ukraine to assist in combating the insurgency. Without a war declaration, Army and National Guard units are limited in their ability to conduct offensive operations legally, but it is a constitutional right for civilians to defend their homeland when under attack, although under ambiguous legal terms. In May 2014, newly elected President Petro Poroshenko took office and the state began the process of officially integrating volunteer units under the control of the Ministry of Defense (responsible for the UAF) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (National Guard); however, many volunteers were not officially documented, and some organized volunteer units refused to be integrated. Consequently, without documentation as a “combat participant,” they are not eligible for government benefits.

Ceasefire Agreement: Minsk-I and Minsk-II SEPTEMBER 2014 AND FEBRUARY 2015

On September 14 2014, representatives from Ukraine, Russia, the OSCE, and the self-proclaimed Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Luhansk Peoples Republic (LPR) signed the first ceasefire agreement. The ceasefire did not hold and violent battles continued. In February 2015, representatives of Ukraine, Russia, France, Germany, and the separatists signed the Minsk II Accords. Three days before the agreement was supposed to come into effect, the Russian-backed separatists intensified fighting to seize more territory.

Rebranding of the ATO to the Joint Forces Operation 2018 TO PRESENT

In April 2018, the President placed the ATO under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense and renamed it the Joint Forces Operation (JFO). In the fall of 2019, under Ukraine’s newly elected President Zelensky, Kyiv’s military and Russian-backed separatists began disengagements in three areas, following the Steinmeier Formula that would pave way for free elections in the self-proclaimed republics. Many citizens, particularly volunteers soldiers from the early stages of the war, view the plan as a welcoming for Russia to proceed with an annexation similar to Crimea. Others see it as the only way to end the conflict. Now in its sixth year, the war still remains undeclared. Despite the current withdrawals and 2015 ceasefire agreements, the Donbas continues to be an active hostile area with daily attacks and casualties accumulating each week. Since 2014, approximately 4,500 Ukrainian soldiers have died, and over 1.5 million citizens have been displaced.