

## The Complexities of the Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, Syrian protestors gathered nationwide calling for reforms that President Bashar al-Assad had promised but failed to deliver: greater economic prosperity, political freedom, and civil liberties. The protests were met with violent crackdowns. By the following year, the protests morphed into a full-fledged armed rebellion to overthrow Assad's government. Several resistance groups evolved and are taking part in the conflict. Four years into the war, an increasing number of other countries have become involved in this civil war. On a local, regional, and global scale, all involved are jockeying politically to control Syria's future.

Trying to control Syria is nothing new. Following WWI, France controlled the area that is now Syria

and Lebanon through the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This agreement with Britain partitioned the former Ottoman Empire (Germany's ally) between the two European powers. The artificial borders drawn by Europeans forced religiously and culturally divergent peoples together while separating allies.

In 1946, Syria became independent of France. The country shares borders with Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, and Jordan. Syria suffered a number of military coups, and thus had unstable rule until Hafez al-Assad took control. Hafez ruled for the next 30 years, until 2000 when the regime was passed on to his son Bashar al-Assad.

From the start, Hafez's rule consisted of Emergency Law, which suspended citizens' constitutional rights. Under his rule, Syria took part in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967. The war led to Syria's loss of the Golan Heights, an escarpment from which Syrian troops had sniped at Israeli troops in the valley below. Hafez's supporters had received training and weapons from Russia. Hafez supported terrorist groups like Hamas and later Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Lebanese pro-Palestinian group that is armed by Iran. They currently fight for Bashar al-Assad.

The Assad family belongs to a minor Alawite group, which is an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam. The Alawite elite were given special privileges and leadership roles for 30 years, under Hafez's rule. Hafez's government was stagnant, corrupt, and suffering from high unemployment. Assad inherited these problems when he became president in 2000.

On December 18, 2000, Assad married Asma Akhras, a Sunni Muslim he had met in London while studying to be an eye doctor. As 64 percent of Syria is Sunni, the majority of people were delighted with his choice. British, educated, and beautiful, Syrians believed that Akhras would help her fellow Sunnis receive better representation in the government.

The first year of Assad's reign allowed unprecedented social and political debate. However, by the end of August 2001, key political activists had been arrested. In the years leading up to the recent protests, little real reform had taken place despite a hopeful start to Assad's rule.

A severe drought in 2006 began pushing farmers into urban areas. It lasted for six years. A lack of rainfall combined with poor water-management policies meant that angry, unemployed men were being packed together in cities, increasing social unrest and strain.

In 2010, the "Arab Spring" protests in Tunisia and Egypt achieved success in overthrowing longtime dictators. These protests inspired the Syrian people to try similar tactics. With the West's encouragement, they joined in the revolutionary fervor that was sweeping the region. Assad's government responded by kidnapping, raping, torturing, and shooting down protestors en masse. This reaction was a throwback to the way his father had handled political unrest.

Times had changed though, and the protesters began to arm themselves and fight back. Protestors were joined by foreigners; some foreigners wanted to help bring freedom to Syria, and others were Sunni jihadists hoping to topple the Shi'ite

*continued >*



from previous page >

regime. During 2011 and 2012, some of the military and elite joined the opposition forces. In response, the government security forces used tanks, machine-gun fire, and bombings to crush the various factions against them. On August 21, 2013, Assad ordered the use of chemical weapons against his own people. By early October 2014, over 100,000 Syrians had died, and a staggering 6.5 million people were displaced.

One of the key reasons for the ongoing fight is the lack of a united opposition. These are a few of the factions fighting Assad: the Free Syrian Army (mostly army defectors, organized in July 2011), the Islamic Front (7 groups collected into one; they want a strict Islamic State), al Qaida, the Nusra Front (an offshoot of al Qaida), and ISIS (a terrorist offshoot of al Qaida). Unity remains elusive among these groups—they are as likely to fight each other as Assad's regime. Civilians have suffered as much harm from their supposed saviors as from Assad's forces.

In 2013, refugees fled into Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. Meanwhile, opposition forces crossed into Turkey and Iraq when they needed to pull out of skirmishes with government forces. ISIS controlled a large portion of Syria, including much of their oil, but it was not until they

took Mosul, Iraq, in the summer of 2014 that Western powers became involved.

On the international stage, several Western nations, including the United States, have imposed economic sanctions against Syria, demanding that Assad leave power. However, the UN Security Council has not taken action because two of Syria's allies, China and Russia, have vetoed all proposed resolutions on Syria.

With the UN's hands tied, many consider this a proxy war (a conflict between two nations where neither country directly engages the other) between the United States and Iran or the United States and Russia. As the United States has boosted military help to the opposition, Russia and Iran have increased their assistance to Assad. Iran assists Assad because Iran is also a Shi'ite-led nation.

The U.S. has used air strikes to weaken ISIS in both Iraq and Syria since 2014. At the end of September 2015, Russian forces began carrying out airstrikes against ISIS and other extremists to help Assad. Russia's involvement makes several points: It displays Russia's military power to the U.S., it protects expensive defense contracts with Assad's regime, and it challenges the West's bid for control of the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin, a dictator in his

own right, resents western nations encouraging protests against regimes.

Washington has criticized Russian involvement, claiming that Russian air strikes hit CIA-backed rebels. Critics accuse Russia of attacking smaller factions rather than seeking to destroy ISIS. The reasoning behind such attacks would be to wipe out the more moderate armed opposition factions so that there are no war heroes to challenge Assad's presidency. Yet Assad is just as bad as ISIS. His crimes against his people are no less severe than those Saddam Hussein, former president of Iraq, was put to death for.

While the powers-that-be play a complicated game to control the future of the Middle East, those on the ground have witnessed a ghastly display of cruelty and depravity from all sides. More than 250,000 people are dead. Another 11 million are displaced, wartime refugees—many of whom are struggling to enter Europe and start a new life. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this civil war is that it will likely continue for years to come.

Brought to you by Geography News Network. #163. November. 20, 2015.

## QUESTIONS

1. Who is supporting the opposition fighters? Why?
2. Who is supporting the Assad regime? Why?
3. How is Hezbollah an example of complex regional alliances?

### Seth and Julie Dixon

Seth is a geography professor at Rhode Island College within the Political Science Department and in the past has worked in the Department of Educational Studies where he supervised Social Studies student teachers in the public educational system. He curates online resources on a site titled Geography Education which is designed to share news articles, videos and other resources that teach geography in the classroom. Julie has continued to express her love of geography through her travels and writing.

## SOURCES

<http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/>  
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703856>  
<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/08/08/374537/americas-biggest-allies-funding-isis/>  
<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/24/world/meast/syria-101/>  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/turkeys-syria-isis\\_n\\_5921782.html?cps=gravity](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/02/turkeys-syria-isis_n_5921782.html?cps=gravity)  
<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/syria-official-interview-russia-support-field-developments.html#>  
<http://abcnews.go.com/International/key-players-syrian-civil-war/story?id=20108422>  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/08/29/9-questions-about-syria-you-were-too-embarrassed-to-ask/>  
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/is-a-lack-of-water-to-blame-for-the-conflict-in-syria-72513729/>