Syria

From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Syria borders Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan, as well as the Mediterranean Sea. This Arabic-speaking country has a population of more than twenty-two million people. The majority—about 74 percent of the population—belongs to the Sunni Islamic sect. Another 12 percent are Alawites, who consider themselves Shi'ite Muslims but incorporate Christian practices into their religion.

For much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Syria has been in a state of political unrest as citizens became increasingly dissatisfied with the Ba’ath Party political system and its authoritarian policies. For decades, Syrians opposed President Hafez al-Assad and his government’s dictatorial regime. In December 2010, a protest in Tunisia inspired demonstrations in many Middle Eastern countries. This unrest—dubbed the Arab Spring— influenced the people of Syria. Widespread demonstrations against the Syrian government began in March 2011. Within eighteen months, tens of thousands were dead, many had been arrested, and hundreds of thousands had fled the country. As of 2015, the civil war continued in the country; more than two hundred thousand people had died, and many more had fled the country as a result of the unrest.

A Brief History of Syria

The region’s rich history stretches back to the tenth millennium BCE. Early civilizations developed writing and the arts. Cities grew and thrived.

Ancient Syria played a significant role in the histories of several faiths. According to the Bible, the apostle Paul converted to Christianity on his way to Damascus, which is now Syria’s capital and the world’s oldest continually occupied city. Paul organized the first Christian church in Antioch. The warring sects of Islam—the Sunnis and Shi’ias—ceased fighting under a common ruler in Syria in the eighth century.

The Ottoman Empire gained control in 1517 CE and ruled for four hundred years. The French conquered Syria in 1920 and ruled until 1946, when Syrian nationalist groups forced the French out of the country.

The newly established republican government of Syria signed its declaration of independence on April 17, 1946, though unrest continued to hinder political efforts. A series of military coups threatened the stability of the government, and control frequently shifted among parties. The internal disorder allowed Arab socialist and nationalist movements to gain strength, setting the stage for future upheaval.

The Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, better known as the Ba’ath Party, tried and failed to form a union with Egypt in 1958. The party overthrew the pro-nationalist government of the Syrian Arab
Republic in 1963 and installed the National Council of the Revolutionary Command (NCRC), a group of all-powerful military and civilian leaders led by President Amin al-Hafez. Tensions mounted between the military and civilian arms of the Ba’ath Party. The more extremist civilian wing staged a successful coup in 1966, dissolved the NCRC, and installed a civilian-led government. The new regime was weakened by the Arab-Israeli War in June 1967 and another coup followed in 1968. Minister of Defense Assad executed a nonviolent military takeover in June 1970 and named himself prime minister of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party. He gained tremendous power in the party through aggressive political strategizing and used it to secure his place as Syria’s head authority figure.

Hafez al-Assad’s Regime

Assad, a member of the enigmatic Alawi sect, quickly established power by forming several Ba’ath-dominated governmental bodies. The Ba’ath Party held 87 of the 173 seats in the newly established People’s Council. Assad also led the Regional Command, a congressional body that worked swiftly to install him as the chief authority figure. Assad was elected president by national referendum in March 1971. He expanded political support for his authoritarian government by forming the National Progressive Front, a coalition of Ba’ath-controlled parties. A new constitution was formed in March 1973, and the first parliamentary elections in more than a decade followed. An amendment to the constitution that year cemented the party’s status and influence in the country—many powerful posts were reserved for party members.

The Syrian people initially welcomed Assad’s authoritarian rule. His policies encouraged economic development, promoted education, and supported a strong military. Government stability slowly returned, but with it came the suppression of political opposition. Syrians were discouraged by the voting process—their choices were restricted to Ba’ath Party politicians. Assad expanded his influence in 1976 when he sent troops into Lebanon with the stated goal of stabilizing the country, which was mired in civil war. Syria effectively controlled its neighbor for twenty-nine years.

Assad ran unopposed in five consecutive elections and ruled for thirty years. During this time, Syrians who expressed antigovernment sentiment risked punishment. A revolt in the city of Hama in 1982 was quickly crushed by Assad’s forces. The military destroyed much of Hama and killed an estimated ten thousand people.

Bashar al-Assad Assumes Control

Following Hafez al-Assad’s death on June 10, 2000, his second son was confirmed as president. Like his father, Bashar al-Assad ran unopposed. Syrians hoped the younger Assad, who had studied medicine in England, would work toward political transparency and government reform. Reform did not come, and economic growth was stagnant. Any sign of opposition was met with arrests or detentions. Assad ordered several pro-reform activists detained in 2001, further discouraging change within the government. Ethnic divisions between his Shi’ite Muslim regime and the mostly Sunni populace also raised tensions within Syria.

In 2004, the United Nations (UN) called on Syria to withdraw its remaining troops from Lebanon.
Following this withdrawal in 2005, the Syrian government cracked down on activism at home. The unyielding repression and Assad’s reelection in 2007 motivated citizens to take further action. In 2011, galvanized by the Arab Spring demonstrations in other countries, Syrian protesters marched in the streets to condemn Assad’s regime.

**Protests Gain Force in 2011**

The new, sustained calls for reform in Syria were sparked by the abuse of protesters. Several students were detained and tortured for writing antigovernment graffiti in March 2011, prompting demonstrations in the city of Dara’a. Security forces opened fire on the activists. The upheaval prompted further protests around Syria.

Demonstrations grew significantly larger and more aggressive as the year progressed. Syrian forces freely fired on protesters, killing thousands. Spokespersons for Assad denied that the government had given any order to shoot at activists. The brutality did not subdue the insurgents; rather, it fueled their anger. Rebel armies assaulted government forces. Though the government announced plans for reform, change was minimal. Assad sent tanks and soldiers to opposition epicenters around the country to quell the resistance. The government disconnected water and electricity services in many areas to weaken the rebels and implemented a communications blackout in some regions, cutting off Internet and phone services. Pro-Assad forces were also hostile toward American officials. Attacks on the US embassy and American ambassador eventually forced the United States to evacuate embassy employees and shut down its operations.

By October 2011, an estimated three thousand people—including two hundred children—had been killed in clashes between the military and insurgents. That same month, various rebel groups formed the Syrian National Council (SNC) to bring down the Assad regime. The group had the support of many outside nations, which condemned Assad’s use of force against protesters. Many countries issued sanctions against Syrian officials and demanded Assad’s resignation.

Near the end of 2011, the Arab League, an association of Arab-speaking countries, asked Assad to remove tanks and cease violence against protesters. He agreed, but delegates sent by the Arab League observed no change. A similar negotiation took place several months later, when UN officials attempted to organize a cease-fire. Assad’s army increased its assaults on dissident forces.

**Violence Continued**

The number of casualties of the conflict rose to more than 7,500 by the end of February 2012, and efforts to negotiate with Assad remained unproductive. Though an election to amend the constitution was held that month, opposition leaders called the vote a sham and largely boycotted it. Elections in May again resulted in mostly Ba’ath Party winners, though analysts believed the Assad family and a few other top Alawites held most of the power. Despite international efforts to end the violence, clashes persisted. Involvement in the conflict by the terrorist organization al-Qaeda led to a rise in suicide bombings and car bombings. By the end of July 2012, the conflict had escalated to a full-scale
A civil war that had displaced more than two hundred thousand Syrian citizens. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an antigovernment activist group, by 2012, the conflict had claimed the lives of a projected twenty-one thousand people—most of them civilians.

The US government continued to insist that Assad step down and hand over power to a representative government. The UN reported that the number of refugees fleeing Syria increased significantly. Millions who had lost their homes in the fighting were living in refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. The conflict continued in the country with several sectarian and jihadist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), joining the fight. The country also began using chemical warfare. By March 2015, more than 220,000 people have died and many millions have been displaced due to the conflict. Thousands of Syrians are fleeing their country every day in hopes of crossing the Syrian border and into other middle eastern countries and Europe. Attempts by other nations, the Arab League, and the UN to help end the fighting failed, and the civil war continues in Syria.


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