

THE BLOODBATH IN SYRIA

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story focuses on the violent uprising in Syria against the government of President Bashar al-Assad—a government known for corruption and restriction of human rights. This story explains how this revolution has cost thousands of lives and threatens to escalate into a full-scale civil war in this Middle Eastern nation and how the international community is responding to it.

Did you know . . .

It is estimated that as many as 5 000 Syrians have been killed during the current revolt against Assad.

For almost a year, a wave of popular protest against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad has swept through Syria. Demonstrators in a number of cities have demanded the end of Assad's dictatorship and its replacement by an elected government that they hope will restore freedom of speech and implement long-overdue political reforms.

Inspired by similar uprisings in other Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the protestors have used social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to communicate with each other and inform the outside world about the upheaval taking place inside their country. But unlike these revolts, which eventually led to the toppling of the existing regimes, the Syrian revolution has so far been unsuccessful in ousting Assad, who grimly holds on to power, not hesitating to use military force to suppress the demonstrations with extreme violence.

Assad has attempted to downplay the seriousness of the popular uprising against his rule, claiming that it is part of an international conspiracy orchestrated by his regime's long-standing enemies, primarily the United States and Israel.

He also blamed a handful of domestic malcontents, including radical Islamist groups such as the banned Muslim Brotherhood, for being behind the demonstrations. He continued to claim that his government was very popular with most Syrians and he strongly denied that his army and police had used excessive force against unarmed civilian demonstrators.

As of January 2012, the situation in Syria was developing into a bloody stalemate between government and rebel forces. Although the United States and the European Union imposed economic sanctions against Syria, and the Arab League dispatched observers to try to force a halt to the violence, no amount of international pressure appeared persuasive enough to break the deadlock. And because two members of the United Nations Security Council—Russia and China—are both strong allies of Assad's regime, it is very unlikely that any UN-authorized, multi-national military action will be launched against Syria (as was the case in Libya, where NATO's bombing campaign played a key role in helping rebels defeat the regime of Colonel Moammar Gadhafi in 2011).

To Consider

1. What do you know about the revolt currently taking place in Syria against the government of President Bashar al-Assad?
2. Do you think that popular uprisings against corrupt governments stand much chance of success?

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Video Review

Further Research

For the latest information about the political situation in Syria, visit www.cbc.ca/news/.

Pre-viewing Questions

With a partner or in a small group discuss and respond to the following.

1. Have you seen any media coverage of the uprising in Syria and the government's response to it? If so, what impressions do you have of these events?

2. Why do you think it is difficult for Canadians to imagine a situation where a government would use military force to kill thousands of its own people?

Viewing Questions

As you watch the video, respond to the questions in the spaces provided.

1. What three Arab countries witnessed successful revolutions against dictatorial leaders in 2011? What were the names of those leaders?

2. What Middle Eastern country is now the scene of a violent uprising against its government? What is the population of this country?

3. Who is the president of Syria? For how long has he held power?

4. Why is it difficult for the outside world to learn about what is taking place inside Syria?

5. What organization has sent monitors to Syria to observe and report on events there?

6. What criticisms have been made against the leader of this mission?

7. How many people are believed to have lost their lives in the uprising since it began in March 2011?

8. What is the capital city of Syria? Why is it a stronghold of support for the regime?

9. What religious group forms the majority of Syria's population?

10. What religious minority group holds important positions in the government and military?

11. Why do members of Syria's Christian minority fear persecution if the government changes?

12. What concessions has the Syrian government offered to the opposition? Why are opposition leaders skeptical of such measures?

Post-viewing Questions

1. After watching the video, revisit your responses to the Pre-viewing Questions. Did watching the video help you respond to the questions in greater depth? In what way?

2. Why is it ironic that an army leader from Sudan should be heading the Arab League monitoring mission to investigate the uprising in Syria?

3. Do you think that Syria's Christian minority is right to fear persecution if the Assad government is overthrown?

4. What actions, if any, should Canada take in response to the uprising in Syria and the government's violent suppression of it?

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Syria: A Brief History

Quote

“Damascus has seen all that has ever occurred on earth, and she still lives. She has looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires, and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies.” — American author Mark Twain, after visiting Syria in the 1860s

Focus for Reading

In your notebook, create an organizer like the one below. As you read the following information on different periods in the history of Syria, record key points in your organizer. You should be able to enter at least four or five points in each section of your chart. You will be using this information in the activities that follow the text material.

Antiquity to the First World War
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The Emergence of Modern Syria, 1919-71
• •
The Assad Dynasty and Its Opponents, 1971-2012
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Antiquity to the First World War

Syria’s long history stretches back to the beginning of human civilizations that were established in the Middle East over 5 000 years ago. Its capital, Damascus, is the oldest continuously inhabited city on the planet, with people living there since at least 2500 BCE. Modern-day Syria’s territory occupies only a fraction of what was once a huge territory and a key part of many ancient empires—including those of the Sumerians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, and

Persians—who fought for control of it over many millennia. Today, the ruins of these now-vanished civilizations can be found throughout the country and are of great interest to both archaeologists and tourists.

The Macedonian warrior-king Alexander the Great wrested Syria from his Persian enemies after winning the Battle of Issus in 333 BCE as part of his campaign to extend Greek rule over the entire known world. In 64 BCE the Roman general Pompey the Great captured Syria and turned it into a province of Rome. Syria thrived under Roman rule, with cities like Antioch, Palmyra, and Aleppo rising to great prominence as centres of trade, commerce, and culture. Its population rose to a level that would not again be reached until modern times.

Syria was also important in the early history of Christianity. Saul of Tarsus, better known as the Apostle Paul, is said to have converted to Christianity while travelling on the road to Damascus. In

Did you know . . .
Syria did not gain independence until 1946.

later years, Syria became a major centre of the new faith, with many churches and monasteries established. Some of these still exist today, and Syria's present Christian population, amounting to about 10 per cent of the country's inhabitants, can trace its roots back to the earliest days of Christianity in the ancient world.

In 640 CE, Syria became part of the new Islamic empire under the Umayyad dynasty, with Damascus as its capital. This powerful state controlled a vast area that stretched from Spain and Morocco in the west to India and Central Asia in the east. Damascus flourished under Umayyad rule, with many beautiful mosques and other buildings still surviving from this glorious period in Syrian history. The Umayyads were very enlightened rulers who extended religious freedom to both Jewish and Christian minorities. However, following the end of their dynasty in 750 BCE, Syria became a battleground for many centuries, with rival Arab sultanates, the Mongols, and the Egyptian-based Mamelukes fighting for supremacy. Eventually, in 1516, the region fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire and remained so until its defeat at the end of the First World War, four centuries later.

The Emergence of Modern Syria, 1919-71

The Ottoman Empire had been an ally of Germany and Austria-Hungary during the First World War, and after its defeat and collapse, it lost much of its territory to the victorious Allied powers, Britain and France. During the war, two diplomats, Mark Sykes of Britain and Georges Picot of France, secretly agreed to divide the Ottoman provinces in southwestern Asia into two zones, each to be controlled by their respective countries. Once the war was over, the newly created League of Nations

formally authorized the establishment of French and British mandates over these territories. Syria and Lebanon were both part of the French zone, with Palestine and Iraq falling under British control.

But local Syrian Arab leaders, who had supported the Allies against the Ottomans during the war and had been promised independence in return for their efforts, felt betrayed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and a nationwide freedom struggle broke out during the 1920s. Although France was able to suppress the revolt, it agreed to demands for Syria's eventual independence, which was proclaimed during the Second World War and became a reality following the withdrawal of French troops a year later.

In the decades following independence, Syria's government proved to be very unstable, with a number of military coups occurring in rapid succession. Along with neighbouring Arab states Egypt and Jordan, it became involved in three wars against Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973, losing each time. As a result of these military defeats, Syria lost control of the Golan Heights bordering Israel, a major bone of contention between the two countries to this day. From 1958 to 1963, Syria and Egypt merged into the United Arab Republic, an experiment that did not succeed.

Inspired by the radical pan-Arab message of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, a group called the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party seized power in a military coup on March 8, 1963, and quickly imposed its control over the country. It passed an emergency decree soon after taking power that banned opposition political parties and severely restricted freedom of speech. These restrictions remained in effect until the uprising of 2011 began.

The Assad Dynasty and Its Opponents, 1971-2012

Hafez al-Assad, one of the key figures behind the 1963 coup, rose to a position of prominence within the Ba'ath Party and assumed complete power as president in 1971. Under his regime, the country's small Alawite minority, of which his family were members, gained dominance over Syria's political, military, and economic life. The Alawites are an offshoot of the Shi'ite branch of the Islamic religion, whose beliefs and practices are very secretive and mystical while sharing strong parallels with Christianity. To many Sunni Muslims, who constitute almost three-quarters of Syria's population, the Alawites are considered religious heretics. Assad's regime was very heavy-handed and dictatorial but followed a determinedly secular path, suppressing radical Islamist groups like the banned Muslim Brotherhood and promoting a policy of religious tolerance of Christians. However, this enlightened approach did not apply to the country's once-numerous Jewish minority, most of whom were forced to emigrate because of the regime's strong anti-Israel policies.

A graphic example of Assad's ruthlessness was his violent crackdown against a Muslim Brotherhood-inspired uprising against his regime that erupted in the city of Hama in February 1982. It is estimated that between 10 000 and 25 000 people, most of them civilians, lost their lives in this revolt, which is believed to be the single deadliest act by any Arab government against its own people in the modern Middle East. A consummate political strategist, Assad sought to improve relations with his former enemy the United States by supporting the 1990 UN-authorized military coalition against Iraq's Saddam Hussein following his invasion of Kuwait. Assad and the Iraqi dictator had

a long history of personal and political enmity, as each led a rival faction of the Ba'ath Party.

Following Hafez al-Assad's death on June 10, 2000, power fell to his son, Bashar, who was only 34 years old at the time. Trained as an ophthalmologist, Bashar had shown little interest in succeeding his father before he became president. During the first months of his regime, he introduced some political and economic reforms, and opposition forces hoped he might lead Syria through a transformation to democracy. But the "Damascus Spring" proved to be short-lived, and, within a year, Assad had cracked down on any expressions of dissent, jailing or exiling most of the opposition leadership. During this time, Syria also became deeply implicated in the political affairs of its neighbor Lebanon and was accused of plotting the assassination of Lebanese politician Rafik Hariri in 2005. After a wave of anti-Syrian protests inside Lebanon, Assad agreed to withdraw his troops from the country.

In March 2011, peaceful demonstrations against Assad's regime arose in many cities throughout Syria. Inspired by similar revolts in other Arab countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the protestors called for an end to the dictatorship and the establishment of democracy. Assad's military and security forces responded with great violence, shooting unarmed protestors in cold blood and using heavy weapons against rebel strongholds. Despite almost unanimous condemnation from most foreign powers, Assad stated that he would not resign and would continue to deal with the uprising against his regime "with a heavy hand."

Almost one year after the revolution began, it appeared that Assad and his opponents were in a stalemate, with neither side strong enough to defeat

the other. This situation alarmed both Syrians and the international community, and there was a growing concern that a full-scale civil war, such as had occurred in Libya, might be in the offing. This turn of events would create even more instability in the Middle East, a region already plagued with many conflicts.

Follow-up

1. With a partner, compare the information in your summary chart. Help each other complete any missing information.
2. Why was Syria such an important part of the world in ancient times?
3. What problems has the modern nation of Syria faced since it gained independence from France in 1946?
4. How do you think the stalemate between the Assad regime and its opponents might be resolved in 2012?

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How should the world respond?

Focus for Reading

As you read this section, complete the following chart, noting possible responses to the situation in Syria and the pros and cons of each.

Response	Pros	Cons
Military action		
Economic sanctions		

The Middle East and the Arab world in general have been shaken by dramatic popular uprisings throughout 2011 and early 2012. A popular rising in Tunisia led to the collapse of the government with minimal loss of life in January 2011. One month later, Egypt's long-ruling dictator, Hosni Mubarak, was forced to step down after massive protests against his regime in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Emboldened by these events, opponents of Colonel Moammar Gadhafi took to the streets of Bengazi, Libya, touching off what was to become a bitter struggle to topple his hated regime, with NATO warplanes playing a decisive role in the ultimate resolution of the conflict and the killing of the dictator in the fall of 2011.

At the same time, demands for reform and political change have been stymied or repressed in other Arab states such as Bahrain and Yemen. But when demonstrators began protesting against the iron-fisted rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011, the

world was caught by surprise. Unlike Tunisia's Ben Ali or Egypt's Mubarak, but similar to Gadhafi, Assad was a ruthless, totalitarian leader who was unwilling to yield to popular demands for his ouster from power, whatever the cost in lives and destruction might be.

But unlike his Libyan counterpart, Assad was not viewed as an international pariah by the rest of the world and could rely on the backing of influential allies both in the region and abroad. Such support would probably be enough to secure the defeat of any moves to organize a United Nations-authorized mission to halt his violent suppression of the revolt, as had been the case with Libya. Inside the Middle East itself, Assad could count Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran among the friends of his regime. Further afield, Russia and China, both permanent members of the UN Security Council—with the power to veto any proposed motion to aid the Syrian rebels—were also strong trading partners and strategic allies of Assad.

Further Research

Find out more about the Canadian government's position on Syria by visiting the website of the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Department at www.international.gc.ca.

A Military Response

Even if the United States and the countries of the European Union and NATO were inclined to initiate a military response to the revolt in Syria—which has not appeared likely so far—it would be very difficult if not impossible to gain UN approval for such an option. In the case of Libya, the Security Council did authorize NATO warplanes to enforce a “no-fly” zone over the country, in order to prevent Gadhafi from using his army against civilians in rebel-controlled areas. This soon led to the bombing of Gadhafi forces on the ground, a move that handed a great military advantage to the rebels, who up until then had proven no match for the dictator's superior troops. In the end, it is probably fair to conclude that without NATO's assistance, the revolution in Libya would not have succeeded—or at least would have taken much longer to prevail.

Even in the unlikely event that the UN Security Council did authorize some kind of military response to the Syrian revolt, it would be much more difficult to impose it, since Syria's armed forces are far stronger than Gadhafi's. In addition, the anti-Assad rebels are still in the very early stages of organizing themselves into any kind of effective fighting force that could be deployed against his army. Further, unlike Libya, Syria has some influential allies in the region, most notably Iran.

Unfortunately, Iran already feels itself under threat from the U.S. and other Western nations, including Israel, as a result of allegations that it is engaged in a program to develop nuclear weapons. It is difficult to believe that Iran would stand idly by should any international military action be launched against its neighbor. Should Iran come to Syria's aid, a full-blown Middle East crisis would ensue, with untold consequences, not only for the region but also for global peace and stability.

Economic Sanctions

Ever since it declared Syria a “sponsor of international terrorism” in 1979, the U.S. has imposed some form of trade sanctions against it. Then-president George W. Bush tightened the screws even further in 2004 when he froze Syrian assets in the U.S. and stopped all exports except humanitarian items. This move was in response to Assad's backing of the militant Islamist group Hezbollah in Lebanon and the radical faction Hamas in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory of Gaza. Other Western countries, including Canada and the members of the EU, have been slower to respond, and in the case of some European countries such as Italy have continued to import oil from Syria even after the uprising began in early 2011.

In January 2012, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird expanded Canadian sanctions already in place against Syria to include a ban on software used in the monitoring of telephone and Internet communications. This was in addition to existing measures that included a travel ban on senior government officials, the freezing of Syrian assets, and halting most imports and exports. For their part, the countries of the EU approved a similar list of sanctions shortly after the beginning of the uprising, even though this group of countries constituted Syria's most important trading partner.

Petroleum is by far Syria's most significant export, accounting for 20 per cent of its total GDP—and the EU nations purchase over 90 per cent of it. A European-wide embargo on Syrian oil could have a crippling effect on the country's economy unless it is able to find other customers for it. China and India, two emerging economies dependent on oil imports, are possible alternatives. But initial reports indicate that Syria's oil production has slumped, and that finding new buyers has proven

more difficult than the Assad regime originally thought. In addition, Syria's other main source of foreign revenue, tourism, has almost evaporated as a result of the disturbances. In addition, unemployment is rising to an estimated rate of 20 per cent, mainly impacting young people. While the regime continues to denounce the rest of the world for its "unjust" economic actions, it remains to be seen how long ordinary Syrians will continue to tolerate the increasing hardship resulting from the sanctions.

To add to Syria's predicament, it now finds itself facing severe disruptions to its electricity supplies, 10 per cent of which are generated by its neighbor, Turkey. A one-time ally, Turkey has taken a strong stand against the Assad regime as a result of its violent suppression of the revolt. It also fears a mass influx of refugees fleeing the conflict. Turkey has threatened to cut off electricity supplies unless Assad agrees to the Arab League's demands that he halt military actions against civilians, withdraw his heavy weapons from rebel-held cities, free political prisoners, and initiate a dialogue with the opposition

leading to the establishment of a multi-party democracy in Syria. As of late January 2012, Assad had demonstrated no willingness to take such demands seriously.

The 22-member Arab League has also been very active in putting pressure on Assad's regime to halt the violence and commit to meaningful dialogue with the opposition. It suspended Syria's membership in the organization in November 2011 and imposed sanctions—including a ban on commercial flights to and from the country from other Arab states. Two league member-nations in particular, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have been extremely vocal in their criticisms of Assad and have even advocated the use of military force as a last resort if diplomatic pressure and sanctions fail to persuade him to change course. The organization dispatched an observer force to Syria in December hoping that its presence would help reduce the violence, but this proved unsuccessful. As a result, some league member-states are reviewing their participation in the monitoring mission, believing it to be counter-productive.

Follow-up

1. With a partner, compare the information in your summary chart. Help each other complete any missing information. Based on this, decide which response you think is more likely to be successful in helping end the bloodshed in Syria.
2. What are the main similarities and differences between the revolution in Syria and similar uprisings that have occurred in other Arab countries?
3. Do you think economic sanctions and other forms of diplomatic pressure will succeed in forcing the Assad regime to change its policies in dealing with the revolt against it? Why or why not?

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Activity: Monitoring Media Coverage

Since the uprising began in Syria in early 2011, it has been almost impossible for mainstream media outlets to report in any depth on these events. This is because the Assad regime has prevented their personnel from entering the country. Instead, the Western media and interested individuals have relied on grainy videos of demonstrations and violent governments attacks taken by witnesses on their cell phones. Many of these have been since uploaded and can be viewed on sites such as YouTube. You can view them by entering "Syria" in the search field.

In January 2012, the Syrian government permitted a CBC news crew to enter the country and file reports on the uprising. Headed by veteran CBC reporter Susan Ormiston, these reports are among the few that Western media have been able to present from inside Syria. They can be viewed at www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/01/11/f-syria-ormiston.html.

You can also forward questions directly to Susan Ormiston by accessing this link: www.cbc.ca/news/yourcommunity/2012/01/submit-your-syria-questions-to-susan-ormiston-veteran-cbc-reporter.html.

In addition, the renowned Arab television network Al Jazeera has devoted a great deal of media coverage to the events of the Arab Spring in general and the Syrian uprising in particular. It can be found at www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/syria/.

The BBC is an internationally recognized objective source of information about events taking place around the world. Its website offers in-depth coverage of events in Syria and can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13855203.

Your Task

Form groups to review and research the media coverage of the uprising in Syria from one of the sources given above. Prepare and present a report to the class on what you learned about these events from the media sources you consulted. As part of your group's presentation, you may wish to show brief video clips portraying events in Syria and lead a discussion of how the members of the class respond to them.

To conclude your presentation, you may offer an evaluation of the media source you researched, indicating what you regard as its main strengths and weaknesses as a source of information about the Syrian revolution. Also note any biases that you can identify in this media outlet's coverage of these events.