

# Syria— the Outcast State

Three years on from the outbreak of protests against the Syrian government, Syria remains wracked by conflict. **Jörg Michael Dostal** looks at the reasons behind the current violence in a state that has always been on the political margins.

**I**f we are to understand the conflict that has raged in Syria since March 2011, we first have to look back into history. Since independence in 1946, Syria has always been an outcast country from the perspective of western powers. The current crisis, however,

represents the most dramatic challenge to the country's statehood and independence.

The modern politics of the Middle East has its roots in the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, named after the British and French diplomats that drew up the secret deal that divided the

Bilad al-Sham or historical Syria of Ottoman times into the four entities of Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and (smaller) Syria. Thus, the region was subjected to a colonial policy of 'divide-and-rule'. British and French interests were served in a thinly-veiled manner by the post-World War I mandate system of the League of Nations: Palestine and Jordan, separated by a British-imposed border along the River Jordan, were handed over by the League to Britain. France took control of Lebanon and Syria, thereby imposing an



artificial boundary between local populations that had been closely connected under Ottoman rule.

In Syria, French administrators relied on local minorities such as the Alawites and the Druze to control the Sunni Muslim majority population. Syria was further divided into smaller cantons, and the northern Syrian coastline (the Sanjak of Alexandretta) was handed over by France to Turkey in 1938, thereby creating a lasting territorial dispute between Arab and Turkish nationalists. After the Second World War, the French were ultimately forced to leave Lebanon and Syria due to local nationalist resistance against their rule and an informal Anglo-American coalition pushing for French withdrawal.

### Independent Syria

Post-independence Syria initially adapted a republican democratic system. The country's first President Quwatli, a conservative nationalist and representative of the land-owning elites, governed from 1946 to 1949 until he was removed in a military coup. The year 1949 saw no less than three military coups in Syria, mostly encouraged by neighbouring Arab countries keen to gain control of Syrian affairs. The CIA was also involved in at least one of these coups: Quwatli had been unwilling to accommodate US oil interests, hesitating to grant right of way for American-Saudi pipelines to cross Syrian territory.

After 1949, Syria became a textbook case of a weak state: military rule and fragile civilian cabinets followed each other in quick succession. The lowest point was reached in 1956 and 1957 when at least five coup attempts or threatened invasions from neighbouring countries were undertaken to remove the Syrian government. Once again, US and British intelligence backed these destabilisation efforts.

The main reason for targeting Syria was the country's drift away from the western camp. Under the influence of Nasser's Egypt, Syria turned towards the Soviet Union in 1956, receiving military and economic assistance that had previously been denied its democratic and military leaders. Ever since, Syria has been out of the direct reach of western powers. After the failed experiment with Arab unity during the United Arab Republic (the union of Egypt and Syria

between 1958 and 1961), Syria has been governed, since 1963, by the Arab Socialist Baath Party. (Baath stands for 'renaissance of Arab culture'.)

### Army-backed Statehood

In reality, the Syrian state was stabilised by army rule. The Syrian Baath regime between 1963 and 1970 was based on a committee of army officers, many deriving from the ethnic and religious minorities historically overrepresented in the armed forces. Hafiz al-Assad (the father of the current President, Bashar, see box) became President in 1971 and ruled the country until his death in 2000.

The exact nature of the Syrian state has always been contested. Single-issue explanations for the long-term stability of the Syrian Baath regime, such as the focus on minority rule over the Sunni majority, fail to convincingly explain why the regime survived for so long. From a socio-economic point of view, the Syrian state was transformed in the 1970s due to increasing revenue from oil sales that allowed a growing Syrian state class to distribute resources to popular constituencies. Many sections of the Syrian population, in turn, started to have a material interest in supporting the Baath regime. Oil rents allowed for progressive social reform and upward social mobility. Public education was expanded and limited land reform created new wealth in the countryside. Female participation in education and the labour force became a mass phenomenon. The state also recognised religious communities and Syria's patchwork of Muslim religious groups, different branches of Christianity and ancient religions underlined the country's rich and unique cultural heritage. Thus, the Baath regime made efforts to combine secular Arab nationalism with an appeal to religious communities.

The Syrian Baath regime included authoritarian and populist features. Rather than acting as a unified bloc, the rule of the Baath Party was based on a coalition of different social constituencies and interests. As long as Syria's oil revenue was stable, the different regime constituencies could be satisfied and internal coherence maintained.

### Outside Challenges

Before the current crisis, the challenges Syria faced were primarily external. The

### President Bashar al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad, second son of former Syrian President Hafiz, was born in 1965. He graduated in Medicine from the University of Damascus, going on to specialise in ophthalmology (the treatment of eye problems). After his older brother, Basil, died in a car accident in 1994, Bashar became the most likely candidate to succeed his father. After the death of Hafiz on 10 June 2000, Bashar became General Secretary of the Baath Party and was subsequently elected President in a referendum, winning more than 97 per cent of the vote. He was re-elected with a similar majority in 2007.

Bashar's presidency was characterised by efforts to reform the economy but no coherent strategy was adopted and the outcome was inconclusive. The high point of his tenure came in the summer of 2006, when Hizbollah (the Shiite militia in southern Lebanon aligned with Syria and Iran) fought Israel to a standstill in the most recent Lebanese war. Two years later, Syria was feted as a potential partner of the European Union and Bashar was greeted by Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris in July 2008. This event marked the high point of the regime's external recognition.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Bashar has stressed political reform. Most of the opposition has refused to engage in dialogue with the President, demanding his resignation. Bashar, however, has said that he might run in presidential elections scheduled for May. According to the new Syrian Constitution, these elections will feature multiple candidates. However, every candidate requires the support of 35 members of Parliament (out of 250). Since opposition figures largely boycotted the parliamentary election, they are not technically eligible to put forward candidates, in addition to being unable to organise politically due to the short timeframe. If Bashar does not run, Syria's foreign minister Walid al-Moualem, a respected senior politician in his 70s could be a viable transitional candidate, although the former Syrian ambassador to the US has never stated such aspirations. Of course, it remains to be seen whether presidential elections could take place at all given the current conditions inside Syria.

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## The Levant: Ethnic Composition (Actual)

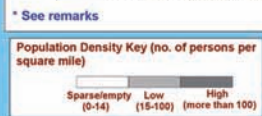
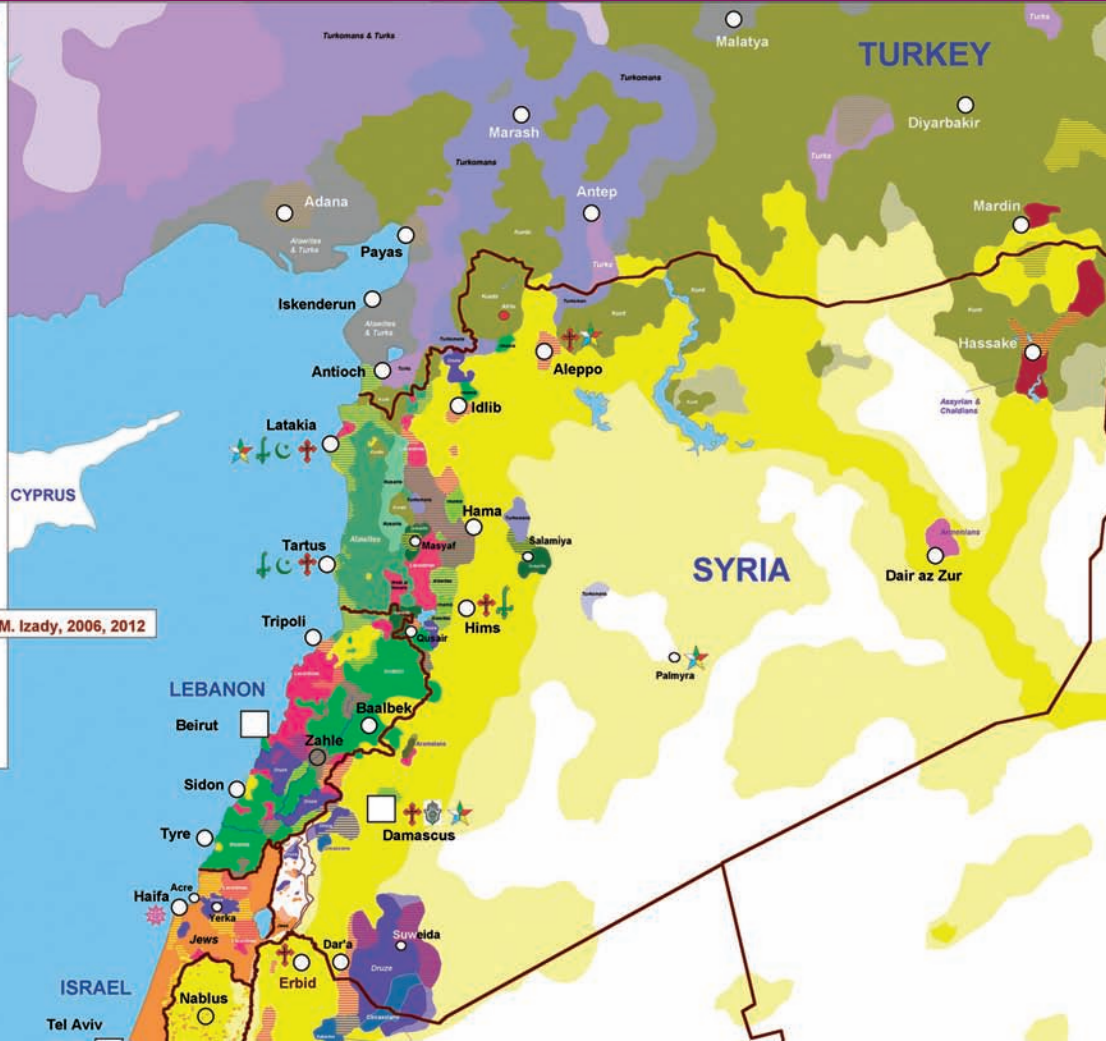


Image courtesy of author Dr Michael Izady at [gulf2000.columbia.edu](http://gulf2000.columbia.edu)  
Image available at <http://bit.ly/1hrKMPP>



most significant events were the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel that resulted in the occupation of the Syrian Golan Heights by Israel. The Syrian Golan is one of the main water reservoirs in the region and the restoration of the territory to Syria has been the main tenet of Syrian foreign policy since the late 1960s.

Another important challenge was the armed insurrection of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood against the state in the early 1980s. This uprising received significant support from neighbouring Arab countries hostile to Syria's Baath regime, especially Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Ultimately, the Syrian army suppressed the Brotherhood. One of the outcomes of this episode was Syria's defence alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran that served to contain Saddam Hussein's challenge for regional hegemony after Iraq's attack on Iran in 1980.

Last but not least, Syria was officially

targeted by the US administration for regime change after the occupation of Iraq in 2003. From the point of view of western powers, the removal of Saddam's Sunni regime produced the unintended consequence of strengthening the regional role of Iran due to its influence with the current predominantly Shiite government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq. This resulted in the creation, for the first time, of a de facto regional alliance of Iran, Iraq and Syria. This is an important factor in explaining what Seymour M. Hersh calls the 'redirection' of US regional strategy during the Obama Presidency which has seen Sunni regimes and interests in the region once again receiving full-scale US endorsement in order to push back Iran and its regional allies.

### After March 2011

Domestic factors and external (or geopolitical) factors must be jointly considered to explain what has happened

in Syria since March 2011. Supporters of the Syrian opposition tend to stress the predominance of domestic factors – the regime is supposed to have hardly any supporters left – while pro-Syrian government factions highlight the role of external factors, especially sponsorship of the insurgency within Syria by neighbouring Arab countries and the Erdogan government in Turkey which is closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. The truth is to be found somewhere between these two points of view.

Domestic economic factors go some way to explaining the breakdown of alliances between the Syrian regime and many sections of the population. Under Bashar al-Assad's presidency, Syria experienced an unbalanced economic boom that focused on the construction of luxury hotels and other prestige projects. At the same time, people in the countryside suffered from the

worst drought in recent history. Syria's cities experienced an influx of more and more people from rural areas, creating urban shanty towns.

At the same time, the Syrian government followed the advice of bodies such as the International Monetary Fund to reduce subsidies for foodstuffs, petrol and heating oil. This decision was due to real and projected decline in the country's oil revenue. While state officials were granted salary increases to make up for the decline in basic subsidies, the poorest sections of society were directly hit by the price increases. Also, Syria has for many years, recorded one of the highest fertility rates in the world, especially in less developed rural areas. The state has failed to provide enough employment for young people in the public sector, due to a decline in oil revenue, and the private sector has been unable to expand sufficiently. In sum, economic crisis and especially rising social inequality are important factors to understand why the opponents of the regime gained support amongst many Syrians.

But the significance of geopolitical factors should not be underestimated. Large-scale anti-government protests and counter demonstrations by supporters of the Syrian regime between March 2011 and mid-2012 have escalated into a full-scale (yet undeclared) transnational war within Syria. In the western media, the Syrian government was exclusively blamed for the repression of peaceful anti-government demonstrators. Yet large-scale pro-government rallies in 2011 and 2012 that brought millions on the streets across Syria – indeed the largest political rallies in the history of the country – were either completely ignored or explained away as based on the forced mobilisation of Syrian government employees. Political reform initiatives by the Assad government, such as the introduction of a multi-party system and a new Constitution, were equally disregarded as 'too little too late'. Throughout 2012, the western media presented events in Syria as based on conflict between the isolated Assad regime and 'the Syrian people'. The strong Islamist current in Syrian opposition forces and the fact that all the ethnic and religious

minorities were generally absent from opposition rallies was largely ignored.

The story of the Syrian conflict is more complex than most western media have been willing to consider. The marked escalation in violence since the summer of 2012 is closely linked with the large-scale delivery of weapons from the outside. Last March the *New York Times* reported that the CIA had delivered at least 3500 tons of military equipment to the insurgents throughout 2012.

In 2013, western public opinion started to take notice of the fact that transnational Islamist networks were fighting in Syria and that many of the insurgents were of non-Syrian origin. In September 2013 the defence analysis company HIS-Jane's reported that the approximately 100,000 insurgents in Syria were classified as follows: 30-35 per cent hardcore Islamists, 30 per cent 'moderate' Islamists (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) and only 25 per cent secular nationalists, amongst them Kurdish nationalists that have frequently clashed with Islamist militias in self-defence and have otherwise followed a policy of armed neutrality in the Syrian conflict.

At the end of 2013, the Syrian government agreed to decommission the country's chemical weapons. The government in Damascus underlined that it is able to act and deliver on agreements with the outside world. At the same time, the conflict escalated further with large-scale destabilisation of neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq by Islamist insurgents operating across national borders.

### Future Prospects

Foreign powers meddling in Syrian affairs from the outside have miscalculated. Not only has the Assad regime survived so far, its regional opponents such as the Erdogan government in Turkey have in the meantime lost some of their democratic credibility. At the beginning of 2014, Mr Erdogan was challenged in the streets of Istanbul. Others in the anti-Assad camp such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar never had any democratic credentials. Their support for Syrian insurgents has always been motivated by sectarianism and the intention to punish Iran.

The background of the Syrian drama

does not differ fundamentally from earlier episodes of regional conflict in the Arab world and amongst Arab states. The main geopolitical issues still concern access to oil, gas and control of pipelines. These issues have, in the past, been very significant in explaining policy-making in the region and in Syria (such as in the mid 1950s and early 1980s when Syria faced earlier rounds of destabilisation).

What is left of the so-called 'Arab spring' in 2014? The short answer is that democracy will not come to Syria, or any other country in the region, in a single step or on the back of foreign intervention. The genuine moderates on both sides of the Syrian conflict must find ways to end the fighting as soon as possible in order to protect the country from further harm. Only by ending the brutal stalemate can the door be opened for genuine negotiations, allowing the different groups in Syria to re-establish a peaceful order based on political reform and power sharing.

In the meantime, western powers should reflect on the failure of their past interventions: only 200,000 Christians remain in Iraq today while about one million had to flee the country after the Anglo-American occupation. Many of these Christians sought refuge in neighbouring Syria where the current violence once again questions their safety. The Middle East is full of religious and ethnic minorities. State failure in Syria would affect the entire region. This basic fact concerns Arabs and Europeans alike.

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