



Coalition for Peace Action - Information and Action

Syria... Background to the Crisis

Historical Background

Present-day Syria is only a small portion of the ancient Syrian landmass, a region at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea from which Western powers created [Syria](#), [Lebanon](#), [Jordan](#), and [Israel](#) in the post-Ottoman era of the early 20th century. This entire region is simultaneously cursed and blessed as a crossroads for commerce and a battleground for the political destinies of dynasties and empires. Exploited politically, it also has benefited from the cultural diversity of people who came to claim parts or all of it. Throughout history, it has been the focal point of a continual [debate], both intellectual and bellicose, between the Middle East and the West. Today, Syria remains an active participant in the trials and tribulations of a troubled and volatile region.

Events Leading up to Today

The period between the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the granting of [France](#)'s mandate over Syria by the League of Nations in 1922 was marked by a complicated sequence of events during which Syrians achieved a brief period of independence (1919– 20). However, three forces worked against Arab nationalism: [Britain](#)'s interest in keeping eastern Mesopotamia under its control to counter Russian influence and protect British oil interests; the Jewish interest in Palestine; and France's goal to remain a power in the Middle East. Ultimately, Syria and Lebanon were placed under French influence, and Transjordan and [Iraq](#), under British mandate. The termination of Syria's brief experience with independence left a lasting bitterness against the West and a deep-seated determination to reunite Arabs in one state. This quest was the primary basis for modern Arab nationalism.

The Arab Socialist Resurrection (Baath) Party (hereafter, Baath Party), with a secular, socialist, Arab nationalist orientation, took decisive control in a March 1963 coup...

Factionalism continued within the Baathist regime until the assumption of power by then- Minister of Defense Lieutenant General **Hafiz al Assad** following a bloodless military coup in November 1970.

Assad, approved as president by popular referendum in March 1971, quickly moved to establish an authoritarian regime with power concentrated in his own hands. His

thirty- year presidency was characterized by a cult of personality, developed in order to maintain control over a potentially restive population and to provide cohesion and stability to government.

Hafiz al Assad died in 2000 and was promptly succeeded by his son, **Bashar al Assad**, after the constitution was amended to reduce the mandatory minimum age of the president from 40 to 34. Bashar was then nominated by the Baath Party and elected president in a referendum in which he ran unopposed. The younger Assad appeared to make economic and political reform a priority of his presidency. He faced resistance from the old guard, however. After a brief period of relaxation and openness known as the Damascus Spring (July 2000–February 2001), dissent is again not tolerated, and it appears that reforms will be slow in coming. Nevertheless, Assad reportedly is slowly dismantling the old regime and replacing certain high-level administrators with non-Baath Party appointments.

The Syrian Uprising

Syria has been under an Emergency Law since 1962, effectively suspending most constitutional protections for citizens. Its President Hafez al-Assad led Syria for nearly 30 years, banning any opposing political party and any opposition candidate in any election. The Syrian government justified the state of emergency due to the fact that Syria was in a state of war with Israel. According to BBC News, the government and ruling Ba'ath Party own and control much of the media. Criticism of the president and his family is banned and the domestic and foreign press are censored. The state exercises strict internet censorship and blocks many global websites like Facebook and YouTube, as well as opposition sites. **The popular uprising, taking place in various cities in Syria, began on 26 January 2011.** Like other pro-democracy rebellions in the Middle East, the protests have taken the form of various types, including marches and hunger strikes. In reaction, Syrian security forces have killed hundreds of protesters and injured many more.¹

¹ Excerpted from Nation's On Line .org (Grammatical changes by the editor) <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/index.html>

Their sources are the "library of Congress and others."

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The Current Crisis

Our President is a former constitutional law professor. He knows well that as a signatory to the UN Charter we are bound by

According to the Washington Post, the first major protests were held in Damascus and Daraa where security forces killed a number of protesters beginning the current crisis in March, 2011. In May, Assad deploys the Army. The U.S. tightens sanctions already in place. In July there is a massive crackdown in Hama where hundreds are reported killed. The West calls on Assad to step down in August, 2011, In November the Arab League suspends Syria's membership. Rebel activity begins in November of 2012. By June of 2013 the UN reports that nearly 93,000 have been killed in the fighting that has expanded into a full blown civil war. That same Month the US alleges that Assad has used chemical weapons, killing nearly 1,500 civilians, but so far no concrete proof has been shown to the public that Assad was responsible. Some claim rebels, supplied by the Saudis are responsible. August, 2013 President Obama Announces possible military action! This brings us to the impending debate on Congress and the current situation. *For the full timeline, go here:*

<http://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/page/world/timeline-unrest-in-syria/207/>

International Law. Bombing Syria would be the act of a rogue state... under international law it is grounds for sanctions and possible other actions against the US, like freezing assets, embargos of US ships, and economic trade sanctions.

But what about Assad's alleged crimes and what about the Syrian people?

While ONLY 9% of the public, according to the Washington Post, supports U.S. military intervention in Syria. 60% oppose intervention outright. (See Reuters/Ipsos poll) This poll was taken Aug 19-20, but even then only 25% said they would support intervention if Assad used chemical weapons, which is still not proved in the most recent case.

Though Assad may be guilty of other crimes against his people, an escalation in military action by the U.S. helps no one and will only risk wider conflict and more death, destruction and ill will.

Finally, besides starting negotiations with all sides in Syria, another strong action the US and its allies could pursue—if UN inspectors confirm chemical weapons use by Syria—is to bring charges against the Assad regime in the International Court of Justice (ICC). War criminals are now being successfully tried and convicted, and that seems a much better way to seek appropriate punishment.

YET... International Law is clear on "Use of Force".

There are two circumstances:

1. Self Defense, 2. Approval of the UN Security Council.

- **Bombing Syria does not come close to meeting either of these.**
- **Bombing Syria will be an illegal act under International Law.**

The humanitarian tragedy in Syria worsens by the day. Only military options seem to be considered. Instead of bombing Damascus, the UN should look into the overall humanitarian catastrophe, to focus on human needs.

During the Berlin airlift, Allied jets flew to West Berlin, not loaded with bombs, but food and medicine. We can establish an airlift, or land corridor, and provide food, clothing and medicine to Syrians refugees - bombs will not resolve this.

Senators Casey of PA and Rubio, of FL, are sponsoring a bill to **greatly increase humanitarian assistance** to the millions of displaced Syrians, in the country and in Jordan elsewhere. **Congress should pass a humanitarian assistance bill without delay!**

What about Bashar El Assad? He should not be bombed, but at the end of the day, he must be brought to justice for crimes against humanity. We can do this, and it can bring justice, rather than endless war. But the humanitarian effort is the best road to peace, with justice for those who are dying every day.

The White House Comment line (202) 456-1111

Capitol Switchboard to reach all US Congresspersons (202) 224-3121.

For info, and/or to get involved can contact

Coalition for Peace Action www.peacecoalition.org or (609) 924-5022.

ENDORISING ORGANIZATIONS:

Brandywine Peace Community ○ *Coalition for Peace Action* ○ *Coalition for Peace Action PA* ○ *Global Woman's Strike* ○ *Peacehome Campaigns* ○ *Philly Against War* ○ *Payday Men's Network* ○ *Every Mother is a Working Mother Network*