



# IN THE NEWS

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FEATURED: JUNE 2013

## Syria: How Long, O Lord?

### Introduction

Where to begin? The tens of thousands dead? The two million refugees? The four million internally displaced Syrians? The towns and cities ravaged, destroyed? The decades of emergency law marked by the brutal smashing of dissent? The nonviolent rallies for democracy crushed by military force? The armed opposition divided by partisanship and clashing agendas, also capable of brutal acts against Syrian citizens? The political coalitions, looked to by the international community for a way forward to end the violence, but unable to unite in their goals and strategies? The “players” in the international community themselves—Russia, the U.S., Turkey, Iran, the European community, Israel, Lebanon—all using Syrian partisans in the conflict as proxies for their own agendas? The many Christians in Syria, uncomfortable with the Assad regime but fearful of the extreme Islamist influences in the opposition?

One must take on all these issues to even begin to grasp the magnitude of the challenge that faces both the Syrian people and those in the international community who hope to bring an end to the violence.

### The History

Who are the Syrians anyway? As citizens of

what is officially known as the Syrian Arab Republic, they inhabit a large swath of land that was the cradle of ancient civilizations who emerged from the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sunni Muslims make up the largest segment of the population, but they are joined by a diverse collection of peoples defined by their ethnic roots or their religious or sectarian beliefs. These groups includes Shi’a Muslims, Druze, Kurds, Christians, Assyrians, Turks, Armenians, and members of the more secular, Shi’a related, Alawite sect to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs.

Turkey borders Syria on the north. Iraq is to the east. To the south is Jordan, as well as Israel (the Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms—both occupied by Israel). To the west lie Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea.

After World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the region controlled by the Ottoman Empire, which included Syria, became a French mandate. Syria achieved independence as a parliamentary democracy in 1946 and the struggle for power within the country began in earnest, marked by a number of military coups, each of which imposed its own version of emergency law. At one point, the president of Syria joined with Egyptian President Nasser to create

the United Arab Republic, which had the effect of quelling the activity of political parties.

In response to the ineffectiveness of the political system, including their own socialist Ba'ath Party, several army officers formed a secret committee that began to plan a way to take control. Among the groups prominent in secret committee of the military were members of the Alawite sect, which gradually gained control of the leadership of the military.

## The international community has clearly been at a loss to know how to respond.

In 1970, the military, led by Hafez al-Assad, took control of the country. Emergency law was imposed with renewed vigor and most constitutionally guaranteed freedoms were suspended. There were informants all around listening for any hint of disapproval of the regime.

In the period 1970–2000, every effort to oppose the regime was brutally crushed, in some cases resulting in the destruction of towns and the killing of thousands of the inhabitants, including women and children. In spite of such instances of repression, those who “minded their own business” and who did not press sectarian religious agendas were able to operate with relative freedom. In that essentially sectarian environment, although there was occasional harassment, the Christian community got along relatively well and was able to conduct their church business with little interference from the government. Mission personnel and visitors from the U.S. and other countries were well-received and travel between Syria and Lebanon posed few problems, except during military incursions into the Bekaa Valley by Israel.

As Hafez al-Assad aged, it was understood that his eldest son would take over control of the country; however, the “heir” was killed in an automo-

bile accident. His younger brother, Bashar, had been trained in Damascus as an ophthalmologist and was in further training in London. Following his brother's death, Bashar was called home to fill his brother's shoes in roles within the military and government. In 2000, after the death of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar was called on to take over his father's role, an obligation, according to close friends, he did not relish.

Whatever reluctance he showed then, there seemed to be no sign of it when he crushed demonstrations in the small city of Daraa in mid-May 2011, which many believed were intended as nonviolent extensions of the Arab Spring. In the early demonstrations there and in other places, there was diverse participation, including many members of the Christian community; however, in the face of the destruction and killing in Daraa, the many factions that now compose the opposition to the regime became increasingly militant and heavily armed.

In December 2011, a large group of army defectors were captured and massacred near Jabal al-Zawiya, and then on February 3, 2012, the Syrian army began a bombardment of the city of Homs, long a seat of opposition to the Assad regime. That bombing campaign lasted for a full month and left much of Homs in ruins and thousands of its people dead. Forty-five bodies were found with stab wounds or slashed throats, presumed to be the work of the *shabiha*, a paramilitary group responsible for many of the worst atrocities of the conflict. From there the violence continued, decimating villages like al-Bayda and Baniyas, where between May 2–4, 2013, more than two hundred men, women, and children were killed.

### The International Community

The international community has clearly been at a loss to know how to respond. In the U.S. there

are those in Congress demanding that the president authorize military intervention of some kind, including, minimally, the institution of a no-fly zone. President Obama has taken a cautious approach, although many consider it dawdling. He is well aware of the history of U.S. intervention in the Middle East and is not persuaded that military intervention is a wise option. In spite of this, on June 13, 2013, he authorized the limited shipment of small arms to rebels, implicating more deeply the role of the U.S.

The situation is complicated, of course, by the fact that the major powers such as the U.S., Russia, and Europe see various parties in the region as proxies for their own larger foreign policy goals. This creates unhelpful partnerships. The two most prominent coalitions are the Russia/Iran/Assad axis and the U.S./Europe/Syrian-opposition axis. These lines of division make it difficult for the United Nations to act, as any proposal to involve the U.N. must receive the support of both Russia and the U.S. if it is to be implemented. The situation is further complicated by Israel's military incursions into Syria and the entry into the war by Hezbollah fighters in support of President Assad.

Beyond the geopolitical aspects of the struggle are the intricate religious agendas. Syria's majority Sunni population has been treated as second-class citizens by the ruling Alawite/Ba'athist party, which has promoted, primarily, a socialist, secular agenda. The Alawites are, however, part of the Shi'a stream of Islam and therefore gain support from Iran, which is a majority Shi'a country. The Sunnis themselves are divided in several ways, from those who support a pluralistic democracy to those in the Muslim Brotherhood who want to make *sharia* the law of the land, and to the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda connection, who advocate the most radical imposition of *sharia*.

Then there are the Druze, part of the Muslim family, who are more concerned about their cultural heritage than they are about imposing religious sanctions on nonbelievers. Add to that the mixture of Christian traditions, with various forms of worship and views of the meaning of citizenship, and one gets a picture of the challenge in resolving the conflict in an equitable and peaceful manner. It is imperative not to allow this conflict to light a fire that could spread across much of the region.

## The Opposition

The thorniest problem for the United States, given its desire to see Assad gone and some more representative form of government in Syria, is the opposition itself. They are fragmented into several groups who cannot agree on a common strategy. They disagree about negotiating with the regime and differ as to what the character of the state, religiously and ethnically, should be when the violence is over.

**Many Christians in Syria . . . [are] uncomfortable with the Assad regime, but fearful of the extreme Islamist influences in the opposition.**

## The Syrian National Council (SNC)

In early 2013, the U.S. and most of its backers declared that the SNC would be the officially recognized entity representing the Syrian opposition and would be the entity through which aid would be distributed. Their Web site states that they support a "democratic, pluralistic and civil state; a parliamentary republic with sovereignty of the people based on the principles of equal citizenship with separation of powers; smooth transfer of power; the rule of law, and the protection and guarantee of the rights of minorities."<sup>1</sup> The majority of the council's

members are Sunni Muslims, many of whom are members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The president of the SNC is a Christian who has been active in leftist causes for many years. However, not all Christians support SNC or are members of the opposition at all. There is a strong minority of Christians and Alawites who remain loyal to the government.

### **The National Co-ordination Committee (NCC)**

This group is made up, primarily, of leftist political parties and youth activists. Wary of religious extremism, the NCC has refused to affiliate with the SNC because of what is perceived as the dominant influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. The NCC has committed itself to dialog with representatives of the regime and they adamantly oppose any form of foreign military intervention in the Syrian conflict, opting instead for economic sanctions and other such measures.

### **National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces**

This group was established in November, 2012 under the leadership of Moaz al-Katib, a Sunni cleric and former imam of the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. They also endorse the formation of a democratic, pluralistic state and have outlined the following principles:

- absolute national sovereignty and independence
- preservation of the unity of the Syrian people
- preservation of the country and its cities
- overthrowing the Syrian regime, dismantling its security forces, and holding responsible parties accountable for crimes against the Syrian people
- not to engage in any dialogue or negotiation with the regime
- upholding a commitment for a civil, democratic Syria

The National Coalition tried unsuccessfully to do an end-run around the SNC and gather all the other parties into one entity that would render the SNC moot. This group does have the support of the Free Syrian Army and the rebel Supreme Military Council. Because the National Co-ordinating Committee rejects violence and supports negotiation with the regime, they are excluded.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Free Syrian Army (FSA)**

This group consists of defectors from the Syrian military who came together in August 2011 to topple the regime. Based in Turkey, they are led by a former colonel in the Syrian army. They are poorly armed and not numerous enough to do more than conduct hit-and-run operations. That said, they have been able to inflict serious damage on units of the Syrian army here and there. One of their leaders told the *Washington Post*, "The Free Syrian Army is carrying out a war of harassing the regime army until they are exhausted, using guerilla tactics."<sup>3</sup> They have taken credit for an attack inside the headquarters of the Syrian National Security Bureau in Damascus that killed President Assad's brother-in-law and three other prominent military officials.

While much of the attention of the world is on atrocities committed against women and children by the Assad regime, there is credible evidence from the U.N. Human Rights Council that the FSA has also resorted to such terror tactics in towns where there is support for the regime.

### **The al-Nusra Front**

Perhaps the most effective fighting force within the opposition is the al-Nusra Front. They are well-armed, well-trained, experienced fighters who have publicly pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda, and to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. They call themselves The Front for the Defence of the Syrian People, and have called out the forces of al-Qaeda to join them in the struggle

for Syria. They claimed credit for many of the suicide bombings that have occurred. In an al-Qaeda video a masked man declared, “We are Syrian mujahedeen, back from various jihad fronts to restore God’s rule on Earth and avenge the Syrians’ violated honor and spilled blood.”<sup>4</sup>

The al-Nusra Front is the most worrisome of all the many groups trying to overthrow the Assad regime because of its discipline and effectiveness. They have taken over the distribution of relief resources in some of the villages and are doing so in an equitable and disciplined way that appeals to the people. They have already been declared a terrorist group by the U.S. and they represent a significant worry for anyone sending arms to the opposition, lest at some point in the future, as has happened in numerous places around the world, the donors find themselves in a later conflict being shot at by their own weapons.

### The Tragic Dilemma—Some Statistics

**Fatalities:** As of mid-June, the U.N. reports the death toll at above 93,000. These are presented as generally verifiable numbers, with the suspicion that there are many others unreported. The UN estimates that at least 10 percent of these are children.<sup>5</sup>

**Refugees:** The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights reported on June 7, 2013 that the estimated number of refugees from the Syrian conflict was above 1.6 million, with the number rising hourly.<sup>6</sup> The demand of this growing number on bordering countries, especially Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey has long-since reached the point of accommodation, yet they still come.

**The Displaced:** There are another 4.25 million Syrians who are internally displaced, unable to return to their homes or no longer having homes

to return to. The U.N. has called for 5 billion dollars in humanitarian aid to Syria and estimates that more than 10 million (almost half the population) will require some form of aid by the end of 2013.<sup>7</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Syrian National Council: <http://www.syriancouncil.org/en/mission-statement.html>; see General Principles # 1.
2. National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces: <http://www.etilaf.org/en/about/principles.html>.
3. Austin Tice and Liz Sly, “Syrian rebels still hopeful as government regains initiative in Damascus,” *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-23/world/35489843\\_1\\_free-syrian-army-rebel-control-damascus-neighborhoods](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-23/world/35489843_1_free-syrian-army-rebel-control-damascus-neighborhoods).
4. BBC News, “Profile: Syria’s al-Nusra Front,” April 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18048033>.
5. Megan Price et al., *Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic* (Human Rights Data Analysis Group and the UN, June 13, 2013), <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAG-Updated-SY-report.pdf>.
6. “Syrian Regional Refugee Response” (UNHCR), <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.
7. Associated Press, “United Nations seeks over 5 billion dollars aid for Syria in biggest appeal ever,” NDTV, June 7, 2013, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/united-nations-seeks-over-5-billion-dollars-aid-for-syria-in-biggest-ever-appeal-376745>.

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**Vernon S. Broyles, III**, is Representative for Public Witness for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is a pastor and has traveled extensively in over fifty countries. He is also author of the column “The Church in Society” in *Presbyterians Today Magazine*.

# WHAT CAN WE DO?

The following are some actions for Christians to consider taking who wish to support a peaceful solution.

- Pray for an end to the fighting. Pray that God will instill a feeling of hope in the lives of those who have lost so much.
- Advocate for a peaceful solution.
- Support established international humanitarian organizations and your denomination's disaster and humanitarian organization with financial donations.
- Stay informed about what is happening.
- Follow your denomination's positions on Syria and support actions taken.
- If your denomination has a partner church in Syria, find out how you can support them. Many Reformed churches, including the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), relate to the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon.

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# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role, if any, do you think the U.S. government should play in Syria? Humanitarian? Military? Should it support U.N. efforts? Are there other roles not mentioned here that it should play?
2. What is the role of American Christians in situations such as the conflicts in Syria and the Middle East?
3. What is your denomination doing and how might you support these efforts?