

UNDERSTANDING SYRIA

By William R. Polk

1 Geographical Syria

Syria is a small, poor and crowded country. On the map, it appears about the size of Washington State or Spain, but only about a quarter of its 185 thousand square kilometers is arable land. That is, “economic Syria” is about as large as a combination of Maryland and Connecticut or Switzerland. Most is desert, some is suitable for grazing but less than 10% of the surface is permanent cropland.

Except for a narrow belt along the Mediterranean, the whole country is subject to extreme temperatures that cause frequent dust storms¹ and periodic droughts.² 4 years of devastating drought from 2006 to 2011 turned Syria into a land like the American “dust bowl” of 1930s. That drought was said to have been the worst ever recorded, but it was one in a long sequence: Just in the period from 2001 to 2010, Syria had 60 “significant” dust storms. The most important physical aspect of these storms, as was the experience in America in the 1930s, was the removal of the topsoil. Politically, they triggered the civil war.

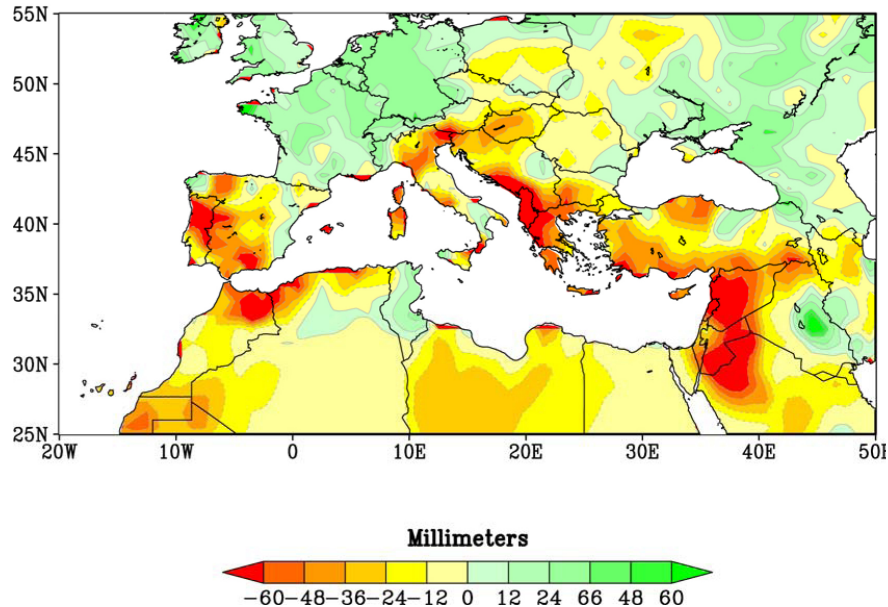


In this 2010 NASA satellite image, vast dust storms can be seen to disperse the light soils of Syria

¹ The Mediterranean area experienced “10 of the 12 driest winters since 1902 in just the last 20 years.” The World Bank, 2012, *Turn Down the Heat*, citing M. Hoerling et al, “On the increased Frequency of Mediterranean Drought,” *Journal of Climate* 25, 2010. Also see NOAA, “Human-caused climate change a major factor in ore frequent Mediterranean droughts,” October 27, 2011.

² Simin Akbari, “Dust storms, Sources in the Middle East and economic model for survey its impacts,” *Australian Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences*, 5(12): 227-233, 2011. They cause severe reduction of soil fertility or even remove the top soil in vast areas, damage crops, kill animals and cause major public health problems. Mehdi Hamidi, , Mohammad Reza Kavianpour and Yaping Shao, “Synoptic Analysis of Dust Storms in the Middle East,” *Asia-Pacific J. Atmos. Sci.*, 49(3), 279-286, 2013, found more than 60 significant dust storms in the area in the one decade, 2001-2011.

In addition to causing violent dust storms, high temperatures cause a lessening of rainfall. This US NOAA Mediterranean map shows the drought conditions of 2010. Except for a small area of Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, the whole eastern Mediterranean was severely affected. (shown in red)



Even the relatively favored areas had rainfall of just 20 to 40 cm (8 inches to 15 inches) - where 20 cm (8 inches) is regarded as the absolute minimum to sustain agriculture - and the national average was less than 10 cm (4 inches). Worse, rain falls in Syria mainly in the winter months when it is less beneficial for crops. Thus, areas with less than 40 cm are heavily dependent upon irrigation. Ground water (aquifers) have been so heavily tapped in recent years that the water table in many areas has fallen below what a farmer can access while the country's main river, the Euphrates, is heavily drawn down by Turkey and Iraq. Consequently, as of the last year before the civil war, only about 13,500 square kilometers could be irrigated.

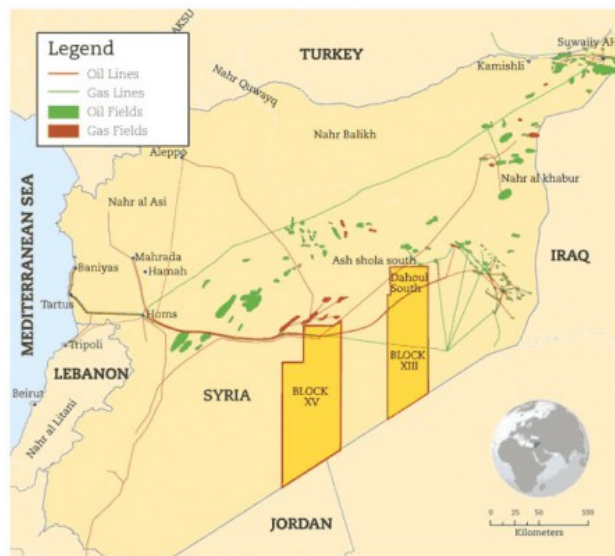
According to the World Bank,³ last year, agriculture supplied about 20% of national income (GDP) and employed about 17% of the population. Before the heavy fighting began, Syrian oil fields produced about 330,000 barrels/day but Syrians consumed all but about 70,000 of that amount. Sales supplied about 20% of GDP and a third of export earnings. Production subsequently fell by at least 50%.⁴ Syria's oil is of poor quality, sour and expensive to refine. Industry, (mainly energy-related) employed about a third of the adult male population and provided a similar percentage of the national income. Before the war, moves were being made to transport across Syria oil and gas from further east to the Mediterranean⁵; obviously, these projects have been stopped. Now there is a sort of cottage industry in crude refining of petroleum products for local use and smuggling.⁶

³ *Syria Overview*, updated April 2013.

⁴ US Energy Information Administration, Independent Statistics and Analysis, February 20, 2013.

⁵ *Open Oil*, March 28, 2012, Amrit Naresh, "Syria's transit future: all pipelines lead to Damascus." Also "The *Oil & Gas Journal* (OGJ) January 1, 2013.

⁶ *Al-Hayat*, April 30, 2013, Abed Hage, "Syrian Opposition seeks control of oil resources." (translated from the Arabic). Hage describes crude method of separating gasoline (a barrel of which sells for \$128) from diesel (\$71+) and gas (\$142). A crude "refinery" can be bought for about \$456 and will separate 3 bbls/day and one for 20 bbls can be



US Energy Information Administration, from Tri-Ocean Energy

Syria is not just a piece of land but is densely populated.⁷ When I first visited Syria in 1946, the total population was less than 3 million. In 2010, it reached nearly 24 million. Thus, the country offered less than 0.25 hectares (just over a third of an acre) of agricultural land per person. Considering only “agricultural Syria,” the population is about 5 times the density of Ohio or Belgium, but it did not have Ohio’s or Belgium’s other means of generating income. If the population were much smaller, Syria could have managed adequately but not, of course, richly.

The bottom line is that the population/resource ratio is out of balance. While there has been a marginal increase of agricultural land and more efficient cropping with better seed, neither has kept up with population growth. Moreover, the increasing number of people have shown that they have been unable to agree on how to divide what they have. So it is important to understand how their “social contract” – their view of their relationship with one another and with the government – evolved and then shattered.

2 The Syrian Heritage

Since before history was written, Syria has been fought over by foreign empires – Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonian Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Turks, British and French. Only during the Umayyad caliphate in the 7th and 8th centuries AD was it the center of an empire. But that relatively short period left Syria with its Islamic heritage. For many centuries, the society has been overwhelmingly Muslim.

Syria also has historically been a sanctuary for little groups of peoples whose differences from one another were defined in religious and/or ethnic terms. Several of these communities were “left overs” from previous invasions or migrations. During most of the last 5 centuries, when what is today Syria was a part of the Ottoman empire, groups of Orthodox, Catholic and other Christians, Alwais, Ismailis and other sorts of Shiis and Yazidis, Kurds, Jews and Druze

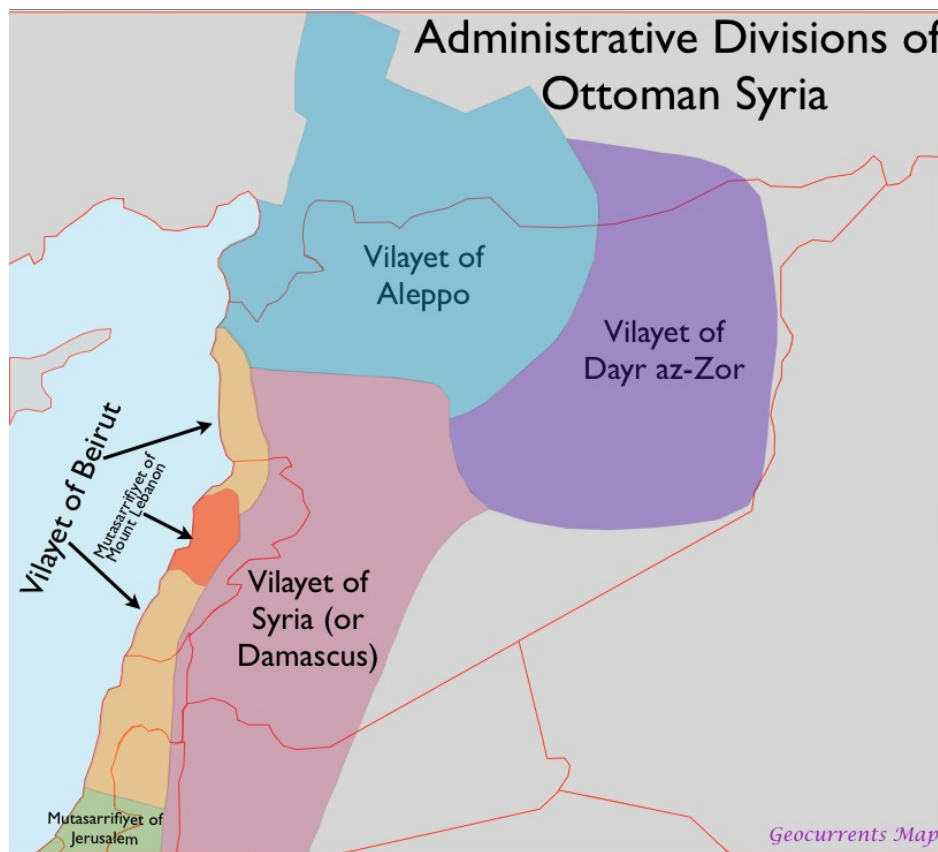
bought for about \$2,854.) About 3,000 such refineries are now in operation. Workers are paid \$7-\$14/day for 12 hours of work. Most of this is under the control of the most effective rebel group, An-Nusra, which produces, sells and smuggles across the frontier the results. Syrian light crude is also in rebel hands; total Syrian reserves est. At 2.5 bn bbls or 0.2% of world reserves.

⁷ World Bank Indicators – Syria 2013.

lived in enclaves and in neighborhoods in the various cities and towns alongside of the Sunni Muslim Arabs.

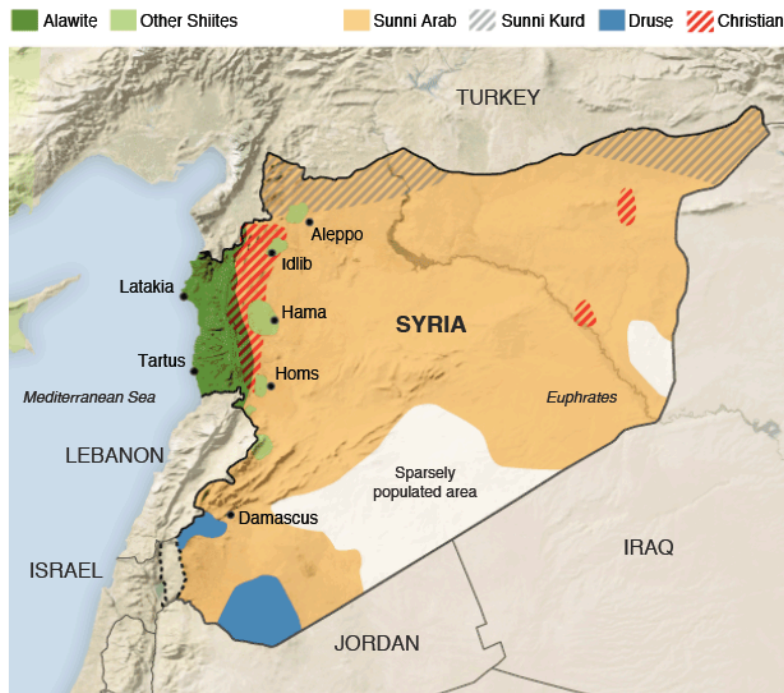
During Ottoman rule the population was organized in two overlapping ways.

First, there was no “Syria” in the sense of a nation-state but provinces (Turkish: pashaliqs) that were centered on the ancient cities. The most important of these were Damascus, which may be the oldest permanently settled city in the world today, and Aleppo. The concept of a state, much less a nation-state, did not enter into political thought until the end of the Nineteenth century. Inhabitants of the various parts of what became Syria could move without feeling or being considered alien from one province of the Ottoman empire to the next. Thus, if the grandfathers or great grandfathers of people alive today were asked about what entity they belonged to, they would probably have named the city or village where they paid their taxes.



Map courtesy of GeoCurrents by Martin W. Lewis.

Second, throughout its centuries of rule, the Ottoman empire generally was content to have its subjects live by their own codes of behavior. It did not have the means or the incentive to intrude into their daily lives. Muslims, whether Turk or Arab or Kurd, shared with the imperial government Islamic mores and law. Other ethnic/religious “nations” (Turkish: millet) were self-governing except in military and foreign affairs. The following map is modern but shows approximately the traditional distribution of minority groups in enclaves scattered throughout the area that became Syria.



Source: Columbia University Gulf 2000 Project by Bill Marsh and Joe Burgess
<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/07/29/sunday-review/a-sectarian-patchwork.html>

What the map does not show is that the same groups also moved into the mainly Muslim cities and towns where they tended to live in more or less segregated neighborhoods that resembled medieval European urban ghettos or modern American “Little Italys” or “China Towns.”

Whether in enclaves or in neighborhoods, each non-Muslim community dressed according to its custom, spoke its own languages and lived in its unique cultural pattern; it appointed or elected its own officials who divided among its fellows the taxes it owed to the empire, ran its schools and provided such health facilities and social welfare as it thought proper or could afford. Since this system was spelled out in the Quran and the Traditions (Hadiths) of the Prophet, respecting it was legally obligatory on Muslims. Consequently, when the Syrian state took shape, it inherited a rich, diverse and tolerant social tradition.

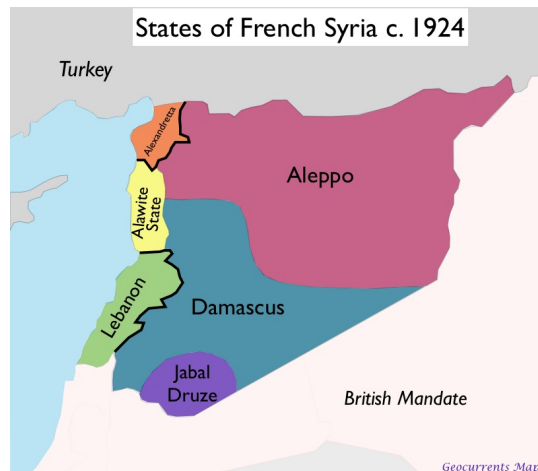
3 French Syria

During the First World War, Great Britain and France were at war with the Ottoman Empire which had sided with Germany and Austria. The war was hard fought, but long before victory was in sight, the British and French concluded what became known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide the Middle East between them. Britain subsequently made other, conflicting, deals with the leaders of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman empire that were to modify the Agreement, but France insisted on effecting most of its terms. (Subsequently, France lost to Britain the mainly Sunni Muslim Arab and Kurdish area of what was to become northern Iraq.) The following French map shows how the Middle East was to be divided among the Great Powers. Most of what became Syria is shown as “Zone A” on the following map the French gave to the British at the peace conference to remind them of the deal.



During the latter part of the war, the leaders of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman empire established a kingdom at Damascus and at the Paris Peace Conference sought recognition of their independence.⁸ France was determined, however, to effect its deal with Britain so in 1920 it invaded and “regime changed” the Damascus government, making Syria a de facto colony of France but legally, under the League of Nation, a “mandate.” The terms of the League mandate required France to prepare it for independence, but the French showed little intention to do that. They spent the next three years actually conquering the country and reformulating the territory.

First, the French created a “Greater” Lebanon from the former autonomous adjunct provinces (Turkish: sanjaqs) of Mount Lebanon and Beirut. To make it their anchor in an otherwise hostile Levant, they aimed both to make it Christian-dominated and big enough to exist as a state. But these aims were incompatible: the populations they added, taken from the pashaliq of Damascus, were mainly Muslim so the French doomed Lebanon to be a precariously unbalanced society. Then they split Syria into detached administrative units: In 1921, they separated Alexandretta, in the northwest, and later ceded it to Turkey (where it was renamed Hatay); they split off the hinterland of the port of Latakia, a partly Alawi area, and in 1922 briefly made it a separate state; and they made the Druze area (Jabal ad-Druze) in the southwest an autonomous part of their colony. Finally, they divided the 2 major cities, Damascus and Aleppo, making each the capital of its neighborhood.



Map courtesy of GeoCurrents by Martin W. Lewis.

⁸ The American delegation, by that time headed by Frank Polk, expressed no official opinion on the Arab position but advised the Arabs to seek Zionist support for their claim as a counterpoise to the French and British plans. That is what Amir Faisal did.

None of these divisions worked so the French reversed course. They united the country as defined in the Mandate but attempted to change its social and cultural orientation. Their new policy aimed to supplant the common language, Arabic, with French, to make French customs and law the exemplar, to promote Catholicism as a means to undercut Islam and to favor the minorities as a means to control the Muslim majority. It was inevitable that the native reaction to these intrusions would be first the rise of xenophobia and then the spread of what gradually would become a European style of nationalism. It was thus in the 1920s and 1930s that we can begin to speak of the concept of Syrian statehood. Indeed, the sense of statehood and nationhood were the major ideas that emerged from the First World War and were popularized during the period of French rule.

When French policies did not work and nationalism began to offer an alternate vision of political life, the French colonial administration fell back on violence. Indeed throughout the French period – in contrast to the relatively laissez-faire rule of the Ottoman empire – violence was never far below the outward face of French rule. Damascus, which they had “regime changed” in 1920, the French bombarded in 1925, 1926 and 1945 and pacified with martial law during most of the “peaceful” intervals. Constitutions were proclaimed periodically only to be revoked and independence was promised time after time until it was finally gained – not by the Syrians nor given by the French but bestowed on Syria by the British army. Because the French administration was under the control of the Vichy government and had abetted German activities, the British invaded in 1941 and overthrew Vichy France’s administration. However, they left behind the “Free French” who continued essentially the Vichy regime. The last French soldier did not leave until April 17, 1946 which became Syria’s national day.

It is not unfair to characterize the impact of the 26 years of French rule thus: the “peace” the French achieved was little more than a sullen and frustrated quiescence; while they did not create dissension among the religious/ethnic communities, the French certainly magnified it and while they did not create hostility to foreigners, they gave the natives a target that fostered the growth of nationalism. These developments have lingered throughout the last 70 years and remain powerful forces today.

4 Syrian Independence

As it took hold of at least the educated Syrians, nationalism may have been emotionally satisfying, but it did not prove to be an organizing principle. Even spurred by it, the Syrians did not grasp the means to control their destiny. So, in the years after the French were forced out, coup leader after military dictator spoke in nationalist rhetoric but failed to lead his followers toward “the good life.” Finally, in 1958, the one coherent, powerful and mobile force, the army leadership, threw the country into the arms of the one Arab leader they admired and trusted, Egypt’s President Gamal Abdul-Nasser. They thought and hoped that Egypt, always the bellwether of the Arab world, could give them stability. So, for three and a half years, Syria became a part of the United Arab Republic. Despite the media view of the event, Nasser was a reluctant participant in Syrian affairs and set what turned out to be unacceptable terms, including the withdrawal of the army from politics and the holding of a referendum. Union did not work so in 1961 Syrians were thrown back on their own resources. A fundamental problem they faced was what it meant to be a Syrian.

The majority of those who became Syrians were Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims. Since the road to worldly success was through the Arabic-speaking army or bureaucracy, Syrians like the inhabitants of empires throughout Asia found conversion to Islam and becoming Arabic-speaking -- if they were not already members of this community -- attractive. The earliest

estimates we know suggest that between 7 and 8 in each 10 Syrians regarded himself as a Muslim Arab and under the growing influence of nationalism regarded being a Muslim Arab the very definition of Syrian identity.

What was unusual about Syria was that the other 2 or 3 in each 10 Syrians did not so believe. As in Ottoman times, they continued to live in economically autarkic areas of the countryside and in quarters of most of the cities and towns of the country. Nationalists took this diversity as a primary cause of weakness and adopted as their primary task integrating the population into a single political and social structure.

But the nationalists were deeply split. The major Islamic movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, argued and fought for the idea that the nation must be Arab Sunni (or “Orthodox”) Muslim. Minorities had no place except in the traditional and Ottoman sense of “protected minorities” (Turkish: *millets*). The more conservative, affluent and Westernized nationalists believed that nationhood had to be built not on a religious but on a territorial base. That is, single state nationalism (Arabic: *wataniyah*) was the focus of Syria’s statehood. Their program, however, did not lead to success; its failure opened the way for a redefinition of nationalism as pan-Arab or folk nationalism (Arabic: *qawmiyah*). As it was codified by the Baath Party, it required that Syria be considered not a separate nation-state but a part of the whole Arab world and be domestically organized as a unified, secular and at least partly Westernized state. This was a particularly difficult task because the dominant Muslim community, initially as a result of French rule and later as a result of domestic turbulence and foreign interference, regarded the members of the minority communities, particularly the Jewish community, as actual or potential turn-coats.

Looming over Syrian politics and heightening the tensions among the contenders for dominance throughout of the post war period has been the modern, powerful and American-supported state of Israel: regular wars between Syria and Israel began in 1948, almost before either state had achieved full independence, and were repeated in 1967 and 1973. Border clashes, informal fighting and limited cease fires were interspersed among these major confrontations. And from 1967, Israel has occupied the 1,200 square km (460 square miles) of Syrian territory known as the Golan Heights. In 1981, Israel proclaimed that it had annexed the territory, a move not recognized by the US or other states, and moved there nearly 20,000 settlers. Meanwhile, intermittent peace talks have been secretly held from time to time without result. A ceasefire, negotiated in 1974, has held but today the two states are still legally at war.

5 The Assad⁹ regime

It was in answer to the perceived weakness of Syrian statehood and the disorder of Syrian political life that the first Assad regime was established in 1970 by Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current leader. The Assad family came from the Alawi (aka Nusairi) minority which makes up about 1 in 8 Syrians and about a quarter of a million people in each Lebanon and Turkey. Like the Jews, the Alawis consider themselves the “chosen people,” but they are regarded by Orthodox Muslims as heretics. Under Ottoman pluralism, this mattered little, but as Syrians struggled for a sense of identity and came to suspect social difference and to fear the cooperation of minorities with foreigners, being an Alawi or a Christian or a Jew put the person under a cloud. So, for Hafez al-Assad, the secular, nationalist Baath party was a natural choice: it offered, or seemed to offer, the means to overcome his origins in a minority community and to

⁹ The correct transliteration of the family name should be Asad (which in Arabic means lion) but in the Western media it has been spelled Assad so I have used that spelling.

point toward a solution to the disunity of Syrian politics so he embraced it eagerly and eventually became its leader. Consequently, to understand Syrian affairs we need to focus on it.

The “Resurrection” (Arabic: *Baath*) party had its origins, like the nationalist-Communist Vietnamese movement, in France. Two young Syrians, one a Christian and the other a Sunni Muslim who were then studying in Paris, were both attracted to the grandeur of France and appalled by the weakness of Syria, and like Ho Chi-min wanted both to become like France and get the French out of their nation. Both believed that the future lay in unity and socialism. For Michel Aflaq and Salah Bitar, the forces to be defeated were “French oppression, Syrian backwardness, a political class unable to measure up to the challenge of the times.”¹⁰ Above all, disunity had to be overcome. Their answer was to try to bridge the gaps between rich and poor by a modified version of socialism and between the Muslims and the minorities by a modified concept of Islam. Islam, in their view, needed to be considered politically not as a religion but as a manifestation of the Arab nation. Thus, the society they wished to create, they proclaimed, should be modern (with, among other things, equality for women), secular (with faith relegated to personal affairs) and defined by a culture of “Arabism” overriding the traditional concepts of ethnicity. In short, what they sought was the very antithesis of the objectives of the already strong and growing Muslim Brotherhood.

Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Baath spread among young students. When as a young student myself, I visited Syria in 1950, I was astonished at how vigorous the student political movements were and how seriously, even violently, the students played a national role. Hafez al-Assad was one of the first student recruits of what would become the Baath Party and quickly became a local hero for his dedication to its cause. As he was described, “He became a party stalwart, defending its cause on the street...’he was one of our commandos.’”¹¹ And he almost paid with his life for his bravery when he was stabbed by a Muslim brother. So, pardon the pun, his antipathy to the Muslim Brotherhood began early and went deep.

Like many young men of his generation, Hafez al-Assad first put his hopes in the military, which seemed more than political parties, even the Baath, to embody the nation. He avidly studied his new profession and became a fighter pilot, but he quickly realized that the military was only a means of action and that what it did had to be guided by political ideas and organization. So, he used his military affiliation to energize his party role. This, inevitably, caught him up in the coups, counter-coups and sundry conspiracies that engaged Syrian politicians and army officers during the 1950s and 1960s. Emerging from this labyrinth he skillfully maneuvered himself into the leadership of his party and domination of the political and military structure of the country by 1971. And his assumption of the presidency was certified by a plebiscite in that year.

His survival, much less his victory, was nearly a miracle, but he had not managed to solve the fundamental problem of Syrian ethnicity and particularly the role of Islam.

This problem, which is so tragically and bitterly evident in Syria today, found an early expression in the writing of the new constitution in 1973. The previous constitutions, going back to French colonial times, had specified that the presidency should be held by a Muslim. Despite his dedication to secular politics, Hafez al-Assad made two attempts to cater to Muslim opinion: in the first, he got the clause in the former constitutions conditioning the presidential office to a Muslim replaced by a sort of redefinition of Islam. “Islam,” the new language stressed, “is a

¹⁰ As Patrick Seale put it in his classical account *The Struggle for Syria*, London, 1987.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

religion of love, progress and social justice, of equality for all...” Then, in the second move, he arranged for a respected Islamic jurisconsult (but from Lebanon, not from Syria and not a Sunni but a Shii) to issue a finding (Arabic: *fatwa*) that Alawis were really Shia Muslims rather than heretics. This was not merely an abstract bit of theology: as heretics, Alawis, were outlaws who could be legally and meritoriously killed – as we have seen in recent events in Syria.

The Muslim Brotherhood was furious. Riots broke out around the country, particularly in the city of Hama. For some years, Assad managed to contain the discontent – partly by granting subsidies on food and partly by curbing the already hated political police – but the fundamental issue was not resolved. Muslim Brothers and other disaffected groups organized terrorist attacks on the government and on Assad’s inner circle, killing some of his close collaborators and exploding car bombs at installations, including even the office of the prime minister and the headquarters of the air force. Assad was told that he would soon follow Egypt’s Anwar as-Sadat, killed by Muslim terrorists, into the grave. Under Muslim extremist attack the whole city of Damascus, as it had been periodically during French colonialism, came under siege. Finally, the Islamic forces were ready to challenge the regime in all-out war. As was later to happen in 2011, so in 1982, the spark was struck. An army unit sent into the Muslim Brotherhood stronghold in the city of Hama was ambushed. The local Muslim guerrilla leader gave the signal for a general uprising. Overnight the city was engulfed in a vicious, “no-prisoners,” insurrection. The regime was fighting for its life. As the most astute observer of those events, the English journalist Patrick Seale, has written in words that ring true also for the events of 2013,¹²

Fear, loathing and a river of spilt blood ruled out any thought of truce...that explain[s] the terrible savagery of the punishment inflicted on the city. Behind the immediate contest lay the old multi-layered hostility between Islam and the Ba’th, between Sunni and ‘Alawi, between town and country...Many civilians were slaughtered in the prolonged mopping up, whose districts razed, and numerous acts of savagery reported...Government forces too suffered heavy losses to snipers and many armoured vehicles were hit by grenades in the rubble-strewn streets...between 5,000 and 10,000 [people were killed or died].

The Syrian city of Hama after Assad’s assault in 1982 looked like the Iraqi city of Fallujah after the American assault in 2004. Acres of the city were submerged under piles of rubble. But then, like Stalingrad after the German attack or Berlin after the Russian siege, reconstruction began. In a remarkable series of moves, Hafez al-Assad ordered the rubble cleared away, built new highways, constructed new schools and hospitals, opened new parks and even, in a wholly unexpected conciliatory gesture, erected two huge new mosques. He thus made evident what had been his philosophy of government since he first took power: help the Syrian people to live better provided only that they not challenge his rule. In his thought and actions, a stern and often brutal monopoly of power, he may be compared to the ruling men, families, parties and establishments of Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Saudi Arabian, Iranian and numerous other regimes.

Also like many of those regimes, Assad saw foreign troublemakers at work among his people. This, after all, was the emotional and political legacy of colonial rule – a legacy painfully evident in most of the post-colonial world but one which is almost unnoticed in the Western world. And the legacy is not a myth. It is a reality about which, often years after events occur, we can verify with official papers. Hafez al-Assad did not need to wait for leaks of documents: his intelligence services and international journalists turned up dozens of attempts by

¹² *ibid*, 333-334.

conservative, oil-rich Arab countries, the United States and Israel to subvert his government. Most engaged in “dirty tricks,” propaganda or infusion of money, but it was noteworthy that in the 1982 Hama uprising, more than 15,000 foreign supplied machineguns were captured and among the prisoners were Jordanian- and CIA-trained paramilitary forces much like the jihadis who figure so much in media accounts of 2013 Syria. And what he saw in Syria was confirmed by what he learned about Western “regime changing” elsewhere. He certainly knew of the CIA attempt to murder President Nasser of Egypt and the Anglo-American overthrow of the government of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh.

His salvation, he believed, lay in his political party, the Baath. But even that fell apart. While it was the titular ruling party of both Syria and Iraq, its leaders became bitterly hostile to one another over what in retrospect seem mainly personal issues but which, at the time, appeared to be cultural and ideological. As Iraq “imploded” in coups from 1958 and morphed into Saddam Husain’s regime,¹³ the Syrians came to regard it as an enemy second only to Israel. So, already in 1980, Hafez al-Assad sided with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. His choice was confirmed when he learned that America was supplying both up-to-the-minute satellite intelligence to Saddam’s forces and the chemicals with which the Iraqis manufactured poison gas to attack the Iranians. Assad took this as proof that somehow Saddam had become an American agent. Thus, Saddam became as much the ogre in the bestiary of Hafaz al-Assad as he later became in America’s. This explains why in 1991, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Hafez al-Assad sided with the American-led anti-Saddam coalition.

The second (Bashar) al-Assad regime began when Hafez al-Assad died in 2000. Like his father had done after the Battle of Hama, Bashar initially made conciliatory moves to his opponents, including allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to resume political activities and withdrawing most of the Syrian troops that had occupied strife-torn Lebanon. But, although he legitimized his position by an election, he quickly showed that he was also following his father’s authoritarian path: ‘run your own lives privately and enrich yourselves as you wish but do not challenge my government.’

During the rule of the two Assads, Syria made considerable progress. By the eve of the Civil War, Syrians enjoyed an income (GDP) of about \$5,000 per capita. That was nearly the same as Jordan, roughly double the income per capita of Pakistan and Yemen and five times the income of Afghanistan, but it is only a third the figure for Lebanon, Turkey or Iran.¹⁴ In 2010, savaged by the great drought, GDP/capita had fallen to about \$2,900/capita.¹⁵ Before the civil war, and except in 2008 at the bottom of the drought when it was zero, the Syrian growth rate hovered around 2%.¹⁶ In social affairs, nearly 90% of Syrian children attended primary or secondary schools and between 8 and 9 in 10 Syrians had achieve literacy. That is, it was comparable to Iran, Saudi Arabia and Libya despite having far fewer resources to employ.¹⁷ The

¹³ Saddam Husain’s career was remarkably similar to that of Hafez al-Assad. He had joined the Iraqi branch of the Baath Party in 1957, roughly the same time Assad joined the Syrian branch and in the same capacity, as a young street fighter. He led a botched attempt on the life of the then Iraqi dictator Abdul-Karim Qasim in 1959. (Qasim later showed me his blood-stained uniform and sneered at the incompetent would-be assassins). Saddam fled to Syria and then went on to Egypt. Returning to Iraq after another coup in 1963, he rose through its ranks until he became vice president, effectively running the country, in 1976 and president in 1979. For further information see my *Understanding Iraq*, New York, 2006.

¹⁴ *Index Mundi*, based on the *CIA World Factbook* as of January 1, 2012.

¹⁵ UN data: <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crname=Syrian%20Arab%20Republic>

¹⁶ The World Bank, GDP per capita growth (annual %)

¹⁷ *About.com* Middle East Issues, based on the “Global Campaign for Education.”

most important tissue on which the Assad regimes made little or no progress were some means of birth control, which as I have mentioned threw out of balance resources and population.

Like his father, Bashar sought to legitimize his regime by election, but apparently he never intended, and certainly did not find, a way satisfactory (to the public) and acceptable (to his regime) of enlarged political participation. While this has been the focus of most foreign hostility to his regime, it was certainly less important to Syrians than his failure to find any means of bridging the gap between the demands of Islam and the new role of the Alawi community. This failure was to play havoc with Syrian affairs. The lack of political participation, fear of public demands and severe police measures, additionally was to make their regime appear to be a tyranny. This and its hostility to Israel led to large-scale if covert attempts at regime change by outside powers including the United States. These acts of subversion became particularly pronounced in the 2nd Bush administration.¹⁸

6 Prewar Syrian Foreign Relations

The Bush administration signaled a new anti-Syrian policy in 2002 when the President included it in what he proclaimed to be the “Axis of Evil.” Covert activities were stepped up and the following year Mr. Bush threatened to impose sanctions (which he did impose two years later). In 2003, Israel used American aircraft in a strike on a Palestinian refugee camp just outside of Damascus. It was the first of a sequence of humiliating attacks, which the Syrian armed forces were unable to prevent. The American Congress rubbed salt into that wound by passing the “Syrian Accountability Act,” that charged the Syrians with supporting terrorism and occupying much of Lebanon as well as seeking chemical weapons.¹⁹

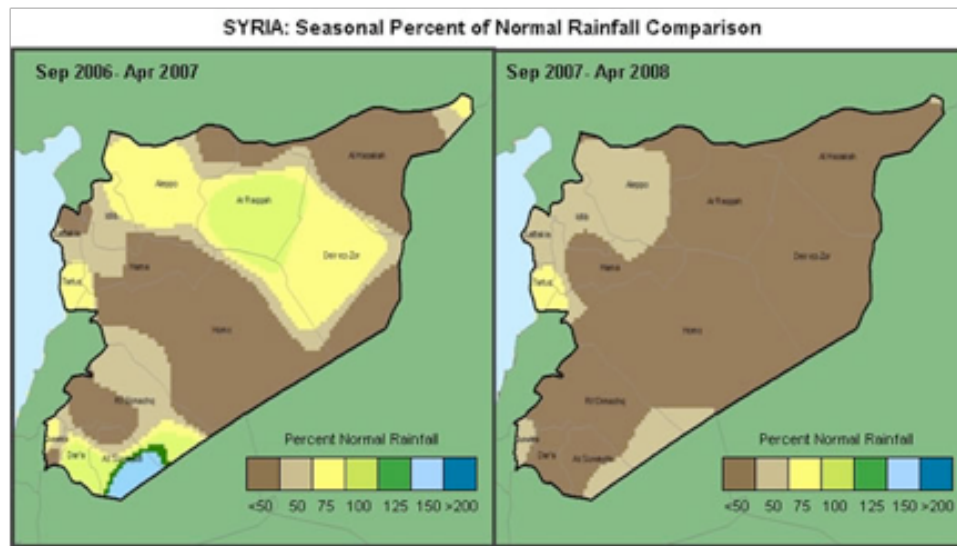
At the same time, diplomatic moves were made to reduce tensions: in 2006, relations were resumed between Syria and Iraq (by then under an American-imposed Shia government; they remain today cordial); in 2007 senior EU and US officials, in a sort of informal version of recognition, visited Damascus, and, seeking to end its split with the conservative Arab governments, Syria hosted an Arab League meeting. But the issue of weapons of mass destruction quickly soured these demarches, particularly between the US and Syria. In a still controversial charge that North Korea was building a nuclear weapons facility at a remote northern site, Israel again in 2007 bombed Syria. But 6 months later, French President Nicolas Sarkozy invited President al-Assad to Paris to work toward reestablishing diplomatic relations.

Tensions were then once more eased with high level visits and in 2010, the US sent an ambassador to Syria but three months later imposes new sanctions on the country. The sanctions aimed to diminish government revenues, particularly from oil exports, and to increase public opposition to the regime. The Syrian regime had not changed, but there seemed to be no clear or consistent policy by the US or the EU toward it.

¹⁸ So far, few of them have been revealed to the American public although many are of course known to other governments including the Syrian. Wikileaks published one “primer” on subversion called “Influencing the SARG [Syrian Arab Republic Government] by the senior American official in Damascus, William Roebuck, on November 30, 2006. This and other leaked documents are quoted by Kevin Gosztola in the August 5, 2011, *The Great American Disconnect*, focus primarily on “dirty tricks,” the spread of rumors and other means to divide the supporters of the regime, other actions, notably by the CIA, allegedly in conjunction with moves by the Israelis, Qataris and Saudis were more direct and violent.

¹⁹ *The Fact Checker*, September 6, 2013, Glenn Kessler, “President Obama and the ‘red line’ on Syria’s chemical weapons.” Mr. Kessler also pointed out (in a similar dispatch of September 4, 2013) that when he was a diplomatic correspondent for *The Washington Post* he learned of a “never-acknowledged gentleman’s agreement...that as long as Israel had nuclear weapons, Syria’s pursuit of chemical weapons would not attract much public acknowledgement or criticism.”

Four years of devastating drought from 2006 caused at least 800,000 farmers to lose their entire livelihood and about 200,000 simply abandoned their lands.²⁰ Outside observers including UN experts estimated that between 2 and 3 million of Syria's 10 rural inhabitants were reduced to "extreme poverty." In some areas, all agriculture ceased. In others crop failures reached 75%. And generally as much as 85% of livestock died of thirst or hunger. Hundreds of thousands of Syria's farmers gave up, abandoned their farms and fled to the cities and towns in search of almost non-existent jobs and severely short food supplies. Outside observers including UN experts estimated that between 2 and 3 million of Syria's 10 million rural inhabitants were reduced to "extreme poverty."



Map courtesy USDA Foreign Agricultural Service
Commodity Intelligence Report, May 9, 2008

As they flocked into the cities and towns seeking work and food, the "economic" or "climate" refugees immediately found that they had to compete not only with one another for scarce food, water and jobs, but also with the already existing foreign refugee population. Syria already was a refuge for quarter of a million Palestinians and about a hundred thousand people who had fled the war and occupation of Iraq. Formerly prosperous farmers were lucky to get jobs as hawkers or street sweepers. And in the desperation of the times, hostilities erupted among groups that were competing just to survive.

Survival was the key issue. The senior UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) representative in Syria turned to the USAID program for help. Terming the situation "a perfect storm," in November 2008, he warned that Syria faced "social destruction." He noted that the Syrian Minister of Agriculture had "stated publicly that [the] economic and social fallout from the drought was 'beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.'" His appeal fell on deaf ears: the USAID director commented that "we question whether limited USG resources should be directed toward this appeal at this time."²¹

²⁰ *The Center for Climate Security*, Feb 29, 2012, Franceso Femia & Caitlin Werrell, "Syria: Climate Change, Drought and Social Unrest," drawing on UN and IFRC surveys.

²¹ November 26, 2008 in cable 08DAMASCUS847_a to Washington and "leaked" to Wikileaks.

Whether or not USAID made a wise decision, we now know that the Syrian government had set itself up for catastrophe. Lured by the high price of wheat on the world market, it had sold its strategic reserves in 2006. According to the US Department of Agriculture, in 2008 and for the rest of the drought years it had to import enough wheat to keep its citizens alive.

So the tens of thousands of frightened, angry, hungry and impoverished former farmers were jammed into Syria's towns and cities where they constituted a "tinder" that was ready to catch fire. The spark was struck on March 15, 2011 when a relatively small group gathered in the southwestern town of Daraa to protest against government failure to help them. Instead of meeting with the protestors and at least hearing their complaints, the government saw them as subversives. The lesson of Hama must have been at the front of the mind of every member of the Assad regime. Failure to act decisively, Hama had shown, inevitably led to insurrection. Compromise could come only after order was assured. So Bashar followed the lead of his father. He ordered a crack down. And the army, long frustrated by inaction and humiliated by its successive defeats in confrontation with Israel, responded violently. Its action backfired. Riots broke out all over the country. As they did, the government attempted to quell them with military force. It failed. So, during the next two years, what had begun as a food and water issue gradually turned into a political and religious cause.

8 The Civil War Takes Shape

While we know a good deal about the Syrian government because it is much like many of the governments around the world, we don't know much about the rebels. Hundreds of groups and factions – called "brigades" even when they are just a dozen or so people – have been identified. Some observers believe that there are actually over a thousand brigades. A reasonable guess is that, including both part-time and full-time insurgents, they number about 100,000 fighters.²²

As in the Afghan war against the Russians, the insurgents are split into mutually hostile groups. This has made them impossible to defeat and very difficult to negotiate with. In Afghanistan, the Russians won all the battles and occupied the entire country sporadically but could never identify any leadership with which they could negotiate. Indeed, even while fighting the Russians, the Afghans guerrilla groups fought against each other for territory, money, weapons, access to smuggling routes, leadership, old ethnic hatreds and other things. Consequently, despite massive foreign aid, they were never able to defeat the Russians. As we shall see, this pattern has been repeated in Syria. There the war has reached a stalemate in which neither side, regardless of the promise or provision of weapons and money by outside powers, is likely to prevail.²³

In Afghanistan, the principal cause for the splits among the rebels was largely ethnic: the Tajiks, Turcomans, Hazaras and Pushtuns, even in the face of mortal dangers, remained bitterly, even murderously, hostile to one another. In Syria, quite different causes of splits among the "brigades" are evident. To understand the insurgency there, we must look carefully the causes. At the basis is religion.

²² *HIS Jane's Defence Consultancy cited in The Telegraph*, Sept 15, 2013, Ben Farmer to and Ruth Sherlock, "Syria: nearly half rebel fighters are jihadists or hardline Islamists, says IHS Jane's report."

²³ *The Guardian*, October 3, 2013, Jonathan Steele, "Uneasy stalemate: Syria caught in deadlock as war of attrition drags on." He writes, "By some estimates, given that large tracts of the north and east are in opposition hands, the government controls only a third of Syria. But as long as it is in charge of Damascus and the coastal strip there is no chance of collapse, mass defections or implosion."

During the course of the Assad regime, interpretation of Islam was undergoing a profound change. This was true not only of Syria but also of understanding, practice and action in many other areas. Particularly affected by the policies of foreigners were young men and women from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, Chechnya, Chinese Turkistan (now Sinkiang) and Egypt.

Millions of Sunni Muslims throughout Africa and Asia -- and even some Shia Muslims²⁴ -- have found inspiration in the writings of the fundamentalist Egyptian theologian Sayyid Qutub. (See Appendix A) Whether or not the governments of their homelands were favorably disposed to Islam, many found the compromises made with modernization or Westernization politically weak or religiously unjustified. Moreover, in areas under non-Muslim rule, such as (Russian controlled) Chechnya and (Chinese colonized) Turkistan, they felt oppressed. Many of those living in the West found Sayyid Qutub's denunciation of their lack of spirituality and crass materialism fit their own interpretation. Others began to find the all-too-common discrimination against them in Christian lands intolerable. So it was that tens of thousands of young foreigners have flocked into Syria to fight for what they see as a religious obligation (Arabic: *fi sabilillah*). Meanwhile, in Syria, while many Muslims found the Assad regime acceptable and many joined even its senior ranks, others saw its Alawi and Christian affiliations, and even its secularism and openness to Muslim participation insupportable.

What has happened is that the aims of the two broad groups -- the Syrians and the foreigners -- have grown apart in a way similar to the split that occurred in Arab nationalism. The Syrians focus on Syria and seek the overthrow of the Assad regime much as their fathers and grandfathers focused on the task of getting the French out of their country, their *watan*. So their nationalism was single country oriented (Arabic: *wataniyah*). The foreign *jihadis*, like the more recent nationalists, put their emphasis on a larger-than-Syria range. For them, it is not a folk nationalism (Arabic: *qawmiyah*) which related only to the Arab world but to the wider world of Islam. That is, it affects over a billion people throughout the world. What they seek is a restored Islamic world, a *Dar ul-Islam* or a new caliphate.

It might come clearer to Westerners if we think of this split, *mutatis mutandi*, in terms of Russian affairs: Stalin focused Communism on a single country whereas Trotsky attempted to cause a world revolution. I want to emphasize that this is not a recondite or theoretical point but is of major importance in understanding the current hostilities and will be fundamental in any attempt to negotiate a ceasefire or a lasting settlement.

Having said that, I want also to emphasize that there is no doubt that, however much they disagree among themselves which they obviously do, all the rebels regard the conflict in Syria as fundamentally a religious issue. Particularly for the native rebels, as I have pointed out, the religious issue is overlaid by ethnic complexities. It would be a mistake to regard the Syrian war, as some outside observers have done, as a fight between the forces of freedom and tyranny. If the opponents of the regime are fighting for some form of democracy, they have yet to make their voices heard.²⁵

²⁴ Notably the Ayatollah Khomeini who had Qutub's works translated into Farsi.

²⁵ *Guardian*: September 19, 2013, Martin Chulov, "Syria's war more complex than ever as both sides face internal divisions." "More than 1,000 units now make up the anti-Assad forces, and while many can still unite behind the stated common cause of ousting the president, many others show no such discipline or even a will to work towards a pluralistic, democratic society if, or when, the Syrian leader falls." What Chulov and other observers found, was essentially what President Putin wrote in his "Plea for Caution" (*New York Times*, September 12, 2013): "Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multireligious country. There are few champions of democracy in Syria."

Like nationalism and socialism in the 1950s and 1960s, Islam has at least so failed to provide an effective unifying force – what a great Arab historian put simply as “turning their faces in a single direction” -- so that, as in other guerrilla wars, the rebels split into a bewildering array of groups. Ultimately, well over 1,000 such groups have been identified.²⁶ And, as in Afghanistan, they fought one another over territory, access to arms, leadership and division of spoils as bitterly as they fought their proclaimed enemy.²⁷ Their fracturing into myriad groups and factions made them impossible to defeat – as the Russians experienced in Afghanistan²⁸ – but also, so far at least, has made them incapable of governing on a national scale. But they are moving in that direction.

The more radical groups, led by An-Nusra Front give the appearance of having studied guerrilla warfare as it occurred elsewhere²⁹ and, among other things they learned was that, to stay alive much less to win their battles, guerrillas must earn the support of the people; so in areas they control, they provide essential services. Overall, these add up to an alternative government. As the most venturesome and best informed of the foreign media reporters witnessed,³⁰

The al-Nusra Front, the principle [sic] jihadi rebel group in Syria, defies the cliché of Islamist fighters around the Middle East plotting to establish Islamic caliphates from impoverished mountain hideaways. In north-eastern Syria, al-Nusra finds itself in command of massive silos of wheat, factories, oil and gas fields, fleets of looted government cars and a huge weapons arsenal.

The commander talked about the services al-Nusra is providing to Shadadi's residents. First, there is food: 225 sacks of wheat, baked into bread and delivered to the people every day through special teams in each neighbourhood. Then there is free electricity and water, which run all day throughout the town. There is also al-Nusra healthcare, provided from a small clinic that treats all comers, regardless of whether they have sworn allegiance to the emirate or not. Finally, there is order and the promise of swift justice, delivered according to sharia law by a handful of newly appointed judges.

All observers agree that the foreign controlled and constituted insurgent groups are the most coherent, organized and effective. This is little short of astonishing as they share no common language and come from a wide variety of cultures. In one operation, which I mention below, the cooperating groups were made up of Chechens, Turks, Tajiks, Pakistanis, French, Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, Saudi Arabians and Moroccans.

Paradoxically, governments that would have imprisoned the same activists in their own countries have poured money, arms and other forms of aid into their coffers. The list is long and surprising in its make-up: it includes Turkey, the conservative Arab states, particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the EU member states and the US.

²⁶ *Guardian*: Sept 19, Martin Chulov, “Syria’s war more complex than ever as both sides face internal divisions.”

²⁷ *New York Times*, Sept 25, 2013, Ben Hubbard & Michael Gordon, “Key Syrian Rebel Groups Abandon Exile Leaders...casting their lot with an affiliate of Al Qaeda.” *New York Times*, July 12, 2013, Anne Barnard & Hwaida Saad, “Syrian Rebel Infighting Undermines Anti-Assad Effort.”

²⁸ Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*, London, 2011.

²⁹ See my *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism, and Guerrilla War, from the American Revolution to Iraq*, New York, 2008.

³⁰ *Guardian*, July 10, 2013, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, “Syria's al-Nusra Front – ruthless, organised and taking control.”

Both the Bush and the Obama administrations have covertly aided the insurgents. Both have provided training, money and arms³¹ and have engaged in propaganda, espionage and various sorts of “dirty tricks.” The rebels, naturally, regarded the aid they got as insufficient while the government regarded it as a virtual act of war. Both were right: it has not been on a scale that enabled the rebels to win, but it was a form of action which, had another country engaged in it, seeking to overthrow the government, any American or European administration would have regarded it as an act of war in international law. (See Appendix C)

Such covert intervention, and indeed overt intervention, is being justified on two grounds: first, that the Syrian government is a tyranny. By Western standards, it is undoubtedly an authoritarian regime. Whether or not it gassed hundreds of its citizens, it certainly killed thousands with conventional weapons. (The rebels are known to have killed at least 20,000 and perhaps as many as 30,000 government soldiers,³² about twice as many as the rebel casualties, and both sides have been documented to have committed atrocities.³³) However, the standards Western nations proclaim have been applied in a highly selective way. The EU and the US enjoy cordial and mutually beneficial relations with dozens of tyrannies including most of the countries now attempting to “regime change” Syria.

Secretary of State Kerry has claimed that only a portion of the rebels – he thinks about 15%-25% – are what he calls “the bad guys.”³⁴ But observers on the scene point out both that that means about 15 or 25 thousand “bad guys” and that they are very bad indeed. Moreover, in the massacres carried out in September and October this year and investigated by Human Rights Watch, they were not just the foreign fighters but also native Syrians.³⁵ In one video a rebel commander is seen eating the heart of a soldier he has just killed; in another, a group of rebels murders captive soldiers who are bound and forced face down in the ground. Another group recently carried out an attack on an old, established and peaceful Christian community whose members, incidentally, still speak Aramaic, the language Jesus presumably spoke.³⁶

³¹ *Washington Examiner. Com*, Sept 17, 2013, Joel Gehrke, “Obama waives ban on arming terrorists to allow aid to Syrian opposition.” “The president, citing his authority under the Arms Export Control Act, announced today that he would “waive the prohibitions in sections 40 and 40A of the AECA related to such a [supply of weapons] transaction.” In fact, the US had been supplying arms and money for several years through the CIA in Jordan and Turkey.

³² SOHR, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported on August 31, 2013 that roughly twice as many soldiers as rebels – 27,654 soldiers 15,992 rebel fighters -- had been killed. Civilian casualties, the report said, stood at 40, 146.

³³ *The Guardian*, May 14, 2013, Ian Black & Martin Chulov, “Syria mutilation footage sparks doubts over wisdom of backing rebels” “Horrific video footage of a Syrian rebel commander eating the heart or lung of a dead government fighter has aroused furious international controversy, fuelling an already heated debate over western support for the armed uprising against President Bashar al-Assad’s regime.” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2013, Ben Hubbard, Rights Group Says It Finds Proof of Torture in Syria.” Human Rights Watch visited 2 Syrian security centers recently captured by rebel fighters and reported “widespread, arbitrary detentions and torture by the government of President Bashar al-Assad.”

³⁴ *Huffington Post*, September 10, 2013, Joshua Hersh, “John Kerry Admits Syria Rebels’ Extremist Groups Are ‘Best Fighters.’”

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, October 2013, “You Can Still See Their Blood,” The attacks were said to be “preplanned and coordinated” and the attackers included Chechens, Turks, Tajiks, Pakistanis, French, Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, Saudi Arabians and Moroccans. It is noteworthy that the so-called “moderates” of the Free Syrian Army participated in the massacres. Horrifying pictures of the events were published by *Paris Match*, September 12-18, 2013. As the Turkish government, an early and strong supporter of the rebels, learned more about the massacres, it began to pull back. *The New York Times*, October 18, 2013, Tim Arango, “Syria Rebels’ Leading Ally Hesitates, 31 Months In.”

³⁶ *The Independent*, September 25, 2013, Robert Fisk, “In sacred Maaloula, where they speak the language of Christ, war leads neighbours into betrayal.” Fisk reported that after the attack, “Maaloula is, almost literally, a ghost town.”

These are not isolated acts. Senior rebels have publicly announced that they plan a genocide of the main ethnic/religious minority, the Alawis,³⁷ Scenes being enacted in Syria today recall the massacres and tortures of the wars of religion in 16th and 17th century Europe.

The English journalist Jonathan Steele was told by the commander of a village defense force, so neither a government soldier nor a rebel, that he saw the results of the attack including “a baby’s head hanging from a tree. There was a woman’s body which had been sliced in half from head to toe and each hang was hanging from separate apple trees.”³⁸ It is difficult even to imagine well of hatred exemplified by such scenes.

Most urgent in the minds of the EU and the US is the second justification for intervention: the Syrian government is charged with using illegal chemical weapons. This is a very serious charge. However, doubts remain on who actually used the weapons.³⁹ And, more important, even though the weapons are indeed horrible and are now generally considered illegal – although several states (the US, Israel, Egypt and Iraq) have recently used them. (See Appendix B.) Terrible as they are, they are only a small part of the Syrian problem – more than 99% of the casualties and all of the property damage in the war have been the result of conventional weapons. Getting rid of chemical weapons will neither in itself stop the war nor create conditions favorable to a settlement.

9 The Cost of the War

Proportional to Syria’s resources, the cost of the war has been immense. And, of course, it is not over. We have only guesses on the total so far. One estimate is that, as of three years ago -- before it got so vicious and destructive -- the war had cost Syria upwards of \$150 billion. Whole cities now resemble Stalingrad or Berlin in World War II. More than 2 million people have fled abroad while another 4.25 million are internal refugees, remaining in Syria.⁴⁰

We have perhaps more accurate guesses on the cost of the spill-over into Lebanon. Even though there was no fighting there, fighting in Syria is estimated to have cost that little country about \$7.5 billion and doubled unemployment to 20%. About 1 million Lebanese were already judged by the World Bank as “poor,” and an additional 170,000 are thought to have been pushed into poverty. The Syrian refugee population has reached at least 1 million, making the Syrians now almost a third of the total Lebanese population. Since this writing, it has grown.

In Jordan, the story is similar. Half a million refugees are camped out there. One refugee encampment there houses over a hundred thousand people and so can be regarded as Jordan’s 5th largest city.⁴¹ Nearly that many have fled to Turkey. Tens of thousands more, mainly Kurds, have fled the genocidal attacks of the Syrian rebels and gone to Iraq.

³⁷ *The Guardian*, October 12, 2013, James Harkin, “Homs: a tale of two cities.” The local word for the rebels is *debaha* (“slaughterer”) who have “ethnically cleaned,” driven out or killed large numbers of Alawis in a formerly mixed neighborhood. About 25,000 were reported as having fled.

³⁸ *The Guardian*, October 2, 2013, “Syria: massacre reports emerge from Assad’s Alawite heartland, Alawites are fleeing their homes, recounting gruesome tales of executions and other atrocities.”

³⁹ I will discuss what is known and what is conjectured in Appendix B.

⁴⁰ As refugees pour out of Syria at about 6,000 a day, it is impossible to get an accurate count, but the number is now believed to be about 9 million or roughly 4 in each 10 Syrians. *The New York Times*, November 6, 2013, Nick Cummings-Bruce and Rick Gladstone, “Diplomats Fail to Agree on Details for Syria Peace Talks.”

⁴¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2013, Julian Barnes & Adam Entous, “Pentagon Plans for the Worst in Syria.”

Before the war in Syria began, Syria was itself a refuge for others. As a result of Israeli occupation of formerly Palestinian lands, half a million Palestinians took refuge in Syria. They were followed by over a hundred thousand Lebanese who fled the war between Israel and Lebanon. Upwards of 2 million Iraqis fled during the American attack and occupation of their country and about 1 million of them, about half Christians, went to Syria. As the war in Syria grew more bitter with massacres and summary executions of Christians and Shii Muslims by the Islamic fundamentalists, all but about 200,000 returned to Iraq. These refugees have been a major drain of the government's resources.

Tragic as these numbers are – the worst for nearly a century – factored into them is that Syria has lost the most precious assets of poor countries, most of the doctors and other professionals who had been painstakingly and expensively educated during the last century. However reprehensible the Syrian government may be in terms of democracy, it not only gives the refugees and its minorities protection but has maintained that part of Syria which it controls as a secular and religiously ecumenical state.

10 The Potential Results of the Syrian War

Even more “costly” are the psychological traumas: a whole generation of Syrians have been subjected to either or both the loss of their homes, security and hope or their respect for and trust in their fellow human beings. Others will probably eventually suffer from the memory of what they, themselves, have done during the fighting. Comparisons are trivial and probably meaningless, but what has been enacted – is being enacted – in Syria resembles the horror of the Japanese butchery of Nanjing in World War II and the massacres in the 1994 Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda.

In short, millions of lives have been wrenched out from under the thin veneer of civilization to which we all cling and have been thrown into the bestiality that the great observer of the brutal English civil war of his time, Thomas Hobbes, memorably described as the “state of nature.” That is, unending war, where “every man [is] against every man.” Then the life of all will be “poore, nasty, brutish and short.” How the victims and the perpetrators can be returned to a “normal life” will be the lingering but urgent question of coming generations in Syria and elsewhere.

Elsewhere, 1 in 4 or 5 people throughout the world alive today is Muslim, roughly 1.4 billion men, women and children. That whole portion of the world's population has its eyes on Syria. What happens there is likely to have a ripple effect across Asia and Africa. It is this effect, as I have written, that President Putin mentioned as leading to his intervention. Thus, even though it is a small and poor country, Syria is in a sense a focal point of world affairs.

Let us consider what might happen within Syria.

First, the war might continue. It is now at a stalemate and outside powers may continue to keep it that way. As we have seen, they have been the major supporters of the rebels. With or without their help, will the war die down of its own accord? That is, will it run out of fighters and victims? Even at the current horrific rate, that seems unlikely. Will the survivors give up? I think not. Foreign fighters stream in even as refugees pour out. And as we have seen elsewhere,

wars can run on “lean.” And, the rebels are driven by a burning faith. So, absent successful negotiations, which the rebels have announced they will not accept,⁴² I can see no end.

Second, if the Syrian government continues or even prevails, there is no assurance that, without outside help and an end to foreign aid to the rebels, it will be able to suppress the insurgency. We see clear evidence to the contrary in the experiences of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Guerrillas can hang on for years as they exhaust their opponents. They need little on which to survive.

Third, if the current stalemate continues Syria will remain effectively “balkanized,” that is, split into pieces somewhat as the French did when they invaded the country in 1920. Today, and perhaps into the future, something like two thirds of the country, including its only major earner, the oil and gas industry, is likely to remain in rebel hands or at least not under the control of the central (Damascus) government. More significant, the rebel-held area will almost certainly be constituted as a fundamentalist Islamic society – what the insurgents already call a caliphate -- perhaps in alliance with the northwestern portions of Iraq. Ideologically driven and believing itself to be under siege, which it almost certainly will be, the caliphate will seek to defend itself with the “weapon of the weak,” terrorism. Those who will become its citizens are already using a modified version of terrorism domestically and will be forced, since they will have no other major weapons, to use them against those who will seek to “regime change” them.

What this caliphate or “Islamistan” will have to do to stay alive will also drive it – and its victims --into confrontation with its neighbors and with outside powers. Even if fighting dies “lasting and bitter war. This war, like the wars Iraq and Afghanistan – regardless of what American and European politicians say or even hope – will necessarily involve “boots on the ground.” That is, it will be fought with guerrilla and terrorist tactics on the rebel side against the now typical counterinsurgency methods on the other side. And, as we have seen, such wars as Iraq have nearly bankrupted the United States.⁴³ Different from the Iraq and Afghan wars, it will also have a “blow-back” effect on the countries from which the Muslim Fundamentalist insurgents come. It is in recognition of this fact that President Putin decided to intervene in the current Syrian war.⁴⁴

⁴² *The New York Times*, November 6, 2013, Nick Cumming-Bruce and Rick Gladstone, “Diplomats Fail to Agree on Details for Syria Peace Talks,” quoting the principal negotiator, Lakhdar Brahimi, saying “They have said that any insurgents who participate in Geneva peace talks would be regarded as traitors.”

⁴³ *Boston National Public Radio (90.9wbur)* September 6, 2013, Linda Bilmes, “The Cost of Striking Syria: 4 Lessons From Iraq and Afghanistan.” “Iraq and Afghanistan will ultimately set U.S. taxpayers back between [\\$4 to \\$6 trillion](#),”

“The 1991 Gulf War lasted for six weeks and our coalition allies paid for the combat phase. But the war costs *always* has come due 30 to 40 years later. The peak year for paying disability U.S. now spends \$4 billion per year paying disability benefits to veterans of that conflict, many of whom suffer from conditions related to “[Gulf War Syndrome](#).” Historically, the bill for veteran’s compensation to World War I veterans was in 1969. The largest expenditures for World War II veterans were in the 1980s. Payments to Vietnam veterans are still climbing.

“Future expenditures will be even higher for those who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, due to much higher survival rates, more generous benefits, and new, expensive medical treatments. The Department of Veterans Affairs has already treated more than 800,000 veterans from these conflicts, the majority of whom qualify for disability compensation for the rest of their lives. The bill for disability benefits, medical care, and Social Security Disability Insurance to these veterans will add another \$900 billion to the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan era.”

⁴⁴ *The New York Times*, *Op-Ed*, September 12, 2013, “A Plea for Caution.” As he wrote, “Mercenaries from Arab countries fighting there, and hundreds of militants from Western countries and even Russia, are an issue of our deep concern. Might they not return to our countries with experience acquired in Syria?”

A relatively minor aspect to consider in such a sequel of events is the effect on the Kurds and their relationships with Turkey, Iraq and Iran. As they have begun to do, the Muslim Fundamentalists in Syria will seek to “ethnically cleanse” the Kurdish areas, driving the inhabitants into Turkey or Iraq.⁴⁵ Those two states are not receptive to additional Kurdish citizens and will, almost certainly, continue, as they are doing today, trying to stop the flow of refugees. Border clashes are predictable, and these could lead either or both to international conflicts and heightened domestic tensions. In fact, we can already see the beginnings of such problems⁴⁶ in recent clashes between the Turkish government and the Syrian insurgents.

Similarly, tensions will increase on the Lebanese, Jordan and Israeli frontiers and domestically in each state. The Fundamentalists are bitterly hostile to the governments of Lebanon and Jordan, which they regard as Western proxies, and to Israel, which they see as a colonial power. Lebanon and Jordan are already precariously balanced and Israel, opportunistically, will likely use the new situation to advance its already underway policy of driving the Palestinians off the West Bank.⁴⁷ Thus, at the very minimum, the turmoil in the Middle East will be heightened.

William R. Polk
November 6, 2013

(END OF PART I: UNDERSTANDING SYRIA)

In Part 2, I will consider what might be done to avoid, cope with or solve these disasters.

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⁴⁶ Reuters, October 27, 2013, Isabel Coles, “Kurdish rebels threaten new fight in Turkey as Syria clashes intensify.”

⁴⁷ The Ma’an News Agency, November 2, 2013, “Official: Israel to demolish homes of over 15,000 East Jerusalemites.”