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Overview: The Civil War & Refugee Crisis in Syria

Instructions: Read the text and key terms that follow. Underline at least three facts that are new to you. Write a question mark by a fact, idea, or term that you have a question about.

Syria is a country in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is bordered by Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan and Israel to the south, and Lebanon to the southwest. After World War I, this entire region was divided between Britain and France, who were victors in the war. France took over Syria and managed it as though it was a colony, setting up local governments that the French could control. The French used a “divide and rule” strategy to make it less likely that Syrians would be able to unite and resist French rule. France created borders within Syria that emphasized existing religious, ethnic, and regional differences. This fragmentation laid the groundwork for conflict that continues in Syria today.

How did the Assad family come to power in Syria?

For the two decades following World War II, the newly independent Syria was politically unstable. Civilian government was interrupted by a series of military coups in which military leaders took control of the country. In 1970, in the final coup, defense minister Hafez al-Assad overthrew the existing government and established an authoritarian military regime that maintained tight control over Syrian society.

The Assad family is from the Alawite sect of Shi'i Islam. Alawites have historically been a minority of Syria's population and somewhat alienated from the rest of Syrian society. They live mostly in rural areas of Syria and follow beliefs and traditions

that are different from those of the Sunni Muslim majority. During the 1980s, various Muslim groups within Syria led uprisings against the Assad regime, but they were violently suppressed by the army. The regime became more repressive in the aftermath of these uprisings.

Hafez al-Assad ruled Syria until his death in 2000, when he was succeeded by his son, Bashar. While Bashar al-Assad was initially more open to political groups that his father had suppressed, his government continued to brutally repress any kind of dissent.

Why did civil war break out in Syria?

When Syrians organized protests during the Arab Spring in 2011, Assad's government responded with a violent crackdown. After a bloody confrontation between protesters and security forces in March 2011, demonstrations spread nationwide over the following months. Protesters denounced government corruption



Syrians protest in the city of Douma, April 24, 2011.

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and demanded an end to the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad. Government forces entered provinces where protests were taking place, in some cases replacing local governors with national troops in order to crush the demonstrations.

In 2012, a coalition of opposition activists formed, called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. This coalition was formally recognized by the United States, Britain, France, Turkey, and Persian Gulf countries as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people. Opposition to the Assad regime was fragmented. The coalition of moderate rebel groups confronted Islamic extremist groups vying for power, as well as Kurdish forces trying to create an independent state along the Turkish border.

How has the international community been involved in the conflict?

In 2012, after the Assad regime threatened to use chemical weapons against rebel forces, the United States and Britain began to provide aid to the moderate rebel groups. This support was suspended after a year, when it became apparent that Islamist rebels had seized the bases of the moderate rebel army. (The most extreme of the Islamist rebels are from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, a terrorist organization that formed after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.) By 2014, ISIS militants had extended

their control beyond territories in northern and western Syria, taking the capital city of Aleppo.

Over the next two years, civil war engulfed Syria as various rebel groups fought each other while also battling government forces. Western countries, along with U.S. allies in the Middle East, intervened militarily to counter ISIS, while Russia and Iran lent support to the Syrian government. With international backing, Syrian government troops recaptured the capital of Aleppo in December 2016. Despite several rounds of attempted peace talks brokered by foreign countries and the United Nations, fighting continues.

How has the conflict affected the lives of Syrians?

The six-year civil war has killed hundreds of thousands of people. The ongoing violence and destruction have led to a massive refugee crisis, as millions of Syrians have fled their country to seek safety and access to basic services. The United Nations Refugee Agency estimated that there were 5,233,712 registered Syrian refugees living outside of Syria at the end of September 2017. An additional seven million Syrians have been internally displaced (forced to flee their homes and relocate within the country). The Syrian Civil War has displaced more than half of the entire Syrian population.



Mark Garten, UN Photo # 537293

Syrian refugees in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, December 7, 2012. The camp, near Syria's southern border, opened in 2012 and by August 2017 was home to over eighty thousand Syrians displaced by the civil war. The camp includes twenty-nine schools that together enroll over twenty thousand Syrian children.

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Key Terms

Refugee: A person who leaves his or her country due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, political views, or membership in a particular social group. People fleeing conflicts are also generally considered to be refugees since they are seeking refuge (safety). Refugees have specific rights and protections under international law. For example, refugees have the right to not be forced to return to the unsafe situation that they fled. Refugees have the rights of security and freedom of movement. They have the right to keep their family together. Similarly, countries that have refugees seeking asylum in their territory have specific responsibilities under international law for the treatment of those refugees.

Migrant: A person who moves to a foreign country for various reasons—such as employment, education, or to reunite with family—usually for a year or more. Unlike refugees, migrants do not face a direct threat of persecution or death in their home country. Before leaving their home country, migrants may be able to seek information about their destination, explore employment opportunities, and plan their travel.

Host country: The country to which a refugee relocates.

Asylum: Shelter or protection from danger granted by a country to someone forced to leave their home country.

Asylum seeker: A person who has moved across international borders in search of protection and filed a claim for asylum with the host country's government. While the government reviews the claim, the person remains an asylum seeker. If the claim is accepted, the person becomes a "refugee" in the eyes of the government. For example, someone from Syria who is living in Germany and waiting to hear the outcome of his or her asylum application would be considered an asylum seeker.

Internally displaced person (IDP): A person who is forcibly uprooted within his or her country but who has not crossed an international border. IDPs may be forced from their home as a result of armed conflict, human rights violations, or natural or human-made disasters, yet remain in their country.

Consulate: The office where a consul works. A consul is an official appointed by a government to live in a foreign city and protect the government's citizens and interests there.

Smuggle: To move goods or people somewhere secretly, usually violating a rule or law.

Deport: To force someone to leave a country, usually because they are from another country and have not been granted permission by the host country's government to live there.

Repression: The act of restraining someone or something by force. Undemocratic governments often repress political dissent (people speaking out against the government through protest or other kinds of expression) in order to maintain their authority.

Arab Spring: A series of popular uprisings against authoritarian governments that occurred in Arab countries across the Middle East and North Africa in the early months of 2011. In mass demonstrations ranging from thousands to millions of people, protesters called for democratic reforms, greater economic opportunity, and an end to human rights abuses. In some countries, the uprisings led to a change in government after a period of fighting between rebel and government forces. For example, in Libya rebel forces overthrew a dictator, Muammar Gaddafi, who had ruled the country for decades. In other countries, the existing government remained in power. For example, in Bahrain, the government violently crushed the protests. In Syria, the conflict turned into a civil war that continues today.