

The Syrian Civil War

Student Text



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THE
CHOICES
PROGRAM
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction: From Peaceful Protest to Civil War

The Syrian Civil War and resulting refugee crisis is one of the defining humanitarian issues of our time. The war has killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and injured more than a million people. Since 2011, the violence of the conflict has prompted about half of the country's population to flee from their homes. Nearly seven million refugees have fled the country and more than six million Syrians are still displaced from their homes within Syria.

“I had to leave the home that I'd spent thirty years building. One day I just had to close the doors, turn the key, and leave everything behind. I'm seventy-two. No one wants to leave home at my age. But I left because I have six sons, and I knew one day the soldiers would come for them.... I watched soldiers take away the neighbors' boys with my own eyes. They were good boys. I'd known them their whole lives. But they were led away like sheep. They didn't even speak up because if they opened their mouths, they'd be shot. I knew it was only a matter of time before they came to our house. We left everything behind, but now my family is safe.”

—Syrian refugee living in Amman, Jordan,
in a Humans of New York interview,
December 4, 2015

What sparked the Syrian Civil War?

What began as peaceful protests during the Arab Spring of 2011 resulted in a violent crackdown by the Syrian government. Demonstrations spread nationwide, as protesters denounced government oppression and demanded an end to the violent dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad. Government forces responded with extreme violence. The conflict escalated over time, as the government continued its assault on the population and armed opposition forces emerged.

While it is frequently referred to as a civil war, the conflict in Syria is not just a conflict among Syrians. Foreign governments such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Israel, and Turkey have been deeply involved in the conflict.

In order to understand the ongoing conflict, it is essential to investigate Syria's social, economic, and political history. In the following pages, you will have the opportunity to explore the history of Syria. In Part I of the reading, you will trace the final years of the Ottoman Empire, the period of French colonial rule, and the early years of Syria's independence. In Part II, you will explore Hafez al-Assad's rise to power, the creation of an authoritarian state in Syria, and the rule of Bashar al-Assad in the early twenty-first century. Part III examines the evolution of the recent conflict in Syria, beginning with the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2011, the violent repression of protests by the Syrian regime, the worsening civil war, and the resulting humanitarian disaster.



The Roman Theater in the ancient city of Palmyra, Syria, built in the second century CE and photographed in April 2010. Syrians see their country as a cradle of civilization and are proud of its rich multicultural heritage. ISIS militants destroyed some of Palmyra's ancient theaters and monuments when they seized territory in the recent conflict, damaging the Roman Theater in 2017.

© Guillaume Pölle / CC BY 3.0.



Mark Garten, UN Photo 668862.

Young Syrian refugees at a refugee camp in the Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, March 25, 2016.

Throughout the curriculum, you will explore how Syrian social movements and resistance have shaped the country's history, and consider the experiences and perspectives of Syrians from the past to the present. You will grapple with the following key questions related to the history of Syria and the recent conflict:

- How did the Ottoman Empire rule the region prior to the twentieth century?
- What are the legacies of French colonialism and foreign involvement in Syria?
- How have Syrian social movements and resistance shaped the country's history?
- What are the causes of the Syrian revolution? How did it descend into civil war?
- How should the international community respond to the recent conflict and the humanitarian disaster?
- What do Syrians want for their future?

Note: This period in history is marked by oppression and violence and has had lasting repercussions for many groups. Please be advised that this text includes firsthand accounts of violence. It is important to be sensitive to your classmates and the ways in which this history might be a difficult topic to study.

The Syrian Civil War

Teacher Resource Book

TEACHER RESOURCE BOOK

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“Beautifying” Dictatorship: Vogue Features Asma al-Assad

Objectives:

Students will: Analyze a primary source document representing the Assads’ attempt to present themselves positively to U.S. audiences.

Recognize a biased source’s rhetorical methods.

Compare and contrast their knowledge of the Assads in the early 2000s with the text’s depiction of them.

Reflect on how archiving practices influence historical knowledge.

Required Reading:

Students should have read Part II and completed “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 21-22) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-23).

Handouts:

“Analyzing the Source” (TRB 26-27)

“Source: Excerpts from ‘A Rose in the Desert’” (TRB 28-29)

Note: Colored pencils may be helpful as students annotate the source.

In the Classroom:

1. Focus Question—Discuss the following questions: What is public image? Is a leader’s public image always representative of what they really do as a leader? Ask students to give an example. How do leaders try to shape their public image?

2. Document Analysis—Tell students that they will be focusing on how the Assads tried to present themselves to a U.S. audience, by studying excerpts from an article in the U.S. magazine *Vogue*. Divide the class into groups of three to four students and distribute “Analyzing the Source” and “Source: Excerpts from ‘A Rose in the Desert.’” Ask students to read and follow the directions. Tell students to read and mark up the document individually and then answer the questions as a group. Remind students that as they read, they should focus on the article’s depiction of the Assads and Syria. (You may wish to review the meaning of the term “bias” with students before beginning the activity.)

3. Class Discussion—Reconvene the class. Do students believe that the text’s depiction of the Assads is positive, negative, or mixed? Do students believe that the text’s depiction of Syria is positive, negative, or mixed? How does the text describe the relationship between the Assads and Syria? What is the article’s author trying to convince the reader to believe? How does the author attempt to convince the reader?

4. Making Connections—What kind of “first family” did the Assads present themselves as in the early 2000s? What specific changes did Bashar al-Assad make to differentiate his public image from his father’s? If needed, review the student text for information. Is this article’s depiction of the Assads consistent with how they tried to present themselves?

Ask students to analyze the article’s title. Tell them that Asma al-Assad lives in Damascus, a city with a population of 2.4 million people. Much of western Syria has a Mediterranean climate. It snows in Damascus in the winter. How does the title “A Rose in the Desert” reinforce misunderstandings about the Middle East as an uninhabited desert?

5. Reflecting on Historical Sources—Many U.S. journalists criticized the *Vogue* article for its flattering depiction of the Assads. Since the article’s publication, *Vogue* has erased all publicly accessible copies of the article from the Internet. (The Choices Program accessed the article through a subscription-only database). How does *Vogue*’s action affect people’s ability to read the article? Now think about the importance of primary sources like this article to our understanding of history. How might *Vogue*’s removal of the article from the written record affect people’s understanding of Syria-U.S. relations in this period?

We often think that archives of primary sources simply exist, without any bias in how they are compiled. How does the fact that organizations such as *Vogue* can hide articles challenge that belief?

Homework:

Students should read Part III and complete “Study Guide—Part III” (TRB 30-31) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part III” (TRB-32).

Analyzing the Source

Part I: Pre-Reading

Instructions: Before reading the article, read the introductory paragraph at the top of the article and answer the questions below.

1. What is the publication date of this source?
2. Which magazine published this source?
3. Who is the author of this source?
4. What is the identity (e.g., nationality, career) of the source's author?
5. Who do you think is the author's intended audience?
6. The Syrian regime paid an American public relations firm to coordinate this article's publication. What sort of bias does this add to the source?

Part II: Source Analysis

Instructions: Now read the source. As you read, you should focus on the article's depiction of the Assads and Syria. While reading, circle any sentences or paragraphs that you found surprising. Then, answer the questions below. You may wish to use colored pencils to underline the following:

1.
 - a. In the text, underline any mentions of Asma al-Assad's physical appearance.
 - b. How does the text depict Asma al-Assad's physical appearance?
2.
 - a. In the text, underline any mentions of Asma al-Assad's work with her organizations.
 - b. How does the text depict Asma al-Assad's work with her organizations?

Name: _____

3. a. In the text, add a check mark next to any mentions of the Assads' opinion on religion (both Islam and Christianity).
- b. How does the text depict the Assads' opinion on religion (both Islam and Christianity)?

4. How does the text, overall, depict the Assad family?

5. How does the text depict Syria's relationship to Europe and the United States?

6. How does the text depict Syria's relationship to the Middle East?

7. How does the text, overall, depict Syria?

8. Based on what you have previously read about the Assads, what important information does this text leave out?

Source: Excerpts from "A Rose in the Desert"

Introduction: This source is a series of excerpts from the article "A Rose in the Desert," which appeared in the March 2011 issue of Vogue, a U.S. fashion magazine. It was written by the American writer Joan Juliet Buck.

Asma al-Assad is glamorous, young, and very chic—the freshest and most magnetic of first ladies. Her style is not the couture-and-bling dazzle of Middle Eastern power but a deliberate lack of adornment. She's a rare combination: a thin, long-limbed beauty who dresses with cunning understatement. *Paris Match* calls her "the element of light in a country full of shadow zones." She is the first lady of Syria.

Syria is known as the safest country in the Middle East, possibly because, as the [U.S.] State Department's Web site says, "the Syrian government conducts intense physical and electronic surveillance of both Syrian citizens and foreign visitors." It's a secular country where women earn as much as men and the Muslim veil is forbidden in universities, a place without bombings, unrest, or kidnappings, but its shadow zones are deep and dark. Asma's husband, Bashar al-Assad, was elected president in 2000, after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, with a startling 97 percent of the vote. In Syria, power is hereditary. The country's alliances are murky. How close are they to Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah? There are souvenir Hezbollah ashtrays in the souk [marketplace], and you can spot the Hamas leadership racing through the bar of the Four Seasons. Its number-one enmity is clear: Israel. But that might not always be the case. The United States has just posted its first ambassador there since 2005, Robert Ford....

The 35-year-old first lady's central mission is to change the mind-set of six million Syrians under eighteen, encourage them to engage in what she calls "active citizenship." "It's about everyone taking shared responsibility in moving this country forward, about empowerment in a civil society. We all have a stake in this country; it will be what we make it."

In 2005 she founded Massar, built around a series of discovery centers where children and young adults from five to 21 engage in creative, informal approaches to civic responsibility. Massar's mobile Green Team has touched 200,000 kids across Syria since 2005. The organization is privately funded through donations. The Syria Trust for Development, formed in 2007, oversees Massar as well as her first NGO [nongovernmental organization], the rural micro-credit association FIRDOS, and SHABAB, which exists to give young people business skills they need for the future....

Damascus evokes a dusty version of a Mediterranean hill town in an Eastern-bloc country. The courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque at night looks exactly like St. Mark's square in Venice. When I first arrive, I'm met on the tarmac by a minder, who gives me a bouquet of white roses and lends me a Syrian cell phone; the head minder, a high-profile American PR, joins us the next day. The first lady's office has provided drivers, so I shop and see sights in a bubble of comfort and hospitality. On the rare occasions I am out alone, a random series of men in leather jackets seems to be keeping close tabs on what I am doing and where I am headed.

"I like things I can touch. I like to get out and meet people and do things," the first lady says as we set off for a meeting in a museum and a visit to an orphanage. "As a banker [Asma al-Assad's former career], you have to be so focused on the job at hand that you lose the experience of the world around you. My husband gave me back something I had lost."

She slips behind the wheel of a plain SUV, a walkie-talkie and her cell thrown between the front seats and a Syrian-silk Louboutin tote on top. She does what the locals do—swerves to avoid crazy men who run across busy freeways, misses her turn, checks your seat belt, points out sights, and then can't find a parking space. When a traffic cop pulls her over at a roundabout, she lowers the tinted window and dips her head with a playful smile. The cop's eyes go from slits to saucers....

The presidential family lives surrounded by neighbors in a modern apartment in Malki. On Friday, the Muslim day of rest, Asma al-Assad opens the door herself in jeans and old suede stiletto boots, hair in a ponytail, the word HAPPINESS spelled out across the back of her T-shirt. At the bottom of the stairs stands the

Name: _____

off-duty president in jeans—tall, long-necked, blue-eyed. A precise man who takes photographs and talks lovingly about his first computer, he says he was attracted to studying eye surgery “because it’s very precise, it’s almost never an emergency, and there is very little blood.”

The old al-Assad family apartment was remade into a child-friendly triple-decker playroom loft surrounded by immense windows on three sides. With neither shades nor curtains, it’s a fishbowl. Asma al-Assad likes to say, “You’re safe because you are surrounded by people who will keep you safe.” Neighbors peer in, drop by, visit, comment on the furniture. The president doesn’t mind: “This curiosity is good: They come to see you, they learn more about you. You don’t isolate yourself.”

There’s a decorated Christmas tree. Seven-year-old Zein watches Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* on the president’s iMac; her brother Karim, six, builds a shark out of Legos; and nine-year-old Hafez tries out his new electric violin. All three go to a Montessori school.

Asma al-Assad empties a box of fondue mix into a saucepan for lunch. The household is run on wildly democratic principles. “We all vote on what we want, and where,” she says. The chandelier over the dining table is made of cut-up comic books. “They outvoted us three to two on that.”

A grid is drawn on a blackboard, with ticks for each member of the family. “We were having trouble with politeness, so we made a chart: ticks for when they spoke as they should, and a cross if they didn’t.” There’s a cross next to Asma’s name. “I shouted,” she confesses. “I can’t talk about empowering young people, encouraging them to be creative and take responsibility, if I’m not like that with my own children...”

After lunch, Asma al-Assad drives to the airport, where a Falcon 900 is waiting to take her to Massar in Latakia, on the coast. When she lands, she jumps behind the wheel of another SUV waiting on the tarmac. This is the kind of surprise visit she specializes in, but she has no idea how many kids will turn up at the community center on a rainy Friday.

As it turns out, it’s full. Since the first musical notation was discovered nearby, at Ugarit, the immaculate Massar center in Latakia is built around music. Local kids are jamming in a sound booth; a group of refugee Palestinian girls is playing instruments. Others play chess on wall-mounted computers. These kids have started online blood banks, run marathons to raise money for dialysis machines, and are working on ways to rid Latakia of plastic bags. Apart from a few girls in scarves, you can’t tell Muslims from Christians.

Asma al-Assad stands to watch a laborious debate about how—and whether—to standardize the Arabic spelling of the word *Syria*. Then she throws out a curve ball. “I’ve been advised that we have to close down this center so as to open another one somewhere else,” she says. Kids’ mouths drop open. Some repress tears. Others are furious. One boy chooses altruism: “That’s OK. We know how to do it now; we’ll help them.”

Then the first lady announces, “That wasn’t true. I just wanted to see how much you care about Massar.”

As the pilot expertly avoids sheet lightning above the snow-flecked desert on the way back, she explains, “There was a little bit of formality in what they were saying to me; it wasn’t real. Tricks like this help—they become alive, they become passionate. We need to get past formalities if we are going to get anything done.”

Two nights later it’s the annual Christmas concert by the children of Al-Farah Choir, run by the Syrian Catholic Father Elias Zahlawi. Just before it begins, Bashar and Asma al-Assad slip down the aisle and take the two empty seats in the front row. People clap, and some call out his nickname: “*Docteur! Docteur!*”

Two hundred children dressed variously as elves, reindeers, or candy canes share the stage with members of the national orchestra, who are done up as elves. The show becomes a full-on songfest, with the elves and reindeer and candy canes giving their all to “Hallelujah” and “Joy to the World.” The carols slide into a more serpentine rhythm, an Arabic rap group takes over, and then it’s back to Broadway mode. The president whispers, “All of these styles belong to our culture. This is how you fight extremism—through art.”

Brass bells are handed out. Now we’re all singing “Jingle Bell Rock.” 1,331 audience members shaking their bells, singing, crying, and laughing.

“This is the diversity you want to see in the Middle East,” says the president, ringing his bell. “This is how you can have peace!”