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Syria, Factor 14: Conflict Resolution

Syria: Solving a Humanitarian Crisis

The current conflict in Syria is "The worst humanitarian crisis of our time" (Edwards). Over the past six years, nearly a half-million people have been killed, and over ten million people have either fled the country or been displaced internally (UNICEF). This conflict further destabilizes the Middle East and has developed into a proxy war involving major powers such as the United States and Russia. There are great variety of other countries and groups participating, all with different interests. The conflict has left the nearly 17 million remaining Syrian citizens without basic necessities such as food or medical care. The violence in Syria must come to a peaceful conclusion through diplomatic means.

The first step to solving a problem is identifying it and understanding how it happened. The region that has become the state of Syria has been inhabited for nearly 10,000 years, and is considered to be one of the most ancient civilizations, predated only by mesopotamia. It was ruled by the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to the end of the Great War, where it transitioned to French control. The occupation did not last long though, as a series of revolts led to an independence treaty in 1936. The period after this was one of turmoil as various groups vied for control of the new country. Syria, as it is known today developed after the Ba'athist coup of 1963 which led to the rule of Hafez al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar al-Assad, in 1970. After his passing in 2000, Bashar became president after winning an unopposed election. In the beginning there was hope for governmental reform, however these aspirations were repressed by the military within the year following the election.

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 after the Arab Spring movement spread into Syria where crowds began to protest the Presidency of Bashar al-Assad. Armed conflict evolved after the Syrian military suppressed the protests. In July, a group known as the Free Syrian Army developed, fighting the Assad government. By 2012, extremists from all over the globe had come to join the rebels, Al-Qaeda also created a new branch in Syria. Also around the same time, Kurdish groups in the north seceded and formed their own group against Assad. By the end of 2012, a proxy war developed with Iran supporting Assad and Gulf States supporting the rebels through Turkey. In early 2013, an Iranian group called Hezbollah entered the ground war helping Assad. In response, Gulf States step up efforts to assist rebels, this time going through Jordan. This divides the middle east between mostly Shia Islam groups supporting Assad, and mostly Sunni Islam groups supporting the rebels. In August, the United States entered the conflict when President Obama signed a secret order with the CIA to send arms and train rebels in Syria. In February 2013 more extremist rebels broke off from the main group in what came to be known as ISIS or ISIL. This new group fought Al-Qaeda and Kurdish groups however, and not Assad. The United States responded by beginning airstrikes against ISIS. The Pentagon also began its own program to start training rebels to fight ISIS, not Assad. Matters became even more complicated in 2015 when Turkey began bombing Kurdish territory and Russia started bombing ISIS and anti-Assad rebels (CNN). All of this had led to terrible living conditions for all Syrians.

It is self evident that the conflict in Syria is very complicated and simple initiatives such as foreign aid will not be beneficial until a peaceful resolution can brokered between all factions. The conflict has brought untold devastation to the average Syrian. Before the fighting started, the Assad government kept power through controversial methods, but ensured relative stability for the country. The Assad government began in 1970 with current President Bashar's father taking over the government. From that period until 2009 life expectancy increased by 17 years, and infant mortality dropped from 132 deaths per 1000 births to only 18 (Maupin). The government also provided free healthcare to all citizens, though it was not necessarily of the highest quality (Health). Due to this some wealthier urban citizens opted to use private doctors and facilities (Kherallah). Improvements in education were made as well, and the average Syrian could expect nine to twelve years of public education (Education). In 1981, the country began a nationwide literacy program available to everyone (Library of Congress). Before the war nearly half of the population consisted of subsistence farmers who grew a variety of crops. However, they were only allowed to farm a certain amount of land mandated by the government, usually less than 100 acres (Economy). The other half of Syrians worked in urban areas, with a minimum wage equivalent to one USD (Poor). Urban Syrians shopped for most of their food from grocery stores (Starr). These factors were signs of a successful developing country, but all of this changed in 2011 when the conflict began.

As aforementioned, approximately four million Syrians have fled the country, causing a refugee crisis in Europe and the world in general. In addition, "over 12 million Syrians - half the country's prewar population - have been displaced from their homes." (Jazeera). Most of the country's educational institutes, healthcare, and infrastructure have been destroyed. More than half of all Syrians are unemployed, leading to economic collapse. Also, the country's GDP is now half of what is was before the war (CIA). These factors have made it increasingly difficult to find food for both rural and urban families. "Syria's food chain is disintegrating – from production to markets – and entire livelihood systems are collapsing." (FAO). Rural families have been displaced from their farms, and exponentially increasing food prices have made getting enough food nearly impossible for most Syrians (Poor). "I was there in June and met farmers in Homs," says Abeer Etefa of the World Food Program (WFP). "They can't access their lands, they've left their property," she says. "Their machinery is gone and they've no access to seeds." Access to clean water has also been affected. Militant groups have taken over most water supplies, leaving urban Syrians without running water, and rural Syrians without means to water their crops. In addition, Syria has been facing a drought which has made water even more scarce for those who have access to it. Some experts suspect climate change to be the driving force behind the low rainfall numbers (Key). This lack of rainfall was also cited as one of the factors that caused the conflict in the first place. Farmers who could not produce enough food to eat were forced to move into cities which became increasingly overcrowded leading to unrest and dissatisfaction with the government.

Over half of all Syrians are under the age of 24, and most families consist of six people (CIA). The large youth population has been growing up in this conflict for nearly six years now. Most do not have any access to schools or healthcare, and many are growing up without parents or adult supervision, doing whatever they have to for survival. These factors have led to increased disease outbreaks among children and adults. Diseases including measles, meningitis, and polio have all been reported to have broken out in urban populations and slums (Health). Access to running water and electricity in areas that still have it have been limited to only around eight hours per day, mostly in government held areas (Mercy Corps). The only way to solve these problems will be to bring stability back to the region.

Various reasons exist for all groups involved in this conflict. These reasons include political, social, and economical interests. For example, some reputable experts such as Mitchell Orenstein and George Romer suspect that Russia has entered the conflict to protect its oil interests. Orenstein, a Harvard Professor, goes on to explain the hypothesis like this "Specifically, most of the foreign belligerents in the war in Syria are gas-exporting countries with interests in one of the two competing pipeline projects that seek to cross Syrian territory to deliver either Qatari or Iranian gas to Europe. In short, as Iran emerges from international sanctions and its massive gas reserves become available for export, Syria's gas war is heating up." (Orenstein). If these pipelines are built, the European Union would not need to depend on Russia for oil, hurting its economy and political power.

Some say that the United States is to blame for the conflict, like Caleb Maupin, a writer for Mint Press News. "As U.S. media bemoans the humanitarian crisis, somehow blaming on the Syrian government and its president, and the U.S. directly sends its military forces into the country, the people of the world should ask Western leaders and their allies: Why are you prolonging this war? Why can't you just leave Syria alone? Why do you continue funding and enabling the terrorists? Isn't five years of civil war enough? Is overthrowing the Syrian government really worth so much suffering and death?" (Maupin). The United States has had a very long history of overthrowing governments and attempting regime change since the mid-nineteenth century. There have been over 30 instances where the US has attempted or been successful in shaping or installing its own US friendly government in a foreign country. As citizens living in the US we are seldom exposed to these facts, and if we are it is usually when we hear buzzwords such as "fighting communism" or "spreading democracy". This inclusion of this information is not to present the United States in a morally condemning light, but simply to explore all motives behind its involvement in the conflict.

The recent US presidential election of Donald Trump has exposed Russian hacking and increased American fears over Russian influence in politics. However, Mr. Trump seems to want a friendly relationship with Russia and Vladimir Putin (DeYoung). This would be very beneficial to the resolution of the conflict if the United States and Russia could come to an agreement and work together to solve this crisis. We should encourage President Trump, President Putin, and their respective representatives to work on renewing cooperation between our two nations, for the good of the Syrian people.

Another reason for conflict could be religious differences between majority Shia Islam countries and majority Sunni Islam countries. For many centuries the two group have lived together with relative harmony, even to the point of intermarriage, and praying in the same mosques. Unfortunately though, that has all changed in the past few decades. "Islam's schism, simmering for fourteen centuries, doesn't explain all the political, economic, and geostrategic factors involved in these conflicts, but it has become one prism through which to understand the underlying tensions. Two countries that compete for the leadership of Islam, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, have used the sectarian divide to further their ambitions." (CFR). This can be seen in Syria, with Shia President Assad backed by Iran, and various rebel groups being sponsored by Saudi Arabia.

"Who started it" does not necessarily matter at this point in the crisis, action needs to be taken to prevent more innocent people from being killed in a conflict that they want no part of. Resolving the conflict in a

diplomatic way is the only way to rebuild this war torn landscape. The first step is a UN Security Council resolution banning the funding of rebel/extremist groups in the middle east. This is crucial in ending the flow of violence because if terrorists do not have guns and supplies they can not kill anyone. The second step will be working with the Assad government to reform its constitution and have a new, independently monitored election. If the country votes to keep Assad, then he stays, if they vote to remove him, he leaves. Research varies on account of bias, however Assad won the 2014 presidential election which has 70% participation and was monitored independently by several countries, however most western countries viewed the elections as rigged. After these actions the focus will be on humanitarian aid to those affected by the conflict. As for ISIS, coalition bombings should be increased to put pressure on the group. In addition, the UN needs to ban and investigate the illegal oil trade that ISIS uses to fund its operations. Without countries purchasing their oil as a means of income, the group will succumb to attrition within the next decade or so (Davis). Also, with no foreign allies whatsoever ISIS has no real chance of surviving much longer on its own. Finally, without arms, soldiers, and money coming in from foreign countries ending up in ISIS hands their growth will slow and eventually recede as the group lacks the means to run self sufficiently. The ideology of ISIS should also be suppressed by banning its propaganda from the internet. Punishments for not following these resolutions should be economic sanctions from UN members, effectively forcing countries to comply or face economic turmoil. The final solution that I would propose would be a peace summit between government and rebel groups, the United States and Russia, and other the minor powers involved in the conflict. Encouraging negotiation between Trump and Putin, and the Shia and Sunni states would allow for a diplomatic solution for all involved. These measures sound logical, but would be difficult to implement. However, the difficulty of negotiation should be far more favorable than the alternative of more and more death in Syria.

Solving this crisis is one of the most difficult issues facing our world today. Regardless of each factions motivations and reasons for fighting the conflict, there is only one clear loser so far: the Syrian people. Each side needs to focus more on what brings them together, not what breaks them apart. Whether Shia or Sunni, both are Muslims, and whether pro-rebel or pro-government, we are all human beings with rights that need to be respected. If governments can work together through the United Nations we can stop the funding of extremist groups and ISIS. Without money and guns these groups can not survive. By working with the Assad government and holding independently monitored elections we can promote democracy and reform how Syria is governed. The Assad government had agreed to drafting a new constitution in 2012 (CNN). If it means the end of the conflict we can be sure that they would be open to doing it again. Solving the crisis in Syria and the Middle East is a daunting task, but the benefits are too many to list. By resolving the armed conflict in the region humanitarian aid can resume, and Syrians will be able get the food, healthcare, and education that they so desperately need. More importantly, they can begin the pick up the pieces and rebuild what they once called their home.

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