

Syria: A Historical Perspective on the Current Crisis

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Background. For ten years, Syria has been changing, with reforms announced at all levels. They are applied gradually, but are drastic

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Syria's history dates back to 9,000 years before the Christian era. It was part of an area between the southern Iraqi marshes in the Gulf, the Zagros Mountains in the East, the Mediterranean Sea in the West and the Sinai. State borders did not exist. Because of its agricultural development and irrigation culture and the area's shape, it was called the "fertile crescent." Syria became a transit country for rulers from east and west, who crossed it in pursuit of power and wealth. Cultures from all directions left their traces in Syria. The Aramaeans were followed by the Assyrians, the Neo-Babylonians, Persians, and finally, Greek and Roman rulers. In the 7th Century of the Christian era, Damascus was the seat of the caliphate, capital of the Arabs and Islam. Under the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, Syria blossomed into an economic, political, spiritual and cultural center. Along the incense route from South Arabia, traders brought spices and precious pearls, along the Silk Road from the Far Eastern China they brought skillfully knitted silk fabrics to be sold in Syrian markets. Arab-Islamic rule under various dynasties reached from India to the Pyrenees, but it was unable to withstand the pressure from European and Turkish interests (Seljuk Turks). At the end of the 11th Century Frankish Crusaders began their campaign in the region; only 200 years later did this invasion come to an end.

The Ottomans conquered Syria in 1616 and divided the province into four administrative units: Aleppo, Damascus, Tripoli and Sidon (in modern Lebanon). The Ottoman Empire stretched to a similar extent as had the Islamic-Arab Empire of the Umayyads. The emerging nation-states in Europe fought against Ottoman expansion and attacked in turn the Levant and North Africa. European traders, missionaries, scientists and travelers have provided important information, with visions of the Orient offset by patronizing attitudes. In the 19th Century Napoleon led European colonialism into North Africa and the Middle East. French, British and Italians divided the region into spheres of influence.

Colonialism and independence

With the end of the Ottoman Empire during World War I, Europe was looking for "allies" in the region to enforce its interests. The British spy TE Lawrence "on behalf of his majesty" promised Prince Faisal of the Hashemite royal family in Mecca Arab independence in return for his cooperation against German and Ottoman rule. Anglo-Arabian troops moved to Damascus (1918) and Faisal in 1920 was elected king by a Syrian Provisional Congress. The

secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) had, however, divided the region between France and Great Britain. France received Syria and Lebanon, England got Iraq, and Transjordan/Palestine. French troops moved into Damascus and expelled Faisal to Palestine. The Treaty of Sèvres confirmed the new colonial situation. France separated Lebanon from Syria and founded a new state of "Greater Lebanon." In 1932, the confessional system was introduced in Lebanon with the political power today is distributed according to religion. The French divided the remaining area of Syria into four parts. The result were the districts of Aleppo, Latakia (where the Alawites were located), Damascus and Jebel Druze (Druze) to the south. France ceded the Northern District Alexandretta to Turkey in 1939; it became the province of Hatay. The Syrians rejected the French mandate. In 1925, Syria's liberation struggle began. The French struck with a vengeance, and in 1936 Damascus was bombed. In 1941, French President General Charles de Gaulle declared Syria independent, but did not accept the election in 1942 of the National Block in the parliamentary elections. Government politicians were arrested. In 1943 new elections took place and in 1945, Syria joined the United Nations and the Arab League. The last French troops left Syria in 1946, on April 17, which is when Syria celebrates its Independence Day.

Western domination in the 20th Century stirred up counter movements, which became the starting point of Arab nationalism and aroused the Arabs in their struggle for independence. But France and Britain left structural, economic and political tracks that have prevented or obstructed an independent national development in the region to date, and can be reactivated if required. The worst legacy was left by the Balfour Declaration (1917), in which Britain agreed with the aims of the Zionist movement; it declared a there to be a "national home" for the Jewish people to build in Palestine. This led to the establishment of the State of Israel in Palestine in 1948, with the Arab states voting against, but with the consent of the United Nations. Since 1967, Israel has also violated international law by occupying Arab land, including Syria's Golan Heights, which are economically, politically and militarily of strategic importance to Syria. Syria insists on their return. The Palestinians displaced from their homes in 1948 have been living in Syria, first in UN refugee camps that have become veritable neighborhoods of Damascus. Apart from the Syrian nationality, Palestinians enjoy the same rights as Syrians.

After independence (1946) Syrians created new parties, including in 1947, the Ba'ath Party, which in 1953 was renamed the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Internal political development was unstable; parliamentary elections were followed by coups and in 1951 the military seized power. In 1958, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was established with Egypt; it lasted only for a three-year period. In 1961 Syria declared itself the Syrian Arab Republic; in 1963, the Ba'ath Party took power in a coup. In 1967 Israel occupied Syria's Golan Heights during the Six-Day War, in 1970 Defense Minister Hafiz Al-Assad came to power in a bloodless coup, and in 1971 was confirmed by referendum as president of Syria and secretary general of the Ba'ath Party. He remained so until after his death in 2000, when his son, Bashar Al-Assad, succeeded him.

No war, no crisis in the region occurred without affecting Syria. The Yom Kippur War (1973), the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988), various wars against Iraq and confrontation with Turkey over the waters of the Euphrates — all of these put the Syrian state under constant pressure. When Egypt and Jordan made peace with Israel (1977-78), Syria became the spearhead of the regional resistance against Israel, back when Syrian had a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. As Western pressure on

Syria continued to increase, the power structures in the country solidified.

Probably the biggest domestic challenge of Hafiz Al-Assad came in 1982 in Hama from the Muslim Brotherhood, which rebelled against the rule of the Alawite Assad family. The Alawites are a small minority group of Shiite Muslims, who are centered in western Syria around the city of Latakia. Assad sent in the military, thousands were killed and the Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed. Secularism has been sacrosanct in Syria since then. Christian, Muslim, Alawite, Ismaili Muslims, Yazidis, Druze, Jews, all religions are respected but forbidden participation in politics. The same applies to the different ethnic groups; Syrian national identity is inviolable. Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, everyone can celebrate their traditional festivals and speak their language. But some are denied Syrian nationality, no group are allowed to intervene in the political arena with nationalist demands. That's the line in the sand.

Economic Development

The population of Syria is growing fast. There were 17.2 million people living there in 1999; by 2009 this had grown to just over 21 million people. In addition, there are around with a million Iraqi refugees and about 500,000 Palestinian refugees (from 1948 with their descendants).

Syria is an agricultural country; agriculture and the cultivation of cotton for textile production, fruit, vegetables and tobacco have made it possible for decades to make a living from the land. A long-standing drought, lack of the water-rich [Israeli occupied] Golan Heights and population growth have led to a huge water scarcity, limiting agriculture and cotton production. About 55 percent of Syria is considered as steppe, where about 1.5 million Bedouins live raising livestock. The drought turned the steppe into desert, which in the Northeast around Hassake gave rise to a dramatic exodus. The great cities of Syria have grown explosively in recent years. Damascus must provide today officially 4.12 million residents with electricity, water, work, schools, hospitals and food supplies. Unofficially, the capital's population may number as many as 7 million, with a belt of poverty around the cities getting bigger. By 2050 an estimated 75 percent of Syria's population will live in cities.

Next to water, oil is the main raw material, with national oil reserves now about 2.4 billion barrels, according to the Oil Ministry. Between 1980 and 1996, the rate of oil extraction rose steadily up to 600,000 barrels per day. Since then, it has decreased. The latest government plan estimates the decline in oil production in the next 15 years as up to 34 percent, with dramatic economic consequences. Because of a modernization of mining technology and the search for further deposits on land and in the Mediterranean, the gas resources are better used; they are now estimated at 280 billion cubic meters. Currently, gas production is 22.3 million cubic meters per day.

In recent years tourism has become an important source of income for Syria and provides about 13 percent of Syrian jobs, according to official figures today. Each regional crisis is felt on the sensitive tourism market; since the beginning of the year cancellations can be seen fluttering on the desks of Syrian tourist bureaus. The absolute low points for the tourism sector were the years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Lebanon War in 2006.

The recent conversion of the Syrian planned economy to a free market economy has

created new jobs and an emerging private sector. Economic elites, including from the Assad family, are able to benefit from corruption. The eleventh Five-Year Plan, which came into force in early 2011, provides for the establishment of 1.25 million new jobs. Women should be given special consideration, said former Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, Abdullah Al-Dardari in an interview with the monthly magazine Syria Today (January 2011). At the same time it further reduced subsidies, introduced a value added tax and “redistributed” the costs of electricity and water to save the state more revenue. Dardari was fired recently, along with the whole government. Many Syrians consider him responsible for making life in Syria more expensive and widening the gap between rich and poor. In the same interview Dardari said that on the contrary, consumption has increased particularly in a newly emerging middle class. This proves, he said, that income had risen more than prices.

Despite a tangible and visible economic development, there is still a poor outlook for finding well-paid jobs, and thus many Syrians leave their homeland in search of work. The majority find this work in the neighboring Arab states, the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Libya. Turkey and Cyprus also offer Syrians employment. Beyond the Arab world, millions of Syrians work in Latin America, the United States and Canada, and also in Europe. The Syrian diaspora contribute significantly to the economic development of the country by supporting their Syrian families financially. The state has loosened regulations in recent years — for example, regarding entry visas and the military draft — and made offers to entice the financially strong and scientific elite of the Syrian diaspora to return or to invest in their homeland.

“Damascus Spring”

That few people take advantage of this offer as had been hoped, has several reasons. Well-paid Syrians living abroad have to make concessions in terms of lower income and are often confronted with a strong hierarchical thinking and an opaque bureaucracy. The standard of living in Syria has improved, but the situation in education and health care leaves much to be desired. For people who are used to thinking freely and acting politically, living in Syria can be a big change. The state of emergency restricts press, organization, association and expression. Many feel that it is outdated to keep the leading role of the Ba’ath Party enshrined in the Constitution.

That was clear to Bashar Al-Assad when he took over from his father in 2000. The London-trained eye doctor had not sought the office, but the ruling Assad family and its affiliated network of power and interests apparently left him no choice. The upheavals of the time, the end of the bipolar world order, worked in the early period favorably for the reformist Assad. With his 35 years of age, he awoke for the youth of Syria — 60 percent of Syrians are under 25 years of age — hopes that there would be change. Assad gave them access to mobile phones, Internet and satellite television, which had been strictly forbidden by his father. About 15 per cent were involved in higher education, and the number of Internet users in proportion to total population is also 15 percent. Assad encouraged the Syrians to take part in discussions on political reforms throughout the country and set up Salons, in which the people debated the lifting of emergency rule, a new constitution, registration of new parties and a new relationship with Lebanon. Under the auspices of the president’s wife many non-governmental organizations were set up in which socially committed young people could work out many of their ideas.

The “Damascus Spring” came to an abrupt end with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The fear of a wider war against Syria was not unreasonable; the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair recently admitted that the then U.S. President George W. Bush and he had discussed an invasion of Syria. The state of emergency was reactivated in full force, and the intelligence agencies and security forces took over the helm. Discussion circles and salons were closed, prominent reformers arrested, and the Internet was sharply controlled. In 2004, the U.S. imposed an economic blockade against Syria, accusing it of “supporting terrorism.” Washington meant by this charge the strategic relations between Syria and Iran and Syria’s support for the resistance of Hezbollah (Lebanon) and Hamas (Gaza). The still-existing sanctions include a ban on trade and transfer of funds; flights between Syria and the United States do not exist.

For the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Feb. 14, 2005), the West, especially the former colonial power France, held Syria and Bashar Al-Assad personally responsible. The internal political repression worsened again. Assad recalled from Lebanon the Syrian troops, which had become unpopular there, and the Western pressure continued. The EU put an almost signed and sealed association agreement with Syria on ice. Assad rejected the allegations and amended Syria’s policy towards Lebanon. Through the mediation of Qatar and France, Syria and Lebanon established diplomatic relations in 2008. President Nicolas Sarkozy invited Assad to Paris for the inaugural meeting of a Mediterranean Union; Syria was back on the international stage. Last but not least, Turkey contributed to mediating a resumption of indirect talks between Syria and Israel, but Syria stopped immediately after the start of the Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip (December 2008). Syria had established an active policy of alliances across the world, a new reputation. The country today has political and economical not only with Iran and Qatar, but also with Russia, Japan and China and is also linked closely with Latin America. Syria meanwhile has close relations with Turkey.

Meanwhile, the U.S. (and the EU) began to recognize the key role of Syria in the Middle East peace process. Their strategy in the region has failed; that is shown not least by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain that have shaken a central pillar of the U.S. military. At that time there was hardly anyone on the street in Syria. Assad had earlier this year put in place social programs and amnesty for political prisoners.

Right to protest

No sooner had the approval gone through in February of the “social” medium Facebook, that had been prohibited in 2007, that an anonymous website “revolution Syria in 2011” called for rebellion. In the southern provincial capital Deraa protests took place in mid-March, when some youths who sprayed slogans against the president had been arrested. Police and security forces intervened, there were deaths and injuries, and the protests grew. Also in Homs and Latakia there were confrontations. Assad put down those responsible for the use of firearms and prohibited the use of live ammunition. Government officials visited the families of the dead, met with the population, and the young people were released. Assad’s spokeswoman announced far-reaching reforms. A bill repealing the state of emergency was to be presented shortly, as was a new party law and tougher laws against corruption. Hundreds of prisoners were released; the ban on female teachers wearing a face veil in class would be withdrawn. Kurds were to obtain full employment rights and their status as “stateless” persons were to be terminated. Assad dismissed the government and warned of a foreign plot to destabilize the country. That does not mean, according to Assad,

that the Syrians had no reason and no right to protest.

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