

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Syria's Civil War: The Dark Side

The brutal civil war currently raging in Syria is a complex conflict that has significant implications for both the United States and for Israel. Israel has vowed to stay out of this civil war but is worried that Hezbollah will obtain access to more sophisticated rockets and perhaps chemical weapons owned by Syria. Because the US has not taken leadership in aiding the rebel forces, Russia and Iran have filled that vacuum. Russia has promised a new shipment of rockets that could shoot down jets from the US, should a no-fly zone be declared, or from Israel, which has already used its air force to disrupt weapons transfers and to thwart Syria's attempt to build a nuclear facility with the help of North Korea. Iran's Revolutionary Guard is in Syria aiding the Assad regime and is clearly underwriting and encouraging Hezbollah's military support of Assad. Hezbollah has clearly ratcheted up its commitment to Syria--the military lifeline for this terrorist group. In addition, other Muslim nations, especially those of Sunni Islam, do not wish to see Syria, Iran and Hezbollah triumph in this civil war. The outcome of this horrific war has enormous implications for the Middle East and for the larger world's balance of power. In this edition of *Issues in Perspective*, I hope to unravel some of this mess in Syria.

- First, you really cannot understand the Syrian civil war without a focus on the Sunni-Shia split within Islam. Roughly 80% of the world's Muslims are Sunni, with Shia Islam obviously in the minority. The rivalry between these two Islamic factions is savage and worsening. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and some of the Arab Emirates of the Persian Gulf are agitating and both directly and indirectly supporting almost any action or development that undermines Iran—the Shia bastion and most militant nation state of Shia Islam. In Shia Islam, theology and geopolitics merge. In Syria, a Sunni majority is rebelling against the ruling elite whose Alawite beliefs are an offshoot of Shia Islam. The Sunnis of the world have supported and financed this rebellion against the Alawites. Only recently has the West taken a serious interest in this civil war, largely because of the growing slaughter that is now approaching 80,000 deaths, and the Assad regime has used chemical weapons against its rebel enemies. Why is there such an intense hatred between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam? The split between these two main groups harks back to the 7th century when a dispute arose over who would succeed Muhammad after he died in AD 632. The Sunnis (today over 1 billion in number) triumphed when Muhammad's chief lieutenant was chosen as the successor. The Shias (today over 100 million) believed that Muhammad's blood relative should succeed him, but lost the struggle over succession. Sunnis are rigid in their interpretation and application of the Koran and believe that many Shias are actually heretics—and have often brutally repressed Shia Muslims as a result. Shia Muslims have a unique eschatology in that they believe that the last of the 12 imams of Islam is alive and may appear very soon, ushering in the last days of history, which will result in the worldwide triumph of Islam. The Alawites of Syria are a strange offshoot of Shia Islam. Iran supports strongly the

Alawites, but the Sunnis regard the Alawites as heretics. Thus, to truly understand the brutality of Syria, one must understand the depths of hatred between the Sunnis and the Shia-Alawites of Syria: The passion and energy of Islamic theology now mesh with the geopolitical realities of Middle East.

- Second, the Syrian civil war should be viewed as a global proxy war. The major powers of both the region and the world are investing in one of the sides to promote or serve their respective interests. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah support Assad and his government. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia support the rebels. With significant numbers of both fighters and weapons, al Qaeda has increasingly become involved in supporting the rebels. The Muslim Brotherhood has also been involved. The United States has been hesitant, late and quite restricted in its support of the rebels. The Obama administration has called for Assad to step down but has done very little to effect that. What is especially troubling is that Russia has been supplying a significant amount of weapons to Assad, most recently its commitment to supply its own S-300 antiaircraft missiles to the Assad regime. Hezbollah has just begun supplying fresh troops to support Assad, which has proved decisive in thwarting any additional advances by the rebels. In fact, this past week the rebels surrendered a small town, Qusayr, on the border between Lebanon and Syria, to the Assad regime largely because Hezbollah fighters made the difference for Assad. President Obama has declared several times that if Assad uses chemical or biological weapons against the rebels, a “red line” will have been crossed. Those weapons have been used by Assad—and the US has done nothing of consequence. So, Russia and Iran, let alone Hezbollah, see no reason to stop supporting Assad. In fact, no one believes Obama anymore when it comes to Syria, so they act accordingly. Columnist Michael Gerson argues persuasively that “It is increasingly argued that the United States needs to fish or cut bait in Syria—which assumes that bait-cutting is even an option. Disengagement would shift the worst case once again: further spreading cross-border radicalization, refugee flows and uncontainable Shiite-Sunni warfare across the Middle East. Iran would see a United States unable or unwilling to accomplish its goals in the region and draw the obvious conclusions.” The current administration has been pivoting more toward Asia and away from the Middle East, with very little success. But as Robert Kagan is the Brookings Institute maintains, “The present world order is seamless, and so is the global strategy necessary to sustain it. . . For decades the United States has been able to provide security and remain engaged in three major theaters at once: Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Today those theaters are more interconnected, economically, and strategically, than ever.” As the US has withdrawn from any semblance of leadership in Syria, Russia and Iran have filled that vacuum. Because Syria has chemical weapons and because it borders on our primary regional ally—Israel—disengagement must not be an option for the US.
- Third, Syria is now a massive humanitarian catastrophe: Over 80,000 Syrians have died and more than a million Syrians have fled their nation. As historian Victor Davis Hanson observes, “Barbarity is now commonplace in the Syria war.” The prolonged fighting ensures that such brutal cycles of violence will continue—and there are no major reasons why such barbarism will cease. Indeed, Hanson declares that, “Neither side—if there are indeed two sides, rather than four or five—is democratic. Both Syrian soldiers and

militias know there is scant chance of postwar punishment for their barbarism. The killing is not merely over the future of Syria: It is also a religious struggle between Shiite and Sunni Muslims, framed by a parallel fight between Baathist authoritarianism and theocratic Islamism.” Thus, whatever the result, the next Syria will be just as brutal and just as undemocratic. The so-called Arab Spring is not producing more moderate regimes. Instead, a more fanatical and more violent Middle East seems to be emerging—and caught in the middle is the only real democratic nation in the region—Israel. May God protect and preserve His people.

See *The Economist* (12 May 2012), pp. 66-67; Robert Kagan in the *Washington Post* (20 November 2012); Michael Gerson and Richard Cohen both in the *Washington Post* (5 June 2013); and Victor David Hanson in the *Wall Street Journal* (30 May 2013).