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By Max Fisher and the Washington Post Foreign Staff



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9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask

By Max Fisher, Published: August 29 at 12:50 pm [E-mail the writer](#)



GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

The United States and allies are preparing for a possibly imminent series of limited military strikes against Syria, the first direct U.S. intervention in the two-year civil war, in retaliation for President Bashar al-Assad's suspected use of chemical weapons against civilians.

If you found the above sentence kind of confusing, or aren't exactly sure why Syria is fighting a civil war, or even where Syria is located, then this is the article for you. What's happening in Syria is really important, but it can also be confusing and difficult to follow even for those of us glued to it.

Here, then, are the most basic answers to your most basic questions. First, a disclaimer: Syria and its history are really complicated; this is not an exhaustive or definitive account of that entire story, just some background, written so that anyone can understand it.

[Read the rest of our “9 questions you were too embarrassed to ask” series here](#)

1. What is Syria?

Syria is a country in the Middle East, along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It's about the same size as Washington state with a population a little over three times as large – 22 million. Syria is very diverse, ethnically and religiously, but most Syrians are ethnic Arab and follow the Sunni branch of Islam. Civilization in Syria goes back thousands of years, but the country as it exists today is very young. Its borders were drawn by European colonial powers in the 1920s.

Syria is in the middle of an extremely violent civil war. Fighting between government forces and rebels has killed more 100,000 and created 2 million refugees, [half of them children](#).

2. Why are people in Syria killing each other?

The killing started in April 2011, when peaceful protests inspired by earlier revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia rose up to challenge the dictatorship running the country. The government responded — there is no getting around this — like monsters. First, security forces quietly killed activists. Then they started kidnapping, raping, torturing and killing activists and their family members, [including a lot of children](#), dumping their mutilated bodies by the sides of roads. Then troops began simply opening fire on protests. Eventually, civilians started shooting back.

Fighting escalated from there until it was a civil war. Armed civilians organized into rebel groups. The army deployed across the country, shelling and bombing whole neighborhoods and towns, trying to terrorize people into submission. They've also allegedly used chemical weapons, which is a big deal for reasons I'll address below. Volunteers from other countries joined the rebels, either because they wanted freedom and democracy for Syria or, more likely, because they are jihadists who hate Syria's secular government. The rebels were gaining ground for a while and now it looks like Assad is coming back. There is no end in sight.

3. That's horrible. But there are protests lots of places. How did it all go so wrong in Syria? And, please, just give me the short version.

That's a complicated question, and there's no single, definitive answer. This is the shortest possible version — stay with me, it's worth it. You might say, broadly speaking, that there are two general theories. Both start with the idea that Syria has been a powder keg waiting to explode for decades and that it was set off, maybe inevitably, by the 2011 protests and especially by the government's overly harsh crackdown.

Before we dive into the theories, you have to understand that the Syrian government really overreacted when peaceful protests started in mid-2011, slaughtering civilians unapologetically, which was a big part of how things escalated as quickly as they did. Assad learned this from his father. In 1982, Assad's father and then-dictator Hafez al-Assad responded to a Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising in the city of Hama [by leveling entire neighborhoods](#). He killed thousands of civilians, many of whom had nothing to do with the uprising. But it worked, and it looks like the younger Assad tried to reproduce it. His failure made the descent into chaos much worse.

Okay, now the theories for why Syria spiraled so wildly. The first is what you might call “sectarian re-balancing” or “[the Fareed Zakaria case](#)” for why Syria is imploding (he didn’t invent this argument but is a major proponent). Syria has artificial borders that were created by European colonial powers, forcing together an amalgam of diverse religious and ethnic groups. Those powers also tended to promote a minority and rule through it, worsening preexisting sectarian tensions.

Zakaria’s argument is that what we’re seeing in Syria is in some ways the inevitable re-balancing of power along ethnic and religious lines. He compares it to the sectarian bloodbath in Iraq after the United States toppled Saddam Hussein, after which a long-oppressed majority retook power from, and violently punished, the former minority rulers. Most Syrians are Sunni Arabs, but the country is run by members of a minority sect known as Alawites (they’re ethnic Arab but follow a smaller branch of Islam). The Alawite government rules through a repressive dictatorship and [gives Alawites special privileges](#), which makes some Sunnis and other groups hate Alawites in general, which in turn makes Alawites fear that they’ll be slaughtered en masse if Assad loses the war. (There are other minorities as well, such as ethnic Kurds and Christian Arabs; too much to cover in one explainer.) Also, lots of Syrian communities are already organized into ethnic or religious enclaves, which means that community militias are also sectarian militias. That would explain why so much of the killing in Syria has developed along sectarian lines. It would also suggest that there’s not much anyone can do to end the killing because, in Zakaria’s view, this is a painful but unstoppable process of re-balancing power.

The second big theory is a bit simpler: that the Assad regime was not a sustainable enterprise and it’s clawing desperately on its way down. Most countries have some kind of self-sustaining political order, and it looked for a long time like Syria was held together by a cruel and repressive but basically stable dictatorship. But maybe it wasn’t stable; maybe it was built on quicksand. Bashar al-Assad’s father Hafez seized power in a coup in 1970 after two decades of extreme political instability. His government was a product of Cold War meddling and a kind of Arab political identity crisis that was sweeping the region. But he picked the losing sides of both: the Soviet Union was his patron, and he followed a hard-line anti-Western nationalist ideology that’s now mostly defunct. The Cold War is long over, and most of the region long ago made peace with Israel and the United States; the Assad regime’s once-solid ideological and geopolitical identity is hopelessly outdated. But Bashar al-Assad, who took power in 2000 when his father died, never bothered to update it. So when things started going belly-up two years ago, he didn’t have much to fall back on except for his ability to kill people.

4. I hear a lot about how Russia still loves Syria, though. And Iran, too. What’s their deal?

Yeah, Russia is Syria’s most important ally. Moscow blocks the United Nations Security Council from passing anything that might hurt the Assad regime, which is why the United States has to go around the United Nations if it wants to do anything. Russia sends lots of weapons to Syria that make it easier for Assad to keep killing civilians and will make it much harder if the outside world ever wants to intervene.

The four big reasons that Russia wants to protect Assad, the importance of which vary depending on whom you ask, are: (1) Russia has a naval installation in Syria, which is strategically important and Russia’s [last foreign military base](#) outside the former Soviet

Union; (2) Russia still has a bit of a Cold War mentality, as well as a touch of national insecurity, which makes it care very much about maintaining one of its last military alliances; (3) Russia also hates the idea of “international intervention” against countries like Syria because it sees this as Cold War-style Western imperialism and ultimately a threat to Russia; (4) Syria buys a lot of Russian military exports, and Russia needs the money.

Iran’s thinking in supporting Assad is more straightforward. It perceives Israel and the United States as existential threats and uses Syria to protect itself, shipping arms through Syria to the Lebanon-based militant group Hezbollah and the Gaza-based militant group Hamas. Iran is already feeling isolated and insecure; it worries that if Assad falls it will lose a major ally and be cut off from its militant proxies, leaving it very vulnerable. So far, it looks like Iran is actually coming out ahead: Assad is even more reliant on Tehran than he was before the war started.

5. This is all feeling really bleak and hopeless. Can we take a music break?

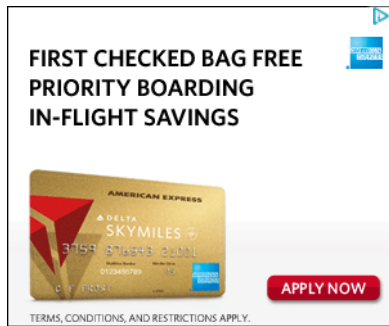
Oh man, it gets so much worse. But, yeah, let’s listen to some music from Syria. It’s really good!

If you want to go old-school you should listen to the man, the legend, the great Omar Souleyman (playing Brooklyn this Saturday!). Or, if you really want to get your revolutionary on, listen to the infectious 2011 anti-Assad anthem “Come on Bashar leave.” The singer, a cement mixer who made Rage Against the Machine look like Enya, was killed for performing it in Hama. But let’s listen to something non-war and bit more contemporary, the soulful and foot-tappable George Wassouf:

Hope you enjoyed that, because things are about to go from depressing to despondent.

6. Why hasn’t the United States fixed this yet?

Because it can’t. There are no viable options. Sorry.



The military options are all bad. Shipping arms to rebels, even if it helps them topple Assad, would ultimately empower jihadists and worsen rebel in-fighting, probably leading to lots of chaos and possibly a second civil war (the United States made this mistake during Afghanistan's early 1990s civil war, which helped the Taliban take power in 1996). Taking out Assad somehow would probably do the same, opening up a dangerous power vacuum. Launching airstrikes or a "no-fly zone" could suck us in, possibly for years, and probably wouldn't make much difference on the ground. An Iraq-style ground invasion would, in the very best outcome, accelerate the killing, cost a lot of U.S. lives, wildly exacerbate anti-Americanism in a boon to jihadists and nationalist dictators alike, and would require the United States to impose order for years across a country full of people trying to kill each other. Nope.

The one political option, which the Obama administration has been pushing for, would be for the Assad regime and the rebels to strike a peace deal. But there's no indication that either side is interested in that, or that there's even a viable unified rebel movement with which to negotiate.

It's possible that there was a brief window for a Libya-style military intervention early on in the conflict. But we'll never really know.

7. So why would Obama bother with strikes that no one expects to actually solve anything?

Okay, you're asking here about the Obama administration's not-so-subtle signals that it wants to launch some cruise missiles at Syria, which would be punishment for what it says is Assad's use of chemical weapons against civilians.

It's true that basically no one believes that this will turn the tide of the Syrian war. But this is important: it's not supposed to. The strikes wouldn't be meant to shape the course of the war or to topple Assad, which Obama thinks would just make things worse anyway. They would be meant to punish Assad for (allegedly) using chemical weapons and to deter him, or any future military leader in any future war, from using them again.

8. Come on, what's the big deal with chemical weapons? Assad kills 100,000 people with bullets and bombs but we're freaked out over 1,000 who maybe died from poisonous gas? That seems silly.

You're definitely not the only one who thinks the distinction is arbitrary and artificial. But there's a good case to be made that this is a rare opportunity, at least in theory, for the United States to make the war a little bit less terrible — and to make future wars less terrible.

The whole idea that there are rules of war is a pretty new one: the practice of war is thousands of years old, but the idea that we can regulate war to make it less terrible has

been around for less than a century. The institutions that do this are weak and inconsistent; the rules are frail and not very well observed. But one of the world's few quasi-successes is the "norm" (a fancy way of saying a rule we all agree to follow) against chemical weapons. This norm is frail enough that Syria could drastically weaken it if we ignore Assad's use of them, but it's also strong enough that it's worth protecting. So it's sort of a low-hanging fruit: firing a few cruise missiles doesn't cost us much and can maybe help preserve this really hard-won and valuable norm against chemical weapons.

You didn't answer my question. That just tells me that we can maybe preserve the norm against chemical weapons, not why we should.

Fair point. Here's the deal: war is going to happen. It just is. But the reason that the world got together in 1925 for the Geneva Convention to ban chemical weapons is because this stuff is really, really good at killing civilians but not actually very good at the conventional aim of warfare, which is to defeat the other side. You might say that they're maybe 30 percent a battlefield weapon and 70 percent a tool of terror. In a world without that norm against chemical weapons, a military might fire off some sarin gas because it wants that battlefield advantage, even if it ends up causing unintended and massive suffering among civilians, maybe including its own. And if a military believes its adversary is probably going to use chemical weapons, it has a strong incentive to use them itself. After all, they're fighting to the death.

So both sides of any conflict, not to mention civilians everywhere, are better off if neither of them uses chemical weapons. But that requires believing that your opponent will never use them, no matter what. And the only way to do that, short of removing them from the planet entirely, is for everyone to just agree in advance to never use them and to really mean it. That becomes much harder if the norm is weakened because someone like Assad got away with it. It becomes a bit easier if everyone believes using chemical weapons will cost you a few inbound U.S. cruise missiles.

That's why the Obama administration apparently wants to fire cruise missiles at Syria, even though it won't end the suffering, end the war or even really hurt Assad that much.

9. Hi, there was too much text so I skipped to the bottom to find the big take-away. What's going to happen?

Short-term maybe the United States and some allies will launch some limited, brief strikes against Syria and maybe they won't. Either way, these things seem pretty certain in the long-term:

- The killing will continue, probably for years. There's no one to sign a peace treaty on the rebel side, even if the regime side were interested, and there's no foreseeable victory for either. Refugees will continue fleeing into neighboring countries, causing instability and an entire other humanitarian crisis as conditions in the camps worsen.
- Syria as we know it, an ancient place with a rich and celebrated culture and history, will be a broken, failed society, probably for a generation or more. It's very hard to see how you rebuild a functioning state after this. Maybe worse, it's hard to see how you get back to a working social contract where everyone agrees to get along.
- Russia will continue to block international action, the window for which has maybe

closed anyway. The United States might try to pressure, cajole or even horse-trade Moscow into changing its mind, but there's not much we can offer them that they care about as much as Syria.

- At some point the conflict will cool, either from a partial victory or from exhaustion. The world could maybe send in some peacekeepers or even broker a fragile peace between the various ethnic, religious and political factions. Probably the best model is Lebanon, which fought a brutal civil war that lasted 15 years from 1975 to 1990 and has been slowly, slowly recovering ever since. It had some bombings just last week.

More from WorldViews on Syria:

- [The one map that shows why Syria is so complicated](#)
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- [Here's why Obama is giving up the element of surprise in Syria](#)

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This post has been updated.



Max Fisher is the Post's foreign affairs blogger. He has a master's degree in security studies from Johns Hopkins University. Sign up for his daily newsletter [here](#). Also, follow him on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).



The nonmilitary options in Syria



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Proudgrandmom wrote:
7:26 AM PDT

Thank you for this article, which has presented some extremely complex issues in much more comprehensible fashion than anything else that I have seen to date in the US "mainstream media."

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**bjh** wrote:

7:22 AM PDT

I got to point 2 before I realized this report is a propaganda piece. The idea that Syria used chemical weapons is ridiculous - just as ridiculous as this 'article'.

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**aluric** wrote:

7:14 AM PDT

odd thing about it

- If this was a civil uprising or revolt in this country, how many other countries would be looking to jump in or get involved??

How would the federal government react to such incursion IN THE PAST? We have no business going in to a country, that not only did not ask for our help or aid; but no one else as a nation is looking to go in, there is no morale outrage - and both sides involved in the INTERNAL conflict are basically out to get even with the USA for the slights they feel we have made to either their nation or their various faiths... Not for nothing but up till now we have been hunting and fight Al-Qaida - and they are the other side in this

BUT MAYBE JUST MAYBE - ITS WHAT OBMAN WANTS - GO IN START A WAR THAT CAUSES AMERICIANS TO REVOLT AND RIOT IN THE USA - AND LET THE "UN" COME IN TO "HELP"....

All the people who are screaming conspiracy think its the case; dam near all those who worry about the present government in the USA trying to override and overrule the constitution are worried about it.... Any one looking at the massive purchases made all of a sudden by the various agencies of the US government between FEMA, DHS, FBI, Secret Service - and see the shortages of ammunition, and gun combined with all the intensive attempts to now get law abiding people into either registered potential threats to the locl and nation government agencies - or made into criminals because they own something banned... it all paints some very disturbing forecasts in pictures of what's coming ahead....

Any other time any other day any other president, congress, and judiciary I would be the first one to say it would never happen - THIS TIME -Well I pray I don't get the opportunity to say I told you so...

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**raywilliams** wrote:

7:10 AM PDT

Loved the map of the region. I see many neighboring nations with a vested interest in Syria.

When they join forces, pick a side, invade and sort out the winner THEN perhaps the US should take an interest in the rebuilding process.

Until then, I see two side who both hate the US ... so F'em both and let the killing continue.

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**inflight** wrote:

7:06 AM PDT

Easily the best rundown on Syria I've read, thanks. I'd argue the time to act was 1+ years ago before some of the actors were as entrenched and the situation was less brittle and subject to blowback. Acting now may be the worst option possible, with no element of surprise, Russia and Iran foaming at the mouth and only France behind us as allies. Ii frankly am unimpressed with our efforts so far, making us look petty and ineffective, about the worst thing imaginable in this situation. International power politics favors the patient and determined.

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**msbpodcats** wrote:

7:01 AM PDT

So why don't we drop an H-bomb? Just one, in Damascus. Blow it back to its constituent atoms. Make sure that the world knows that we're not happy with any them.

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Morrie wrote:
6:43 AM PDT

There have been limits on war for centuries.

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aonewhoknows wrote:
6:36 AM PDT

This is pure propaganda. This is the same crap that was passed as facts with saddam gassing his people and then WMD's that didn't exist. They aren't even sure who did the gassing, rebels or the gov't! Let the UN handle it.. it's their job. We are not the world police, nor can we afford another war bill. This issue began with Israel and Syria. If Israel still has a beef with them then let them deal with it, but stop dragging our country into it.

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@magguyenn wrote:
6:35 AM PDT

So why don't we fall in BEHIND the Arab League...in supporting THEIR response...whatever that is? Wouldn't that be far less diplomatically risky? Haven't we already provided several of the League member countries with serious military hardware, aviation assets, etc.?

Like Liked by 2 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse



redbird7 wrote:
6:31 AM PDT

Excellent article. Smart and well written. Thank you, Max, for that. You've given me more insights into the Syrian situation and dilemma than I ever had before. Sure glad I'm not in Obama's shoes.

I'm passing this on to others who will be equally interested.

Like Liked by 2 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse



DavidGonzales responds:
6:56 AM PDT

I just finished reading the article and concur 100% with your opinion, redbird. Excellent article, though the contents are sad and depressing. Aside from the political chaos in Syria, there is really a need to scare countries away from using chemical weapons, as this article states.

When I was in the US Army, one sergeant told us about a once-planned weapon that would blind enemy troops (terrible!), but it was stopped due to the same reasons chemical weapons are banned.

And you're right, I wouldn't want to be in Obama's shoes either.

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publius18 responds:
7:12 AM PDT

A nice little primer with a light touch.

One critique - rules of war are much older than a century.

Christianity was a big influence on rules of war, most famously with St. Augustine's Just War Theory - which is still largely the parameters we use today.

Christian Kings and soldiers since the Middle Ages were expected to spare civilians, take prisoners, fight in self-defense or a just cause, etc. Whether they always did is another matter.

The American Revolution and Civil War were prime examples of wars fought under pretty strict adherence to rules - perhaps more civilized rules than we have today.

Just one point of overstatement in an otherwise good piece of writing.

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Add your thoughts...



John L. Clark wrote:
6:28 AM PDT

I think that, while on the topic of embarrassing questions about Syria, it might have been good to toss one out about the actual groups responsible for the two chemical weapons attacks this year.

<http://www.mintpressnews.com/witnesses-of-gas-atta...>

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srg10 wrote:
6:25 AM PDT

I would think that someone with such leading questions (#7 & #8, which actually includes a statement) would know quite a bit about the situation already.

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BBWeekly wrote:
6:24 AM PDT

A decent summary, although I think it overstates the government's reaction to the protests at the beginning of the war. But it does fail to emphasize, with its laundry list of ethnic groups, that the government is secular and the rebels are largely religious.

I have nothing against religion, but I do have a problem with religion taking itself too seriously. Religious extremists are far more dangerous than secular fighters, because I think that all of us can understand taking out a few people in the name of maintaining power and money. But doing something in the name of religion is foreign and scary.

I think that the secular government maintaining power would probably be better for the world in the long run, in many areas: (1) the security of Israel. (2) tourism (3) protection of historical sites (4) Western access to the country.

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Not Blue, Not Red responds:
7:01 AM PDT

Serious question for you, and no I am not anti-semitic. But why the knee-jerk, standard reaction to events in the middle east regarding the "security of israel". I mean.....1) it's a foreign country far, far away 2) It has taken from us WAY more than it gives back 3) Israel's "security" often comes at the security/freedom/dignity of many other groups in the region who then accuse the US of being the problem, which just creates more enemies for us.

So why.....do you, and so many others really care about Israel at all? Because they're a "special ally"?

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Add your thoughts...



Bonnie-Clyde Barrow wrote:
6:18 AM PDT

"Case against Syria said to include intercepts of regime planning attack".

REALLY, Snowden let the entire world know that the NSA/USA listens to every conversation there is. Are we to believe a nation discussed using chemical weapons via a method that could be intercepted? On top of that, as Putin points out, Syria was winning with no problem. Why would Syria use chemical weapons? This was a

set-up....

Like Liked by 3 readers · Reply · Share · Report Abuse



Not Blue, Not Red responds:
7:03 AM PDT

"Syria was winning with no problem".....maybe you haven't been paying attention long enough.
"No problem" maintains a strange place in your vocabulary

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publius18 responds:
7:13 AM PDT

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The American Revolution and Civil War were prime examples of wars fought under pretty strict adherence to rules - perhaps more civilized rules than we have today.

Just one point of overstatement in an otherwise good piece of writing.

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Add your thoughts...



George Sos wrote:
6:04 AM PDT

you skipped the question "who benefits from the war in syria (and in allother places as a matter of fact).It is the US ,UK France and the rest of the weapon making death-selling countries...and syria ewill be attacked opnly because there is a crisis looming over the west.The only way they can get the economy going,is war.whyy?because the last centruy or so ,countries have created a business around weapons making that is worth half at least their GDP.So if they want to move the economy they have to sell death and war...what is you dont understand?...

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