

Syria

What's happening in Syria?

Syria has been mired in conflict since March 2011, after a popular revolt in Tunisia sparked uprisings across the Arab world. Unlike in Egypt, where the military enabled the overthrow of 30-year ruler Hosni Mubarak, or in Libya, where foreign forces helped topple dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Syrian rebels received very little support from the international community, and the United Nations repeatedly failed to reach a consensus on sanctions against the nation's government, led by President Bashar al-Assad. President Assad, who was elected in 2000 and 2007 (he ran unopposed each time), inherited his father Hafez's presidency and imposed on the country a regime that has systematically suppressed criticism and opposition, with internet monitoring, torture, and travel bans. When people in Hama (200 km/130 miles north of capital Damascus) began to protest, asking for reforms and civil rights, the government responded with brutal repression, killing thousands of people in a few months.

Why should you know about this?

Syria has long had good relations with many U.S. enemies, helping Iran send weapons to Hezbollah, an Islamic organization based in Lebanon and classified as terrorist in many Western countries. The Syrian government also enjoys help from Russia, which vetoed sanction resolutions at the U.N. and is suspected of providing Assad's forces with weapons. Syria is of major importance for the U.S. Middle East policy. Still, despite multiple calls for a Libya-style intervention, President Barack Obama has been reluctant to act openly, although it has come to light that he ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to provide rebels with tactical support earlier this year. This decision stops short of handing out weapons, but it seems to have increased the effectiveness of the opposition in its attacks.

What now?

The Red Cross gave the Syrian conflict the status of civil war, which means those involved can be prosecuted for war crimes in an international court of law. In fact, the U.N. investigation concluded Assad's regime was guilty of war crimes. The first U.N. peace mission, led by special envoy Kofi Annan, failed, but a new mediator was appointed: Lakhdar Brahimi has much experience in the Middle East. Even still, the situation is complicated. Opportunistic Islamic groups are joining rebel ranks to help them fight the Syrian army, hinting at possible strife and instability later on. While French President François Hollande said France would recognize a transitional government after Assad's fall, the U.S. are cautious and won't support a coalition that would include extremists. Hopes for a political solution are fading fast, and President Barack Obama, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, and President Hollande all warned Assad against using chemical and biological weapons. Egypt and the League of Arab countries have condemned the actions of the Syrian government and called for Assad to step down. Iran has expressed support for President Assad, although many diplomats, soldiers, and government officials have defected, denouncing the violence of his actions. Assad said the war was not over, but government officials opened the door to resignation talks. President Abdullah II of Jordan said Assad may look to create an Alawite enclave should he not be able to hold on to Greater Syria. Alawites (or Alawis) are a religious group of which the Assad family is part. They are based in Syria and describe themselves as Shia Muslims. Creating an enclave could lead to the break-up of the country along sectarian lines. Ending the conflict has become even more urgent now that it has spilled over into Lebanon, where violence is increasing between Sunnis and Alawites.

Related Stories

World Great Powers at Odds on Syria While War Spills Onto Lebanon

Three days after U.S. President Barack Obama said the Syrian government would face “**enormous consequences**” should it decide to turn chemical and biological weapons against the rebels, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron echoed the warning, stating that such a move would be “**completely unacceptable**,” and would “force them to revisit their approach so far.” Cameron also talked to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande about ways to help Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s opponents, and to decide on a plan to facilitate the transition “after the inevitable fall of Assad.” China, through its official press agency Xinhua, accused “western powers” of “**digging deep for excuses** to intervene militarily in another conflict-torn Middle East country,” following the **Russian stance**. Meanwhile the Syrian conflict is stirring violence in Lebanon, where **sectarian strife between Sunnis and Alawites** in Tripoli resumed after less than a day of ceasefire. Lebanese Alawites, a Muslim sect that originated in Syria and supports Assad, are a minority in Sunni-dominated Lebanon. Sunni fighters in Tripoli have sided with Syrian rebels. *(Aug. 23, 2012)*

Syria Prepared to Discuss Assad Resignation in Talks

Syria’s Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Qadri Jamil said today **the government is prepared to discuss the resignation** of President Bashar al-Assad in negotiations that would end the 17 month conflict, so long as resignation isn’t a condition to the talks themselves. “As far as his resignation goes, making the resignation itself a condition for holding dialogue means that you will never be able to reach this dialogue,” Jamil said. “But any problems

can be discussed during negotiations. We are even ready to discuss this issue.” Both rebels and western countries have made this issue a condition to engaging in settlement talks, a demand Jamil rejected. Violence continues in the country: **one Japanese journalist was killed** in Aleppo and two other reporters are missing. At least 19 journalists in total have been killed since the conflict began, the Committee to Protect Journalists said. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov **warned the U.S. against intervening in Syria** a day after President Barack Obama threatened Assad’s regime with “enormous consequences” should it seek to use biological and chemical weapons. Meanwhile, French President François **Hollande met with the leader of Syria’s main opposition group** Abdel Basset Sayda. He also met yesterday with new United Nations Peace Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. The civil war has claimed between 17,000 (U.N. figure) and 23,000 (according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) lives since it started. *(Aug. 21, 2012)*

Obama Warns Syria Against Using Chemical Weapons

U.S. President Barack Obama said today Syrian President Bashar al-Assad would face “**enormous consequences**” should he decide to move chemical and biological weapons in a threatening way, or use them against the rebels. These are the strongest words coming from the U.S. since the conflict started. President Obama has been reluctant to arm the rebels, who count extremist Islamic factions among them. Meanwhile, the civil war continued to spread: the Meqdad clan abducted **20 Syrians in Lebanon**, as well as a Turkish citizen, in reprisal for the kidnapping of Hassan al-Meqdad, a member of the family, by Syrian rebels. Displacements continued, with the number of refugees reaching 170,000 in neighboring countries, almost 70,000 of whom are in Turkey. Syrian **rockets also fell on Jordan’s territory**, the AFP reports, injuring a young girl. *(Aug. 20, 2012)*

Syrian Government Guilty of War Crimes, U.N. Says

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime is **guilty of having committed war crimes**, a United Nations panel concluded after an investigation into the Houla massacre, perpetrated on May 25 of this year. Houla is a small region near the city of Homs, north of Damascus. The U.N. said **108 people, including 49 children, died** at the hands of Assad's soldiers and pro-regime militiamen. The government insisted the opposition committed those murders, calling them acts of terrorism. Today a **bomb exploded** near a hotel where U.N. workers were staying. Rebels, who claimed the attack, said it targeted Syrian government security forces. Meanwhile, the conflict also seems to have **exported itself to Lebanon**, as a Lebanese Shi'ite family abducted 30 Syrian citizens in retribution for the kidnapping of some of their family members by the Syrian opposition. Fearing escalating violence, the United Arab Emirates told its own citizens to **leave Lebanon** without delay. *(Aug. 15, 2012)*

Former Syrian PM Says Assad's Regime Is 'Collapsing'

Riad Farid Hijab, the Syrian Prime Minister who defected last week, said today President Bashar al-Assad's regime is "**falling apart morally, materially, economically**," adding that "its military is rusting, and it only controls 30 percent of Syria's territory." He spoke at a press conference in Jordan's capital, Amman. Hijab explained that many other Syrian leaders were also waiting to defect. His departure prompted the U.S. to remove his name from a blacklist and unfreeze his assets. Syria is facing increased diplomatic isolation after the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation** recommended the suspension of the country's membership at a **meeting** in Saudi Arabia yesterday. Meanwhile, France, the U.K., and the U.S. are rethinking their support to Syrian rebels,

trying to **focus their efforts on specific groups** to avoid dealing with extremist Islamic factions that have infiltrated the opposition's ranks. *(Aug. 14, 2012)*

SYRIAN REBELS CALL FOR NO-FLY ZONE

Syrian rebel leaders **called for foreign support** today, asking for the creation of no-fly zones and safe havens near the borders with Jordan and Turkey. Rebels also said they **shot down one of the government's planes** in Eastern Syria, though President Bashar al-Assad's regime claims that the fall was due to a technical fault. Assad's forces have been using heavy artillery in Aleppo, but also in Damascus, which the opposition is trying to retake. The government said they would **welcome a dialogue with the rebels**, on the condition that it be supervised by President Assad. King Abdullah II of Jordan said last week Assad could seek to **create an Alawite enclave** in the country if he continues to lose ground. *(Aug. 13, 2012)*

SYRIAN PRIME MINISTER DEFECTS

Syrian rebels and the country's official media said today the country's Prime Minister Riad Hijab defected, two months into his term. He said through a spokesman he left Bashar al-Assad's regime, **which he called "terrorist, murderous,"** and called himself "a soldier of this holy revolution." White House Spokesman Jay Carney said this is "a sign that Assad's grip on power is loosening." The state-run **media initially tried to pass his departure off as a dismissal.** It also denied reports that the Finance Minister also defected. *(Aug. 6, 2012)*

SYRIAN REBELS HAVE U.S. SUPPORT

U.S. President Barack Obama **signed a secret order** earlier this year, authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency and others to support Syrian rebels. While it does not provide for lethal weapons, international observers have noticed increased organization and efficiency among opposition forces in recent weeks. There are still fears that the conflict is giving Al-Qaeda groups a chance to establish themselves, turning it into a **war between Sunnis and Shi'ites**. Human rights activists condemned the **public execution** of four Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's loyalists in Aleppo yesterday. As **violence continued in the country's commercial capital**, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said **this battle is the "nail in Assad's coffin."** **Saudis raised \$117 million** to help the Syrian people with much-needed cash, but also with cars and medical equipment. One million people were displaced, and as many as 122,000 left Syria altogether. *(Aug. 1, 2012)*

SYRIAN FORCES AND REBELS CLAIM VICTORIES IN ALEPPO

Contradictory reports came from Syria's commercial capital Aleppo today, as both Syrian forces and rebels claimed to have gained ground in the city. The opposition denied that the military, armed with warplanes and helicopters, had "purged" the neighborhood of Salaheddin, and said they had captured a military checkpoint at the north of the town. Meanwhile, reports came that jihadists, more specifically groups tied to Al Qaeda, are playing a **bigger role in the uprising**, and could soon **join rebels in Aleppo**, filling a vacuum left by the international community's reluctance to intervene. Bashar al-Assad's regime did suffer a new blow when **Syria's chargé d'affaires in London** defected, saying he was "no longer willing to represent a regime that has committed such violent and oppressive acts against its own people." French foreign affairs minister Laurent Fabius said today he will request an **urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council** to discuss Syria, as soon as France takes over the Council's rotating presidency on Wednesday. *(Jul. 30, 2012)*

SYRIA CONFLICT GIVEN CIVIL WAR STATUS

The Red Cross gave the conflict in Syria the status of “civil war.” The change in definition means combatants are now subject to the Geneva Convention, and could be prosecuted for war crimes. Meanwhile, the government has **denied attacks on civilians** and fighting has continued to escalate. Morocco declared the Syrian ambassador persona-non-grata and Russia still refuses to support any resolution that would lead to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad leaving office. *(Jul. 16, 2012)*