The Syrian Civil War: What Is Fueling the Violence?

In March 2016, the Syrian Civil War entered its fifth year. Since its beginning, cities have been laid to ruin, more than a quarter-million people have been killed, and over 10 million have been forced to flee their homes. How did this come to be?

The conflict began in 2011, when peaceful protesters assembled in the southern Syrian town of Daraa. They were protesting the arrest and torture of a group of teenagers whose sole crime was writing anti-government graffiti on a wall. With so many Syrians fed up with the government’s repression and corruption, the uprising quickly spread to other cities.

The Syrian people called on President Bashar al-Assad to make major democratic reforms. Instead, he responded with violence. It became clear that the Assad regime was not going to back down and that the unarmed protesters were no match for the government’s guns and tanks. As a result, rebel militias formed with the goal of taking down Assad.

One of the first rebel groups to emerge was the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Because of their moderate political ideology, the FSA gained the backing of Western nations such as the US. But other, more religious, militia groups also entered the fray. This worried Western powers.

While many Western nations were more than happy to see Assad go, they had hoped the uprising would give way to a secular government, similar to their own.

The recent rise of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda further intensified Westerners’ fears. Many worried that the more religiously-minded militias operating inside Syria would become jihadist terrorists. Nervous about the Islamification of the opposition, and lacking public support for involvement in another foreign war, many Western nations chose to stay mostly on the sidelines, offering only minimal support to the opposition. Meanwhile, the Assad regime continued to brutally suppress its citizens.

Throughout the conflict, Assad has used chemical weapons and bombs to kill thousands of Syrians, most of whom have been civilians. People have also died of starvation, as cities have been laid siege.

As protest turned into war, people’s ethnic and religious identity began to play an increasingly important role in determining on which side of the conflict they stood. The vast majority of the Syrian people are Sunni Muslims. Most Sunnis oppose the Assad regime. President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite. The Alawites are a Muslim sect distinctly different from Sunnis who make up about 12% of Syria’s population. Despite being a minority, Alawites have a great deal of power, filling the ranks of top military and government positions.

As a result, most Alawites have stayed loyal to the government. In addition, other sizable religious and ethnic minority groups have been brought into the conflict. These groups are often targets of discrimination and must weigh their interests as they navigate their way through the conflict.

Syria’s civil war has now raged for over five years. The war is so tangled that politicians and policymakers are at a loss for how to end the violence. There’s no doubt that the uncompromising stance of the Assad regime as well as the determination of the opposition have greatly contributed to the ongoing violence. But there are other factors at play and other parties who share responsibility for this deadly conflict. This Mini-Q asks you to dig deep to identify the other reasons why this conflict continues to fester and to answer the question: The Syrian Civil War: What is fueling the violence?
Background Essay Questions

1. Why did Syrian citizens rise up in protest in March 2011?

2. How did President Bashar al-Assad respond to the peaceful protests?

3. Despite being opposed to President Assad, why were Western nations reluctant to provide support to the rebel militias?

4. How have people’s religious and ethnic identities affected their stance on the conflict?

Timeline

1919 —
Ottoman Empire loses territory in the Middle East; France and Britain split up the land

1945 —
Syria wins independence from France

1970 —
General Hafez al-Assad comes to power through a military coup

2000 —
Hafez al-Assad dies and his son, Bashar al-Assad, inherits the presidency

2011 —
Democratic uprisings, known as the Arab Spring, emerge throughout the Middle East; in Syria, the government brutally cracks down on protesters

2013 —
Syrian government carries out a chemical weapons attack; over 1,400 killed, including 426 children. The US condemns the attack but no military action taken against Assad

2014 —
ISIS announces the creation of its own Islamic state in Iraq and Syria; US-led coalition engages in targeted airstrikes against ISIS

2016 —
Geneva III peace talks on Syria; the United Nations initiates its third attempt in five years to end the violence in Syria
1. Why is it so difficult to accurately track Syria’s war casualties?

2. According to Al Jazeera, approximately what percentage of the deaths were civilians as of September 2015?

3. Which side of the conflict appears to have suffered a greater number of deaths: those fighting for the Assad regime (regular army, militias, and foreign fighters) or those fighting against Assad (Syrian Rebels and foreign fighters)?

4. As of March 2016, how many Syrians have been forced to flee their homes due to the war? How many are internally displaced (staying in Syria)? How many are refugees (fled to other countries)?
Document Analysis

1. What is a sectarian conflict?

2. What two sects appear to be most at odds with one another in Syria's war?

3. Which sect supports the Assad regime?

4. Which sect dominates the opposition forces?

5. According to Ambassador Hof and Alex Simon, why has the sectarian violence been "self-perpetuating"?
At least six people have been killed in a wave of sectarian bloodshed in the central province of Homs, including three people whose bodies were mutilated.

Residents and pro-democracy activists said the government has been enlisting thousands of plainclothes security men, known as shabiha, since March to help quell dissent [suppress the opposition]. Most of the shabiha are Alawites, and resentment against them runs high: many people accuse them of killing thousands of unarmed civilians.

On Sunday, residents of Homs, Syria’s second-largest city, discovered the bodies of three Alawites mutilated and dumped in a deserted area.

All three were armed government loyalists.

News of the deaths enraged other Alawites, who went on a rampage, according to residents and activists. Three people were killed, including a mother of three, and scores of shops owned by Sunnis were burned and vandalized.

Document Analysis
1. Who are the shabiha, and what is their relationship to the Assad government?

2. What were the shabiha accused of doing?

3. How did Alawites in the city of Homs respond to news that three Alawite government loyalists were killed and mutilated?

4. How has sectarianism fueled the violence in Syria?
Document Analysis

1. Why are the Syrian Rebels, the Kurds, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS all labeled "opposition groups"? Who is their common enemy?

2. According to the chart, with which specific opposition groups is the Syrian government engaged in heavy fighting, and with which groups is it engaged in limited fighting?

3. What appears to be the relationship of the core opposition groups to each other? Explain.

4. Which opposition group appears to be most at odds with the other opposition forces? Explain.

5. How would a divided opposition contribute to increased violence?
1. What is another name given for ISIS?

2. When did ISIS first appear on the scene in the Syrian conflict? (Hint: Look at both the document and source line.)

3. According to Sarah Birke, up until the arrival of ISIS, what appeared to be the relationship of the other rebel groups to each other?

4. According to Birke, what separates ISIS from the other opposition groups?

5. How has the emergence of ISIS further fueled the violence in Syria?
1. Which foreign countries are supporting the Assad government? Which foreign countries are supporting the Syrian Rebels?

2. For the most part, the US and Turkey are on the same side with regard to the war in Syria; however, there is one group over which they have a strong disagreement. Which friend of the US is an enemy of Turkey?

3. What is the one combatant group operating inside Syria that all foreign countries are opposed to?

4. Samer N. Abboud states that the government's allies “have adopted a policy of regime preservation at all costs.” What is implied by the phrase “at all costs”?

5. How has foreign involvement in the Syrian conflict further fueled the violence?
Document Analysis

1. Who did Russia appear to be targeting with their airstrikes? Who did the US-led coalition appear to be targeting?

2. According to the Note, how has the term “terrorist” caused disagreement between foreign powers?

3. Russia has been accused of trying to strengthen the position of the Assad regime with its airstrikes. Based on the map, is there any evidence to support this claim? Explain.

4. The US government has stated that it is opposed to the Assad regime. Based on the map, does the US appear to be doing anything militarily to demonstrate its opposition to Assad? Explain.

5. How does this document further support the argument that foreign involvement is fueling the violence in Syria?