How Syria Came to This

by Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew J. Tabler (/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.

Articles & Testimony

The Douma chemical attacks are only the latest chapter in a long story of ethnic and sectarian conflict, international connivance, and above all civilian suffering.

Seven years of horrific twists and turns in the Syrian Civil War make it hard to remember that it all started with a little graffiti. In March 2011, four children in the southern city of Der'a scrawled on a wall "It's your turn, Doctor"—a not so subtle prediction that the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a British-trained ophthalmologist and self-styled reformer, would go down in the manner of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, the Mubarak regime in Egypt, and eventually, the Qaddafi regime in Libya. But Syria's story would turn out differently.

The crackdown started small. Assad's security services arrested the four graffiti artists, refusing to tell their parents where they were. After two weeks of waiting, the residents of Der'a—who are famously direct and fiery—held protests demanding the children's release. The regime responded with live gunfire, killing several, and drawing the first blood in a war that's now killed some half a million people. With every funeral came more opportunities for protests—and for the regime to respond with more violence.

The protests quickly spread to other towns and cities—Homs, Damascus, Idlib, and beyond—engulfing what is nominally still the Syrian Arab Republic in flames. The underlying dynamic that drove the Arab uprisings—a rapidly growing youthful population and a rigid repressive regime incapable of change—was consistent across a number of countries. But the effects varied widely, and nowhere were they more ferocious than in Syria, where early hopes that Assad would go the way of other dictators have crumbled in the ruins of Syria's ancient cities and the shattered lives of its people. The progression of the regime's brutality, from deploying snipers to pick off protesters demanding

freedom and dignity, to dropping chemical weapons on entire towns, has unfolded with the world watching in real time.

And now the world has again observed, through snippets on social media, what appears to have been a chemical-weapons attack in a rebel stronghold. It has watched the retaliatory strikes of the United States and allies, and heard the Pentagon claim success in the bombing of three facilities associated with Assad's chemical weapons program. How Syria moved from graffiti, to the near-toppling of its dictator, to that same tyrant's reassertion of control over a broken country, is a story of ethnic conflict, international connivance, and above all civilian suffering. And it's not ending now, but only entering a new and perhaps even more dangerous phase.

Decision-makers in Western capitals had long viewed the Assad regime as a grim model of Middle Eastern stability, but in 2011, they suddenly thought that "people power" would bring down Assad as it had other Arab despots. The Assad regime, however, had something the others didn't. "Popular resistance" strategies work well against authoritarian systems whose leadership come from the country's ethnic and sectarian majority, such as Egypt. Soldiers ordered to turn their guns on protestors are faced with a choice: Shoot their brethren among the protestors, or help get rid of those ordering them to do so. This causes a split in the army and security services, which can lead to a toppling of the government.

Assad's by contrast is a minority government with a kind of fortress of sectarian interests around it. Minority Alawites serve at the core, followed by concentric rings of other minorities (Christians, Shia, etc.), and finally by coopted Sunnis who represent the majority in Syria. Minority army and security officers are therefore farther removed from the majority Sunni population, making them more likely to order fire against protestors than to topple their brethren in power. This has galvanized the Assad regime against the kind of splits that toppled Ben Ali and Mubarak.

But this evidently wasn't part of President Obama's calculation when, in August of 2011, he declared that Assad should "step aside," as if Syria's strongman would magically leave on his own. To speed up the process, Obama organized European and Arab League allies to adopt similar language, as well as a raft of sanctions on the Assad regime, most notably a ban on purchases of Syrian crude oil, the regime's lifeline. Totally missing was a plan for removing Assad in the event he didn't go peacefully.

And Assad wasn't about to. In the autumn of 2011 and the first half of 2012, multiple UN initiatives failed to bring about sustainable ceasefires or a solution to the hostilities. While Western governments urged Syrians to keep the protests peaceful, the regime's military escalation to include more snipers, minority militiamen dubbed "ghosts," and rotary and fixed-wing aircraft caused death tolls to skyrocket. More and more Syrians picked up weapons to defend themselves, and hundreds of local militias were organized under the banner of the Free Syrian Army. The insignia included the old nationalist flag of Syria, but the FSA was more of a franchise than a true army.

The uprising had morphed into a civil war. So when in the summer of 2012 Russia and the United States offered a transition plan to help stop the violence, both sides dismissed it, each one believing it could defeat the other militarily. If anything, it looked like the rebels were gaining the upper hand; one group managed to seize half of Aleppo, Syria's largest city and industrial center, that July. At that point the pattern was set: When the regime faced serious losses, it resorted to extreme measures. In Aleppo Assad's forces resisted, holding onto the western side of the city and firing Scud missiles at rebel bases—becoming the second largest user, after Najibullah in Afghanistan, to deploy these weapons against their own people. Death tolls and refugee outflows spiked.

As the battle overshadowed diplomacy, the United States and its allies had hard decisions to make. First was what to do with the Syrian opposition, within which jihadist groups had rapidly sprung up, and which were poised to grow stronger in the absence of outside efforts to corral and arm the nationalist opposition. Obama, however, famously

rejected plans to do so. Just as important, and ultimately disastrous, was an ancillary decision to allow U.S. regional allies to arm the opposition instead. Money from various Arab Gulf countries flowed into Syria, sowing even more division among those fighting Assad, and making Salafist and jihadist groups the strongest among them.

The second issue, and one that would usher in another turning point in the Syrian war, concerned U.S. intelligence reports that Assad was preparing to escalate further, by using his chemical weapons stockpile, which at that time was estimated to be the largest in the region if not the world. In an August 20, 2012 press conference, Obama said "that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized." As the war raged on that autumn, more and more reports and samples indicated the Assad regime had indeed begun using chemical agents in low concentrations.

By then, death tolls were already skyrocketing, with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimating around 50,000 dead by the end of 2012, and refugee outflows approaching a half million. Syria was melting down quickly. Evidence of chemical weapons use kept accumulating; refugees kept fleeing; and money kept flowing to jihadist groups, including what would ultimately become the Islamic State. And new combatants were entering the field. Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias were operating on the side of the Assad regime, while in the northeast, Kurdish fighters called the shots in an effort to secure their own autonomy. As the country fell apart, terrorist organizations filled up the vacuum on every side.

By summer 2013, opposition groups gained more ground in and around the capital Damascus. Either out of military desperation or pure brutality, the Assad regime doubled down on chemical weapons use. On August 21, 2013, nearly a year to the day after Obama set his fated "red line," the Syrian military launched sarin-filled rockets on the Eastern Ghouta pocket east of Damascus, an attack that the U.S. estimated killed around 1,400 civilians. As warships assembled off the Syrian coast for a possible retaliation, Obama backed down under pressure from Congress and his base, opting instead for a Russian proposed deal that would supposedly rid Syria of chemical weapons.

This dramatic turn of events caused whatever remained of Syrian opposition support for the U.S. to evaporate. On a trip to southern Turkey that autumn, I spoke to representatives of the Syrian opposition who told me they were furious over the decision. Many believed Assad had used chemical weapons and gotten away with it. But most were surprised that Washington believed the deal would stop him from doing it again—a tragically prescient conclusion.

Refugee outflows hit 2 million that September. And ISIS duly expanded throughout Syria and Iraq. In 2014, its territory was approximately the size of Great Britain, and the militants were suddenly threatening not just the Assad regime but also the Iraqi state Washington had spent billions cobbling together. It was at this point that the Obama administration decided to strike Syria. While international headlines focused on the horrific execution of Americans in ISIS captivity, more than 76,000 Syrians were killed in 2014 alone, the conflict's highest yearly death toll, and 1.3 million more Syrians fled to neighboring countries. Hundreds of thousands were displaced inside Syria as well.

America was not then targeting Assad directly—though Obama had by that point begun a covert program to arm some of the rebellion—but the regime was contracting as the U.S.-backed rebels crossed deep into the Alawites' heartland, threatening Assad's sectarian base. This was perhaps why Assad began dragging his feet on the chemical-weapons deal, missing deadlines for moving stockpiles out of the country even as reports surfaced that it hadn't fully declared all of them.

Alarms were going off in Moscow, but over a different problem. The concern was not the pace of the deal's implementation, but that its Syrian ally was in a dangerous position: It had limited deployable manpower, and was losing territory even with the support of Iranian-backed militias. Only days after the United States signed the Iran nuclear accord in 2015, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' external operations wing, flew to Moscow; within about a month, Russia had established a base in the threatened Alawite

stronghold of Latakia on the Mediterranean coast. Throughout the autumn of 2015, Russian aircraft dropped Vietnam-war era "dummy" bombs in support of Assad regime and Iranian forces throughout Syria, slowly reversing the regime's losses in Latakia and allowing Assad and Iranian-backed groups to march north on Aleppo.

A million more Syrians fled the country, with many fleeing beyond neighboring Turkey onward to Europe. Over 55,000 Syrians were killed in 2015 alone, bringing the overall total for the conflict to over a quarter million, with an estimated 100,000 more undocumented deaths.

The United States, now saddled with defeating ISIS and supporting the Syrian opposition, buckled. It engaged both Russia and Iran in an attempt to establish ceasefires and talks to end the war—even as Russia continued to pound rebel positions, allowing what was left of Assad's army and an array of Iranian-sponsored militias, including Hezbollah to push the rebels back. By summer 2016, this hybrid force surrounded and pulverized east Aleppo. And the U.S. was meanwhile seeing one of its allies challenged by another, as Turkey effectively invaded Syria to block U.S.-backed and Kurdish-dominated forces from consolidating their territory. Americans were focused on the outcome of the 2016 presidential election; Syrians, though, were focused on fleeing, with an estimated 11 million—half of Syria's prewar population—on the run either in neighboring countries or inside Syria. Aleppo fell by late December, sending thousands of oppositionists into Idlib province, where many pro-Assad commentators claimed they would be corralled for slaughter.

As U.S. President Donald Trump took the reins in Washington, the Assad regime turned its attention to Idlib province and rebel-controlled areas of southwest Syria adjacent to Israel and Jordan. But a closer look at the force composition of those offensives showed a larger Iranian-supported and Hezbollah component than ever. U.S.-supported rebels fought back, pushing the regime south despite Russian air support.

This was the context in which the Trump administration faced its first major instance of a chemical attack in Syria, in April 2017, in the village of Idlib's Khan Sheikhoun. The United Nations ultimately confirmed it included the nerve agent sarin—a substance the Assad regime was supposed to have given up. This time, instead of trying to do a deal, Trump struck the airbase responsible for delivering the attack.

And yet Washington also found itself fighting one of Assad's enemies, ISIS. In the summer of 2017, the U.S., Russia, and Jordan managed to strike a deal to dramatically decrease the fighting in pockets of the country, allowing the Assad regime to launch an offensive against the jihadist group. Its army by now depleted, it relied in part on major contingents of Shia militias and Russian-organized units. Sunni areas liberated from ISIS afterward were expected to welcome the regime's offensive, but the Assad regime's brutality, combined with the Shia composition of the Iranian-backed forces coming to occupy Sunni Arab areas, caused most internally displaced persons to head toward the Kurdish-dominated zones.

ISIS, however, was not the regime's only priority, or even its primary one. In early 2018, the Assad regime launched an offensive to capture the Ghouta pocket—by then the opposition's last major presence near the Syrian capital and site of the 2013 chemical weapons attack. The regime and associated Iranian-backed militias were able to cut the pocket in two as Russia attempted to broker an evacuation of civilians and fighters to other areas. When those talks broke down, the Assad regime launched a military assault to take Ghouta by force. For reasons of limited manpower, sheer brutality, or both, Assad appears to have resorted to chemical weapons once again, killing dozens and again stepping over Washington's red line.

And once again, American strikes followed against regime targets. On Friday night, Secretary of Defense James Mattis characterized these strikes as a "one-off" meant to deter the use of chemical weapons, but no matter what comes next, those weapons are but one gruesome part of settling the Syrian Civil War. The war is now arguably the world's largest humanitarian disaster since World War II. The death toll now stands at nearly half a million, though

the UN has stopped counting. Countless others are wounded and missing. A U.S. government report that the Assad regime is using a crematorium near the Saidnaya Prison outside Damascus indicates many of their remains may never be found. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates 13.1 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance, with more than 6 million internally displaced and 5 million registered as refugees. Hundreds of thousands more remain unregistered. Estimates of the total number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon today surpass a quarter of the country's population, with only slighter smaller figures for Jordan.

This is horrible enough. But meanwhile, the way the Syrian Civil War is "winding down" is increasingly unacceptable to regional countries. Israel, worried about the spike in Iranian militias and influence in Syria, is bombing there like never before. Turkey, concerned about the growth of the Kurdish-dominated forces linked to Ankara's archenemy, the PKK, has invaded northwest Syria, pushing Kurds out of one stronghold in Afrin with threats to do the same in another one, Manbij. Meanwhile, negotiations in Geneva and elsewhere have yet to produce viable ceasefires or anything resembling a political settlement.

Like the civil war in neighboring Lebanon, the Syrian Civil War now threatens to morph into the Syria War—a regional conflagration which seems likely to burn for a generation. And civilians are cursed to live it, and die in it, every day.

Andrew Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published ***on the Atlantic website (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/syria-chemical-weapons/558065/)***. ❖

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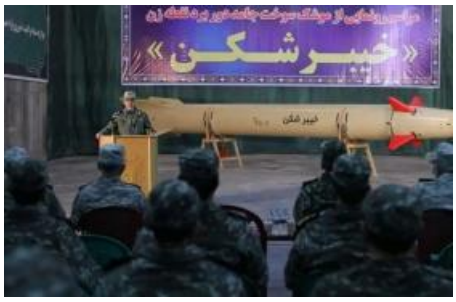

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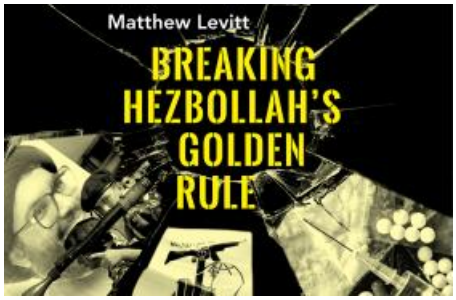

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