



INTERNATIONAL

# THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

– NO END IN SIGHT



In Syria, hope has been in short supply for far too long.

This Middle Eastern nation has been engaged in a bitter **civil war** for more than five years. The violence has caused massive destruction, and suffering on a unfathomable scale. More than 400,000 people have been killed since the fighting began, including 14,000 children. Meanwhile 4.8 million Syrians have fled the country, while 6.5 million more have been displaced within Syria’s own borders.

The **United Nations** (UN) calls the situation in Syria “the worst humanitarian crisis of our time.”

## LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPONS

Yet for a brief moment in September, a ray of hope shone on the devastated nation when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov brokered a deal between the warring groups.

Rebels, supported by the U.S. and other countries, and government

forces, backed mainly by Russia, agreed to a week-long **ceasefire**, beginning on September 12. That meant food and life-saving medical supplies might finally reach civilians caught in the crossfire, including the estimated 250,000 people trapped under **siege** in the city of Aleppo. Maybe the ceasefire would even lead to the beginning of peace talks.

## FIGHTING WITH RENEWED FURY

Sadly, this faint hope didn’t last. On September 17, the U.S.-led coalition mistakenly bombed dozens of government forces in southern Syria. Government forces retaliated for this error on September 19 by destroying a clinic as well as 18 aid trucks that were on their way to Aleppo. The attacks killed 20 people, including the head of the **Red Crescent** – and the fragile ceasefire was shattered.

From there, the situation only got worse. All aid groups suspended operations in Syria, while pro-government forces intensified their

attacks in rebel-held eastern Aleppo – even bombing two of the city’s largest hospitals, killing hundreds of civilians, including 100 children.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Under international rules, it is a war crime to target hospitals, aid workers and emergency supplies during a conflict.

Local people and observers said that the attacks went beyond anything they had seen since the start of the war.

“Imagine a slaughterhouse,” said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. “This is worse. Even a slaughterhouse is more humane.”

## HOW THE WAR BEGAN

What is behind this horrible, drawn-out war? The roots go back to March 2011. That was when the Syrian people rose up by the thousands against their government. They were frustrated with President Bashar al-Assad, a **dictator**, who has ruled Syria since 2000.

## DEFINITIONS

**CEASEFIRE:** a temporary state of peace agreed to between opponents so they can discuss peace terms

**CIVIL WAR:** a war between two or more groups in one country

**DICTATOR:** a person who holds absolute power in government

**RED CRESCENT:** the equivalent of the Red Cross in an Islamic country

**SIEGE:** a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town or building, cutting off essential supplies, with the aim of compelling the surrender of those inside

**UNITED NATIONS (UN):** an organization formed after World War II to encourage peace, cooperation, social progress and economic stability



Under Mr. Assad, opposition parties were banned, freedoms were severely restricted and torture and corruption were widespread. The people were desperate for change.

### HOSTILITIES ESCALATE

Mr. Assad refused to step down, however. Instead, he used his powerful military and its vast store of weaponry, including chemical weapons, against his own citizens.

Undaunted, the people fought back. By August 2011, the rebels had organized into a group called the Free Syrian Army. One year later, a full-scale civil war was underway.

Soon afterwards, a ruthless terrorist group called Daesh (also known as Islamic State, or ISIS) moved in. Daesh wants to control the entire Middle East and strictly rule it according to the group's own twisted version of Islamic law. It used the chaos in Syria to capture huge sections of the country, as well as parts of neighbouring Iraq.

### A COMPLICATED CONFLICT

Daesh has now lost much of the territory it took but it is still carrying out a “war within a war” in Syria. It is fighting the rebels as well as others with whom it disagrees, including the Syrian government.

This has complicated the situation for nations who want to see an end to President Assad's rule. Why? Because the Western coalition led by the U.S. strongly opposes Daesh. It has been battling this group for over two years and has launched more than 15,000 air strikes against it.

Yet destroying Daesh would help President Assad – whom the West would also like to see defeated. France, Britain, Canada and the U.S. have been giving logistic and political support to help the rebels bring down the government. Other states, including Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, also back the rebels.

Meanwhile, Syria is supported by long-time allies Iran and Russia. Iran has given the Assad regime financial, technical and military assistance – and Russia has gone even further. In 2015, it sent dozens of strike aircraft, jet fighters and some troops into the battle, bolstering Mr. Assad's military position, which had been weakening.

### WEAPONS AND WORDS

Russia says Syria asked for its help to fight Daesh. It says that it is bombing U.S.-backed rebels, too, because it believes they are also terrorists. Yet as long as the U.S. and Russia agreed that they both wanted to destroy Daesh, there was room for negotiation.

After the failed ceasefire, however, tensions increased between the U.S. and Russia and all talks broke down. Russia threatened to shoot down coalition jets if they attacked pro-government forces, while Mr. Kerry accused Russia of war crimes. Tensions eased and brief talks resumed on October 15, but observers didn't hold out hope for a new truce.

### A BID TO SIDESTEP RUSSIA

Russia has non-military weapons, too. It regularly blocks United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at reining in Mr. Assad. On October 8,

### ABOUT SYRIA

With a 4500-year history, Syria is one of the oldest nations in the world. At 185,180 square kilometres – more than twice the size of New Brunswick – it is made up of fertile plains, mountains and deserts. Its capital is Damascus. Arabic is the official language. Before the war, Syria had a population of 22.5 million. Most were Muslims who belonged either to the Sunni sect (74 percent) or the Alawite Shia sect (12 percent). Ten percent of the population was Christian. President Assad and the group who run the government are Alawite Shia.

it **vetoed** another one aimed at ending the bombing of Aleppo.

In response, Canada tried an unusual tactic, calling for a meeting of all 193 UN members to pressure Syria into stopping the war. Sixty-nine other states signed on. A General Assembly resolution wouldn't be binding, but it might have some moral authority.

“This is about ending the suffering for the Syrian people,” said Canadian representative Michael Grant.

### “WAKE UP!”

Certainly, those on the front lines of this tragedy are worn down by it all.

“Tell the world to wake their consciences,” said a nurse from Aleppo. “Why are Syria's children being forgotten?” ★

### DEFINITIONS

**SECURITY COUNCIL:** the branch of the UN that authorizes peacekeeping operations, sanctions and military action. Five of the 15 members – China, France, Russia, the UK and the U.S. – are permanent and can veto any resolution.

**VETO:** the right to reject a decision or proposal made by a law-making body



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**ON THE LINES**

Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. Describe the religious makeup of Syria.

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2. List at least three other important facts about this country.

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3. Name the leader of Syria and describe what life has been like for people under his rule.

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4. What happened in Syria in March 2011?

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5. How did the Syrian regime react to anti-government protests that spread across the country six years ago?

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6. Which extremist group took advantage of the Syrian civil war and now controls a large part of eastern Syria?

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7. How did some western nations react to the spread of this extremist group?

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8. Which two countries are friendly to President Assad? Explain how they are supporting Syria.

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9. List at least two consequences of the civil war for the Syrian people.

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

An *inference* is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A *plausible inference* is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

What inference(s) can you draw from the fact that about half of Syria’s population has been displaced since the civil war began in 2011?

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## BEYOND THE LINES

On a separate piece of paper, create a **sociogram** to show the information contained in this story. A sociogram is a diagram that uses pictures rather than words to convey information (although occasionally, single words may be used to label elements of the sociogram) and symbols, such as arrows, to show the connections among the facts and details.

*A good sociogram includes all important points, clearly shows the relationship among the different points, and is easy to understand.*

## JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. a) What is your understanding of the reasons for the civil war in Syria?  
b) For what reasons is the Syrian civil war complicated to solve? Explain.
2. As you see it, what is the significance of the Syrian civil war? Give reasons to support your response.
3. Getting accurate information out of Syria is a dangerous task.  
a) Why do you suppose journalists risk their lives to report on what’s happening in Syria? Explain.  
b) Would you consider war journalists heroes? Why or why not?

## ONLINE

*Note:* The links below are listed at [www.lesplan.com/en/links](http://www.lesplan.com/en/links) for easy access.

1. Watch an incredibly powerful short video about becoming a refugee called “Most Shocking Second A Day Video” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQ-1oHfmQ>
2. Watch the equally powerful follow-up video about life as a refugee, titled “Still The Most Shocking Second A Day”, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKDgFCojiT8>
3. Watch a cartoon explainer video called “The European Refugee Crisis and Syria Explained” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvOnXh3NN9w>
4. Watch the PBS coverage from September 17 “Russia Claims U.S. Airstrikes Killed Syrian Troops” at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe4\\_b9gke3o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe4_b9gke3o)
5. Read more about Syria at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>
6. View photos of Syria at [http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Middle\\_East/Syria/](http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Middle_East/Syria/) ★



# MAP ASSIGNMENT

Complete this map assignment to better understand the article *The Syrian Civil War*.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. Obtain the required resources and read all the instructions before starting.
2. Colour your map after all labelling is completed.
3. Print in pencil only first, then go over the printing in black ink.
4. Work carefully and neatly.

**Resources Required:** pencil, black pen, pencil crayons, ruler, eraser and an atlas.

**Part A** Locate and label the following countries in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

Iraq (green)	Kuwait (red)
Jordan (purple)	Israel (red)
Lebanon (yellow)	Syria (pink)
Turkey (brown)	Armenia (pink)
Azerbaijan (purple)	

**Part B** Locate and label the capital cities of these countries and underline each city name.

**Part C** Locate and label the following countries in CAPITAL letters and shade each as indicated:

Iran (yellow)	Saudi Arabia (orange)
Egypt (grey)	Cyprus (orange)

**Part D** Locate and label the following seas and lakes and shade them light blue:

Caspian Sea	Lake Van
Lake Urmia	Lake Tharthar
Lake Milh (Lake Razazah)	Dead Sea

**Part E** Draw and label the following rivers and shade them light blue:

Tigris River	Euphrates River
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**Part F** Locate and label the following and shade all ocean water dark blue:

Mediterranean Sea	Red Sea
Persian Gulf	

**Part G** Draw and label the Suez Canal and shade it dark blue.

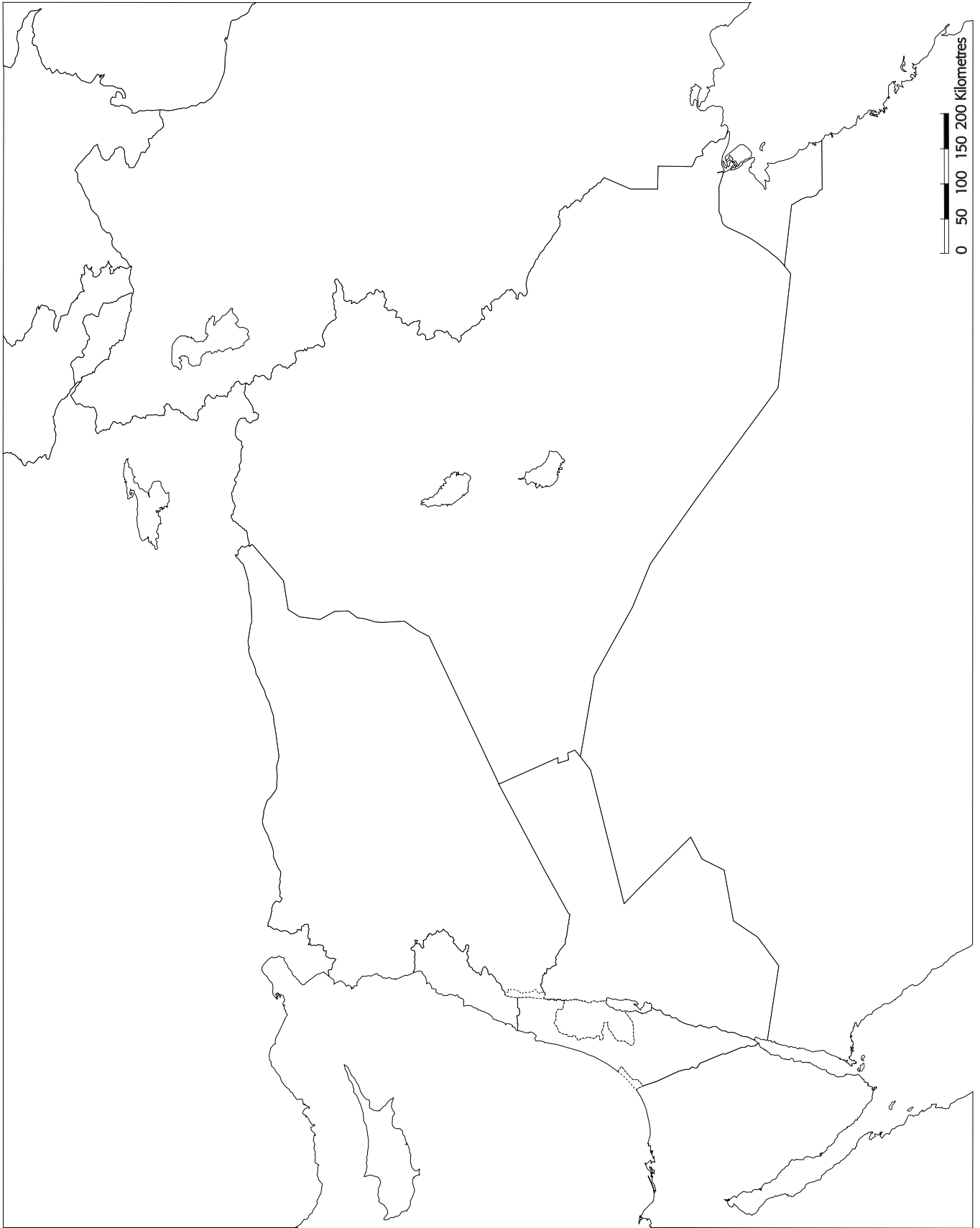
**Part H** Locate and label the following Syrian cities:

Aleppo	Homs
Latakia	Hama
Ar-Raqqah	Deir ez-Zor

**Part I** Complete your map with a frame, title and compass. ★



Syria









IMAGES IN THE NEWS

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Syrian Civil Defense workers search through the rubble in rebel-held eastern Aleppo on October 11, 2016. (Syrian Civil Defense- White Helmets via AP)







IMAGES IN THE NEWS

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Children carry aid packages at a new village that was established near Sajur River by Syrian civilians escaping from a village south of Aleppo, Syria on October 19, 2016. (Mustafa Sultan/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)