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# *The conflict in Syria, the involvement of Islamic State, and the refugee crisis in Europe*



A presentation to the Institute on 27 October 2015 by  
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*Professor Williams explains the background to the civil war which has been raging in Syria since 2011, describes the situation as at October 2015, and addresses some of the consequences of the war, such as the emergence of Islamic State and its caliphate, and an overwhelming flow of refugees towards Europe, causing a migrant crisis.*

**Key words:** Syria; Bashar al-Assad; Alawite; Shia; Sunni; United Nations; Turkey; Arab League; Russia; Iran; China; United States; Israel; 2011 Uprising; Islamic State; Hezbollah; Free Syrian Army; Kurds; European migration crisis.

A civil war has been raging in Syria since an uprising in January 2011 and an end to it is not yet in sight. So far, it has generated nearly a quarter of a million casualties, mainly civilian; enabled the emergence of Islamic State, which has established a caliphate across a large swathe of north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq; and generated an overwhelming flow of refugees towards Europe. In this paper I will outline the background to the conflict, describe the conflict in some detail and then outline some of its consequences.

## **Syria and its Recent History**

Syria has a population of 22.5 million, which is similar in size to Australia's population of 24 million, but there the similarities end. Syria, with a land area of 185,180 km<sup>2</sup>, is about twice the size of Tasmania. Its gross domestic product, \$108 billion a year, is 1/13th of Australia's \$1.37 trillion; and its per capita income, \$5040 per person per year, is 1/10th of Australia's \$47,608. Life expectancy in Syria is 68 years, whereas it is 83 years in Australia; the median age in Syria is 23 years, compared with 38 years in Australia; and youth unemployment in Syria is 30 per cent.

As a consequence of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916, the modern state of Syria was established after the First World War as a French mandate. It was the largest Arab state to emerge from the formerly Ottoman-ruled Arab Levant. The French mandate lasted until 1943, when two independent countries emerged from the mandate period – Lebanon and Syria.

On 24 October 1945, Syria became a founding member of the United Nations; and on 17 April 1946, Syria gained independence as a parliamentary republic. In 1949, the fledgling Syrian democracy was overturned by a CIA<sup>2</sup>-backed, right-wing coup to allow the Trans-Arabian oil pipeline to cross southern Syria to the Mediterranean. Following a further coup in 1963, the Ba'ath Party came to power; and since then, the Alawite-dominated Ba'ath Party has been the political authority in Syria.

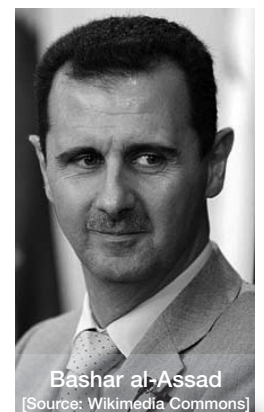
The Alawites, also known as Alawi Shias, Alawis, Nusayris, and Ansaris, are a branch of Shia Islam centred in Syria. Religion, indeed, is an important factor in the current civil war. Syria's 22.5 million population is 74 per cent Sunni Muslim (which includes the Turks and most Kurds), 12 per cent Alawite, 10 per cent Christian, and 4 per cent other groups – mainly Shia and Druze. The majority of the 18 million Syrian *diaspora* are Christians of the Eastern Orthodox Churches and Eastern Rite Churches.

Syria remained politically unstable until 1970 when Alawite Defence Minister, General Hafez al-Assad, seized power and declared himself President. He soon banned all opposition. In 1981-82, at the height of an Islamist insurgency throughout the country, he ruthlessly suppressed a Sunni uprising at the city of Hama, now known as the Hama massacre, which left at least 20,000 dead. Since then, other smaller uprisings, involving members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other mainly Sunni anti-regime elements, have been brutally suppressed.

In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died and was succeeded by his oldest surviving son, Bashar al-Assad. Bashar was appointed after a constitutional amendment which lowered the age requirement for President from 40 to his then age of 34.

Bashar al-Assad is an ophthalmologist by training, and speaks fluent English. He has a British-born Syrian wife, Asma. His succession initially inspired hopes of reform, known as the "Damascus Spring". However, the Damascus Spring ended in 2001 with the arrest and imprisonment of 10 leading activists who had rashly called for democratic elections and a campaign of civil disobedience.

Since then, Bashar al-Assad's promises to introduce political reforms have not resulted in substantial political changes, largely due to behind-the-scenes powebrokers. Regime insiders say that Bashar does not have Hafez al-Assad's absolute grip on power. Instead, he is surrounded by powerful military and intelligence figures, most of



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whom are either related to him or are members of his minority Alawite community. They rely on the *status quo* continuing.

### The 2011 Uprising

The current uprising dates from a public demonstration linked to the Arab Spring<sup>3</sup> on 26 January 2011, when Hasan Ali Akleh from the town of al-Hasakah dowsed himself with petrol and self-immolated. Mass protests began at Daraa on 15 March 2011 and the security situation has deteriorated since then. As the situation got increasingly out of hand, the regime deployed its security forces to use all available means to crush the uprising. It left many cities in ruins.

The international media portrayed the events in Syria as brutal regime forces massacring civilians or freedom fighters. Even so, the al-Assad sectarian regime still attracted considerable support, including from the Syrian *diaspora*. Support rallies also occurred in Australia in the early stages of the uprising. There is widespread *diaspora* recognition that, while the al-Assad regime is autocratic and ruthless in dealing with dissent, Syria is still better off with al-Assad than it would be with the likely alternatives. Syria's minority groups fear that, if extremist Sunnis gain power, they will turn Syria into a fundamentalist Islamic state with a strict Wahhabi interpretation of sharia law and low tolerance for other religions.

On 18 July 2012, a bomb detonated at a high-level meeting at the National Security headquarters in Rawda Square, Damascus, killing and injuring a number of top military and security officials of Bashar al-Assad's government. Syrian publicly-owned television reported that it was a suicide attack, while the opposition claims that it was a remotely-detonated bomb.

The bomb struck a devastating blow against al-Assad's inner circle. Among those killed were General Dawoud Rajiha, the Defence Minister; General Assef Shawkat, Bashar's brother-in-law, who was Deputy Minister of Defence and Head of Intelligence; and General Hassan Turkmani, Head of the Crisis Centre on the Uprising. Among the wounded were Maher al-Assad, Bashar's younger brother, who was Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division; and Major General Mohammad Ibrahim al-Shaar, the Interior Minister.

Key regime figures now include Wael Nader al-Halqi of the Ba'ath Party who is Prime Minister; Walid al-Muallem of the Ba'ath Party, who is Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates; General Fared al-Jasem el-Frej, the Chief-of-Staff of the Syrian Army, who is now Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister; and Rami Makhoul, a financier and businessman.

### External Interests in Syria

Many external powers have a stake in the outcome of the Syrian civil war. For example, the Arab League is Sunni-dominated and would like to see a democratic Sunni regime in Damascus, but is wary of the possible knock-on effects on undemocratic members such as Bahrain. Members Saudi Arabia and Qatar are believed to be the principal funders of the Syrian armed opposition.

At the United Nations, Russia and China have blocked international involvement in Syria to protect their interests in Syria after losing out in Libya, where they abstained from voting to allow NATO<sup>4</sup> intervention on humanitarian grounds, and subsequently lost access to Libya's oil wealth and arms sales.

The United Nations has been largely ineffectual in Syria since it only has observer status. United Nations observers have been criticised by both the Syrian Government and the opposition for bias and inaction.

Iran, being Shia, supports regional Shia groups, and has for many years supported the al-Assad regime and the Lebanese Hezbollah through Syria. Iran does not want to see a Sunni-dominated regime emerge in Syria.

Turkey seeks eventual regime change in Syria in order to restore some of its Ottoman glory and expand its influence in the Arab world. It provides tacit support to Islamic State in order to contain Kurdish separatism and limit Iran's influence in the Levant. Nearly all of the foreign fighters going to Syria transit through Turkey. At the same time, as a member of NATO, it has to provide some support to NATO operations against Islamic State.

Russia has been constant in its support for the Assad dynasty. Syria is its closest and most important ally in the Middle East. Since 1971, Tartus has hosted a Russian naval supply and maintenance presence, giving Russia a foothold in the Mediterranean. In May 2010, President Dimitri Medvedev was the first Russian head-of-state to visit Syria, where he cemented political and economic ties between the two countries. Russia is now Syria's largest supplier of arms, contributing 65 per cent of Syria's weapons. Moscow also has an electronic surveillance station at Jabal al-Harrah, south of Damascus, to monitor United States, Israeli and NATO communications and air traffic, and to provide Iran with early warning of any Israeli air strike. It also monitors opposition communications.

China has significant trade relations with Syria – worth nearly \$2.2 billion a year, according to figures from the International Monetary Fund. The trade is almost entirely in China's favour. China is also actively involved in Syria's oil industry; and has provided radar technology deployed at the Kafr Bunhum Complex, north of Homs.

Western European governments remain reluctant to become directly involved against al-Assad. They prefer to work through sanctions; and the largely ineffectual Arab League and United Nations – and blame Russia.

Australia has no particular strategic interest, but is part of the pro-sanctions group and is part of the United States-led coalition in Iraq. It is one of only four countries conducting air strikes in both Iraq and Syria.

Israel and the United States see regime change in Syria as a way of containing Iranian and Hezbollah influence in the Levant. The United States also believes that attacking Islamic State in Syria will limit Islamic State's ability to destabilise Iraq. Israel reportedly has been covertly arming Syrian opposition groups, while the CIA reportedly has been providing arms to opposition groups through north Lebanon and Turkey. The Obama administration is planning to step up the supply of arms to moderate opposition groups.

### Syrian Armed Forces

The Syrian armed forces number about 178,000 active duty personnel (army 110,000; air force 63,000; and navy 5000). Theoretically, 10 million men are fit for military service. About 65 per cent of the armed forces are Alawite, while 80 per cent of the officers are Alawite.

Syria's main weapon suppliers traditionally have been non-Western – Russia, Belarus, Iran, China and North Korea. It has at least 1500 T-72 tanks. The Syrian Air Defence Force comprises 25 air defence brigades, each with six surface-to-air batteries; and 130 air defence batteries.

The military's elite divisions, the Republican Guard and

<sup>3</sup>The impetus for the Arab Spring had been Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunis on 17 December 2010.

<sup>4</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Division, commanded by Bashar's volatile and violent younger brother, Maher, are exclusively Alawite. Most of Syria's conscripts are Sunni – a regime vulnerability if it uses them to suppress fellow Sunnis.

A powerful regime asset is the Alawite-controlled intelligence and security agencies: Military Intelligence Directorate; General Security Directorate; Political Security Directorate; National Security Bureau; and Air Force Intelligence Directorate (Mukhabarat). They are responsible for regime security, and for identifying and eliminating counter-regime elements.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that the Syrian Paramilitary numbers around 108,000, comprising 8000 gendarmerie and 100,000 workers' militia.

In addition to the formal regime forces, there are the 20,000 Shabiha – Alawite militias of armed men in civilian clothing. They are believed to include members of the security forces, criminals and thugs. Much of the killing of Sunni civilians has been carried out by the Shabiha.

### External Assistance to the Syrian Armed Forces

The Lebanese Hezbollah is providing security for areas bordering on Lebanon and in early June 2015 committed 2000 fighters to the battle for Aleppo as well. It is also supporting Iraqi and Iranian forces fighting against Islamic State in Iraq.

Iran boosted its presence in Syria in 2014 with several hundred military specialists. There are at least 60 to 70 Quds Force officers on the ground in Syria at any given time, as well as 2000 – 3000 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The main IRGC role is intelligence and logistic support.

On 30 September 2015, Russia intervened in the conflict to support the Syrian armed forces with air strikes, mainly targeted against Jabhat al-Nusra and Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest).

### Armed Resistance to the Syrian Government

A National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was established under United States pressure in 2012. It is an uneasy coalition of opposing groups; and is not recognised by most of the armed opposition groups fighting in Syria.

The armed opposition groups are the “gangs of armed terrorists” to which the Syrian government often refers. Fighting the regime are: Free Syrian Army (45,000 – 60,000), which has its main base at Hatay, Turkey, across the border from Aleppo, Syria; Islamic Front (40,000 – 70,000); Jihadists, including the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra (11,000) and Khorasan Group (50?); Army of Conquest military coalition (10,000+); and Ahrār ash-Shām (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of Levant) military coalition (10,000 – 20,000). The armed opposition is lightly armed – preferred personal weapons are AK47/74s. Weapons have been smuggled into Syria from Lebanon and Turkey since the beginning of the uprising.

Other armed groups involved in the conflict include Kurdish fighters/separatists: Peshmerga (200,000); People's Protection Units (YPG) (50,000); Asayish (4000); and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) armed wing of the People's Defence Forces (HPG) (15,000).

Another of the armed groups involved is Islamic State. Its strength inside Syria and Iraq has been variously estimated at 200,000 by the Kurds; 100,000 by Islamic State itself; and 20,000 – 31,000 by the CIA, which estimates Islamic State strength outside Syria and Iraq to be 32,600 – 57,900 for a

total Islamic State strength of 52,600 – 88,900. Islamic State is less concerned with fighting al-Assad's forces than it is with consolidating its hold on the “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq; and eliminating any Sunni opposition to itself. It is the most powerful, ruthless and feared opposition group in Syria.

### Current Military Situation

As at 10 October 2015 (Map 1), Hezbollah controlled a strip of territory in Syria along the border with Lebanon; and the Kurds, similarly, controlled territory along the border with Turkey. Two areas, one in the north-west, the other in the south-west were under Rebel control. Islamic State controlled a big slice of territory in the north-east along the axis of the Euphrates River and centred on Raqqa and Deir al-Zour; and another large area north-east of Damascus; and several areas in the west were contested by the Rebels and Islamic State. The remainder of the country was either under Regime control or was uncontrolled.



The military situation in Syria on 10 October 2015, showing the sectors controlled by each of the competing armed factions. [Source: Institute for the Study of War]

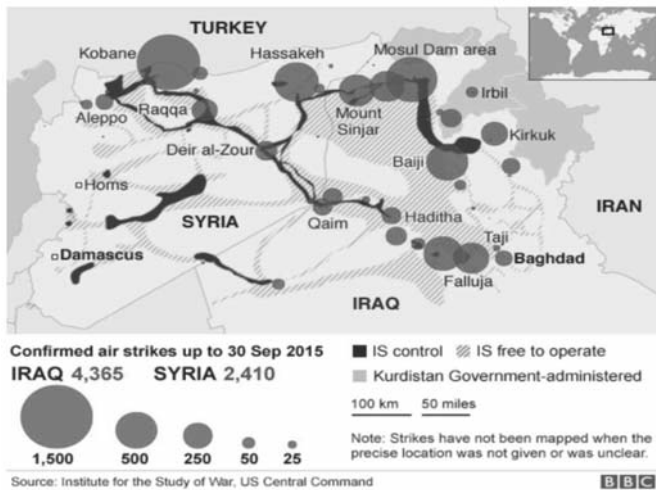
The total death count in Syria by October 2015 was 230,000+, of which 20,000 were children. In August 2015 alone, 2040 people were killed, of whom 40 per cent were women and children.

The United States Central Command reported that, from August 2014 to 30 September 2015, there were 4365 coalition air strikes in Iraq and 2410 in Syria. Of these, nearly 3000 had been by United States aircraft and the remainder by aircraft from the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Canada, France Australia, Denmark and Belgium. These have been concentrated on targets in territory controlled by Islamic State (Map 2 - see next page). Russian air strikes from 30 September to 5 October 2015 focused primarily on assisting government forces recapture Rebel controlled areas in the north-west.

### Refugees

A major consequence of the conflict in Syria has been a flow of refugees from the fighting towards Europe. But the fighting is not the only cause. There can be several other ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors involved in a decision to become a refugee. Among the former can be environmental degradation, discrimination, crime, an unsafe environment,





The locations of confirmed coalition air strikes in Iraq and Syria up to 30 September 2015 [Source: Institute for the Study of War and United States Central Command]

and lack of prospects. Among the latter can be safety and security, employment, social benefits, better life prospects, a welcoming environment, *diaspora* members and family members.

As at 31 August 2015, there were 4,088,078 Syrian refugees outside Syria registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of whom 1,938,000 were registered in Turkey; 1,113,941 were registered in Lebanon; 629,245 in Jordan; 249,463 in Iraq; 132,375 in Egypt; and 24,055 in Africa. Interestingly, to date Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States have declined to accept any Syrian refugees.

From 2010 to 2013, the immigration of non-European Union nationals into Europe was steady at around 1.4 million a year; with around 300,000 asylum applications, and 70,000 – 140,000 illegal border crossings. In 2014, asylum applications jumped to 628,000 and illegal border crossings to 284,000. There has been a further substantial jump in both categories in 2015, but the annual data are not yet available.

The triggers for the 2015 European migrant crisis have included: Macedonia's announcement in June 2015 that it would relax transit restrictions; the reduced cost of people-smuggler-assisted travel via Greece, instead of via Libya; German Chancellor Merkel's announcement of an "open-door" policy, and media coverage of migrants being welcomed in Germany; and Syria's increasing military conscription. These changes led to the Eastern Mediterranean/Central Balkan migration route to Germany becoming favoured over the Central Mediterranean Route from Libya via Sicily and Italy and the Western Mediterranean route via Algeria/Morocco and Spain.

The flow of migrants had reached crisis point by mid-September and on 16 September Hungary, on the Central Balkan Route, closed its border with Serbia. Immediately, a new Central Balkan migration route evolved to bypass Hungary – from Serbia and Montenegro, via Croatia and Slovenia, to Austria and Germany.

Other contributing factors to the enhanced flow of migrants have been: a youth bulge in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with high unemployment; conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, which have been made more deadly by external involvement; the rise of violent Sunni

Islamist extremism; long delays with UNHCR placements, coupled with soul-destroying life in refugee camps; and perceptions that Western countries, unlike unwelcoming Muslim countries, offer the mainly Muslim refugees prospects for a better life.

According to the UNHCR, as of mid-September 2015, 74 per cent of the almost 500,000 Mediterranean Sea arrivals since the beginning of the year were asylum seekers – 54 per cent from Syria, 13 per cent from Afghanistan, and 7 per cent from Eritrea – and 69 per cent were adult men.

There are, however, some benefits for the European recipient nations. They include an influx of proactive young workers and a rebalancing of the ageing demographic structure; promotion of multiculturalism and related benefits; and a "feel-good" factor of being able to help people in need. Against this, though, there are popular concerns about the potential for the development of migrant "ghettoes"; being "swamped" by Muslims with their high birth rate and "alien" lifestyle; effects on employment for other citizens; security concerns to do with Islamist extremism, and the possibility of migrant involvement in crime; and the economic cost of absorbing large numbers of mostly unskilled migrants.

The UNHCR assessment for Syria is that, with no political solution in sight and military confrontation continuing, the number of people affected by the internal conflict in Syria is likely to increase. Ongoing destruction of infrastructure, along with shifting conflict lines and high levels of insecurity and violence, have been reducing or severely damaging Syrians' livelihoods. The scale of destruction presents a major obstacle to return and reintegration efforts.

## Conclusion

The military outlook is for more of the same. More ethnic and religious conflict is anticipated, leading to more deaths and more refugees. Associated local and regional instability will persist; and major power rivalries will continue to play out in Syria. Assassination of Bashaw al-Assad could accelerate the regime change process, but alternatively could lead to a more hard-line government in Syria. Longer term, partition of Syria along religious lines seems to be the most likely outcome.

**The Author:** Clive Williams graduated from the Officer Cadet School Portsea in December 1964 into the Australian Intelligence Corps. His first (and non-corps) posting was to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, as an infantry platoon commander. He served in that capacity in Vietnam during 1965/66, and was awarded the Medal for Gallantry (MG). After resigning from the Australian Army in 1981, he pursued a career in Defence Intelligence. He began running terrorism courses at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1996. In 2002, he left the Defence Department to run post-graduate courses in terrorism and national security at the ANU and other Australian and overseas universities. He was given professorial appointments at Macquarie University and at the University of New South Wales Canberra in 2006; and he continues as a visiting professor at the ANU's Centre for Military and Security Law. Along the way, he has done missing-in-action recovery in Vietnam; field work with NATO in Afghanistan; and provided counter-terrorism training in the United States, Indonesia, Taiwan, Japan, Romania and the Maldives. He has published widely on defence and terrorism matters; and provides media commentary on events such as the Lindt Cafe siege in Sydney in December 2014. [Photo of Professor Williams: Colonel J. M. Hutcheson, MC]