

THE MIDDLE EAST EXPLAINED

A project of the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies

STUDENT VIEWING GUIDE

Video: The Historical Roots of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Key Terms

Syria: A predominantly Arab country in the eastern Mediterranean region. Although Syria's name dates to ancient times, Syria did not exist as a nation until it was formed by France in the years after World War I out of provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

League of Nations Mandates: European control imposed by the League of Nations over Ottoman territories that were conquered during World War I. Out of the territories it took, France created Lebanon and Syria, while the British created Iraq, Transjordan (now Jordan), and Palestine (now Israel and Palestine [West Bank and Gaza Strip]).

Alawite Islam: A branch of Shia Islam found primarily in Syria. Although Alawites are a minority in Syria, they have controlled the government for almost half a century.

Shia (Shiite) Islam: A branch of Islam whose followers believe that the leadership of the Muslim community belongs to someone in the bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sunni Islam: A branch of Islam whose followers believe that the leadership of the of the Muslim community can be filled by an appointed, devout individual who would follow the Prophet's example.

Arab Spring: A series of revolutionary demonstrations and protests throughout the Arab world, beginning in 2010, in which protestors challenged authoritarian regimes in power.

Syrian civil war: A violent war for control of Syria, which has continued since 2011. There are many players in the war including the Syrian government, which has kept control of the capital (Damascus); nationalist rebel groups including the Free Syrian Army, which is supported by the United States and other countries; the Islamic State, which has clashed with all of the other groups; and Kurdish groups (who seek independence from the Arab-dominated state).

Islamic State: A self-proclaimed "caliphate" (Islamic theocracy) that took control of much of northeast Syria in 2013 and claims to rule by the principles of Sunni Islam. The vast majority of Muslims in Syria and around the world reject the Islamic State's violence and claims to authority.

Timeline

16th century-1919: Ottoman Empire

1920-1946: French rule under League of Nations mandate; current name (Syria) and borders created

1946: Independence from France

1949: First in a series of coups d'état

1970: Hafez al-Assad takes power

1982: Hafez al-Assad cruelly suppresses Islamic opposition in the city of Hama

2000: Hafez al-Assad dies, is succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad

2010: Beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia: revolutionary movements spread throughout the Arab world

2011: Syrian Revolution against the al-Assad regime leads to civil war

2013: The Islamic State establishes itself in northeastern Syria

2016: Over half of the Syrian population has fled from their homes since 2011



Photo Credit: Reuters | Syrian refugees land on the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos in an inflatable dinghy from Turkey in September 2015.

Comprehension Questions: The Historical Roots of the Syrian Refugee Crisis

1. Name three countries that border Syria:

2. Describe the environment in Syria during Hafez al-Assad's rule:

Compare this with the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's rule, his son:

3. What events led to the beginning of the Syrian Revolution?

4. What is the main goal of the Syrian Revolution?

5. Which countries are supporting al-Assad's rule? Why?

Which countries are supporting anti-al-Assad forces? Why?

6. In the video, Professor Cooke states "14 million Syrians are out of their homes." Where have they gone? What are the challenges they face?