

9 questions about Syria you were too embarrassed to ask

By Max Fisher, Updated: August 29, 2013



The United States and allies are preparing for a possibly imminent series of limited military strikes against Syria, the first direct U.S. intervention in the two-year civil war, in retaliation for President Bashar al-Assad's suspected use of chemical weapons against civilians.

If you found the above sentence kind of confusing, or aren't exactly sure why Syria is fighting a civil war, or even where Syria is located, then this is the article for you. What's happening in Syria is really important, but it can also be confusing and difficult to follow even for those of us glued to it.

Here, then, are the most basic answers to your most basic questions. First, a disclaimer: Syria and its history

are really complicated; this is not an exhaustive or definitive account of that entire story, just some background, written so that anyone can understand it.

1. What is Syria?

Syria is a country in the Middle East, along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It's about the same size as Washington state with a population a little over three times as large – 22 million. Syria is very diverse, ethnically and religiously, but most Syrians are ethnic Arab and follow the Sunni branch of Islam. Civilization in Syria goes back thousands of years, but the country as it exists today is very young. Its borders were drawn by European colonial powers in the 1920s.

Syria is in the middle of an extremely violent civil war. Fighting between government forces and rebels has killed more 100,000 and created 2 million refugees, half of them children.

2. Why are people in Syria killing each other?

The killing started in April 2011, when peaceful protests inspired by earlier revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia rose up to challenge the dictatorship running the country. The government responded — there is no getting around this — like monsters. First, security forces quietly killed activists. Then they started kidnapping, raping, torturing and killing activists and their family members, including a lot of children, dumping their mutilated bodies by the sides of roads. Then troops began simply opening fire on protests. Eventually, civilians started shooting back.

Fighting escalated from there until it was a civil war. Armed civilians organized into rebel groups. The army deployed across the country, shelling and bombing whole neighborhoods and towns, trying to terrorize people into submission. They've also allegedly used chemical weapons, which is a big deal for reasons I'll address

below. Volunteers from other countries joined the rebels, either because they wanted freedom and democracy for Syria or, more likely, because they are jihadists who hate Syria's secular government. The rebels were gaining ground for a while and now it looks like Assad is coming back. There is no end in sight.

[...]

6. Why hasn't the United States fixed this yet?

Because it can't. There are no viable options. Sorry.

The military options are all bad. Shipping arms to rebels, even if it helps them topple Assad, would ultimately empower jihadists and worsen rebel in-fighting, probably leading to lots of chaos and possibly a second civil war (the United States made this mistake during Afghanistan's early 1990s civil war, which helped the Taliban take power in 1996). Taking out Assad somehow would probably do the same, opening up a dangerous power vacuum. Launching airstrikes or a "no-fly zone" could suck us in, possibly for years, and probably wouldn't make much difference on the ground. An Iraq-style ground invasion would, in the very best outcome, accelerate the killing, cost a lot of U.S. lives, wildly exacerbate anti-Americanism in a boon to jihadists and nationalist dictators alike, and would require the United States to impose order for years across a country full of people trying to kill each other. Nope.

The one political option, which the Obama administration has been pushing for, would be for the Assad regime and the rebels to strike a peace deal. But there's no indication that either side is interested in that, or that there's even a viable unified rebel movement with which to negotiate.

It's possible that there was a brief window for a Libya-style military intervention early on in the conflict. But we'll never really know.

[...]

8. Come on, what's the big deal with chemical weapons? Assad kills 100,000 people with bullets and bombs but we're freaked out over 1,000 who maybe died from poisonous gas? That seems silly.

You're definitely not the only one who thinks the distinction is arbitrary and artificial. But there's a good case to be made that this is a rare opportunity, at least in theory, for the United States to make the war a little bit less terrible — and to make future wars less terrible.

The whole idea that there are rules of war is a pretty new one: the practice of war is thousands of years old, but the idea that we can regulate war to make it less terrible has been around for less than a century. The institutions that do this are weak and inconsistent; the rules are frail and not very well observed. But one of the world's few quasi-successes is the "norm" (a fancy way of saying a rule we all agree to follow) against chemical weapons. This norm is frail enough that Syria could drastically weaken it if we ignore Assad's use of them, but it's also strong enough that it's worth protecting. So it's sort of a low-hanging fruit: firing a few cruise missiles doesn't cost us much and can maybe help preserve this really hard-won and valuable norm against chemical weapons.

[...]