Backgrounder on Syria: History

Before WWI, Syria was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. During the war, Syria was claimed by the French in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which split up the Ottoman Empire into French and British spheres of influence.

After WWI, the League of Nations put Syria under French mandate and by 1920 France had established a puppet regime in Damascus. French policy towards Syria favored the rural elites and Christian religious minorities, and in 1922 France carved a section of land out of Syria to be a separate country, modern day Lebanon. These actions sparked a sense of Syrian nationalism among the masses and led to multiple nationalist uprisings, violently suppressed by the French.

With the fall of France during WWII, Syria's government was unstable and subject to influence by the Vichy French and Free French political movements. Syria declared independence in 1941; in 1946 French troops evacuated and left Syria to govern itself. The French left no political structure, however, and soon multiple political parties arose. Among those parties was the Baath Party, which represented the ideas of two Damascus educators, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar. The Baathist movement, a secular political party, combined Arab nationalism and Arab socialism and strived to gain independence from Western influence.

With the hopes of eliminating the Syrian Communist Party as a political force, the Baath negotiated a political union with Egypt, creating the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR existed as a Syrian-Egyptian union from 1958-1961, when a Syrian military coup ended the relationship. It was at this time that Hafiz al-Assad, who served on the military committee during the coup, began his rise to power.

Through a bloodless coup in 1970, Hafiz al-Assad took over as president of Syria. He established a socialist, secular government which resulting in initial support from members of religious minorities, including the Alawites (of which Assad was a member), Druze, and Christians. Further, his government achieved some popularity for bringing stability to Syria and implementing a series of social reforms and infrastructure projects. Through the course of his regime, however, Hafiz al-Assad's authoritarian government operated a vast web of police informers and agents that acted to violently repress any opposition through arrests, torture, and execution.

Following the death of Hafiz al-Assad in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad was confirmed as president by an unopposed referendum. While there was great hope for economic and social reform, it was quickly suppressed by Bashar al-Assad's government. His reign has been known for human rights violations, economic lapses, and extreme corruption.

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