

Rivalries and rifts behind Syria's agonies

This week, the Syrian army has launched a bloody crackdown against democracy protesters. Foreign leaders are appalled. But religious and ethnic conflicts muddy the waters.



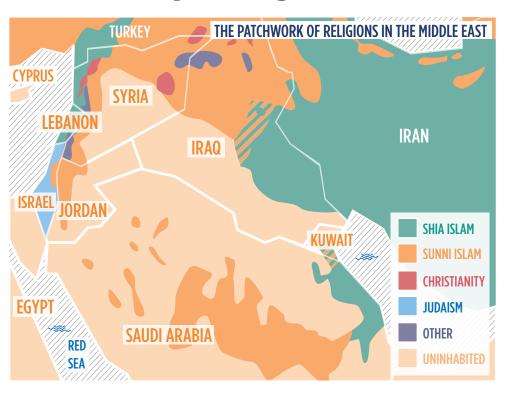
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ince December 2010, a wave of protest has been sweeping the Middle East. Oppressed populations have risen against dictators. Egyptians and Tunisians have overthrown their governments. Libya is locked in bloody civil war.

Now Syria is in turmoil. After weeks of protest, and occasional promises of reform from the government of Bashar al-Assad, the conflict has turned horrifyingly violent. Assad, apparently abandoning early efforts to appease his unhappy citizens, has sent tanks and special forces to crush dissent.

In cities where protesters were strongest, snipers have been shooting unarmed civilians in the streets. More than 400 are reported to have died so far. Hundreds more have simply disappeared.

Western leaders look on in consternation. They may suspend trade and diplomatic links with Syria, although military intervention is not being considered.



But the Syrian uprising is not a simple story of the people versus the dictator. To understand why, you have to look back to the years when the borders of Middle Eastern countries were being drawn.

For hundreds of years, countries like Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were part of the Turkish Empire. During the First World War, Turkey fought on the German side and was defeated in 1918. The victorious allies divided the Middle East into territories, ruled by the West.

After the Second World War, these territories gained independence. But the borders were crudely drawn. New countries were left with mixed populations, with Christians, Jews and followers of various Muslim sects mixing uneasily.

So how does this affect the Syrian protests? Bashar al-Assad belongs to the Alawi religious group, a minority Muslim sect which is part of the Shia branch of Islam. Alawis control most senior posts in

the army, and are a majority among the ruling classes.

The protesters, meanwhile, are mainly Sunni, like the majority of the general population. Sunnis have traditionally regarded Alawis as dangerous heretics.

Then there are Syria's many Christians. They may want democracy, but they have prospered under Assad, and fear that a Sunni takeover could leave them vulnerable.

And watching from afar are the big regional powers, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, which is friendly with the Alawi government.

FRACTURED NATION

The Syrian protesters are honest in their desire for freedom. Assad is acting as a tyrant, and his brutal repression is deplorable. But political analysts know that the dictator and his people are also caught up in an old and dangerous story of religious strife.



Q&A

Q Is this sort of conflict a problem all over the Middle East?

A Yes. Europeans sometimes see the region as a unified area, under the banner of Islam. But in fact, there are very many different groups, often very hostile to one another.

Q How many exactly?

A Sunni and Shia are the main divisions.

But there are also Wahhabis, Salafis, Druze, Jews, Christians (including Orthodox, Maronite, Catholic and Syriac churches), Sufis, Alawis, Yazidis and many more.

Q What do Iran and Saudi Arabia have to do with it?

A One is Shia, the other Sunni. And they both support their own sect in other countries. The unrest in Bahrain, for example, saw a Saudi-backed Sunni monarchy crush protests from the Shia population, who may have had Iranian support. Iran supports Shia militias in Lebanon and Iraq, while Saudi Arabia supports Sunni regimes in places like Jordan and Yemen.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Religion divides more than it unites.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?