



#chicagoGirl

A Study Guide
for

A Place in the World
CFI Education

Prepared by Roberta McNair



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About the Film



Ala'a Basatneh and the Syrian revolution

Director/Screenwriter **Joe Piscatella**

Producers **Joe Piscatella, Mark Rinehart**

Director of Photography in Syria **Bassel Shahade**

From her childhood bedroom in the Chicago suburbs, an American teenage girl uses social media to coordinate the revolution in Syria. Armed with Facebook, Twitter, Skype and camera phones, she helps her social network “on the ground” in Syria brave snipers and shelling in the streets to show the world the human rights atrocities of a dictator. But just because the world can see the violence doesn’t mean the world can help. As the revolution rages on, everyone in the network must decide what is the most effective way to fight a dictator: social media or AK-47s.

#chicagoGirl was shot over the course of two years. Shooting took place in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Damascus, and Homs. For shoots in Syria, a Canon 7D and an iPhone 4 were smuggled in. All Syria footage was smuggled out on three hard drives over the course of the first 18 months of the revolution.

<http://www.chicagogirlfilm.com/#!press-notes/c10fk>

Screenings and Awards

November 2013. International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), Amsterdam; Winner, Doc U Award (best film awarded by a youth jury)

February 2014. Human Rights/Human Wrongs, Oslo

February 2014. Cinema for Peace and Justice Award from the Cinema for Peace Foundation, Berlin

March 2014. #ChicagoGirl and Ala’a Basatneh are recognized by Amnesty International as one of their 10 Human Rights Heroes of 2014

March 2014. One World, Prague

March 2014. Amnesty International’s Movies That Matter, The Hague; Winner, Golden Butterfly in the Student’s Choice category

April 2014. Stockholm International Film Festival

May 2014. Seattle International Film Festival, Seattle

May 2014. DocEdge, Auckland

May 2014. Planete+Doc, Warsaw; Winner of the Award of the Emigration Museum (best film about migration and expatriates). Special Mention for Canon of Cinematography Award

June 2014. Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh

July 2014. Giffoni International Film Festival, Italy; Winner, GEN DOC (best documentary)

September 2014. International Cinematographers Film Festival—Manaki Bros., Republic of Macedonia

September 2014. Take One Action Film Festival, Glasgow

October 2014. Festival Des Liberties, Brussels

October 2014. Hollywood Film Festival, Los Angeles

October 2014. Austin Film Festival

June 2014. Edinburgh International Film Festival, Edinburgh

October 2014. Kino Saga, Lithuania

November 2014. Leeds International Film Festival, Leeds

November 2014. Napa Valley Film Festival, Napa

November 2014. Sausalito Film Festival, Sausalito

November 2014. Crocevia di Sguardi, Turin, Italy

November 2014. St. Louis International Film Festival

November 2014. Anti-Racism Film Festival, Stockholm

November 2014. Tallin Black Nights, Estonia

December 2014. Ajyal Youth Film Festival, Qatar

http://www.chicagogirlfilm.com/#!screening_press/c1t44

This young girl is leading a revolution—via YouTube, 6,000 miles from home

By Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, July 11, 2014

As a 22-year-old still living at home with her family in Chicago, college student Ala'a Basatneh doesn't seem like a typical revolutionary.

Born in Syria, Basatneh moved to the U.S. at a young age and grew up as an ordinary suburban teenager. But after hearing about a group of Syrian children being brutally punished for writing anti-government slogans on their school walls, she used Facebook to contact Syrian protesters, joining the revolution from 6,000 miles away.

As the subject of the documentary *#chicagoGirl*, Basatneh has become one of the public faces of social media activism, using YouTube and Facebook to help citizen journalists spread the word of their fight against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime. The film offers an interesting glimpse into how a 19-year-old college freshman went from hanging out at the mall to spending all her free time editing protest footage and translating revolutionary slogans, becoming a key political activist in a country she hadn't visited in over a decade.

In the U.S., the term "hashtag activism" is usually uttered with a kind of derisive sneer, the implication being that social media can't be used to effect any kind of "real" change. But in Syria, sites like Twitter and Facebook are an integral part of the revolution.

While the Arab Spring brought down the Tunisian government in 28 days and the Egyptian government in 18, the longevity of Syria's revolution means that activists find it difficult to

retain the interest of the international media. But if an activist can post clear YouTube footage of a protest and make sure that it's shared on social media, then it's far more likely to wind up on TV. Part of Basatneh's job is to help citizen journalists make their work as accessible as possible to what can best be described as overseas audiences.



Bashar al-Assad as the Grim Reaper

But as her role became increasingly important, her safety became less secure. Basatneh received death threats and was followed around her home neighborhood in Illinois. For her own safety, she used to be escorted to and from class by campus security.

#chicagoGirl is a film about the real-world impact of social media, in a situation where people are risking their lives to share information online. It's also a story about idealism and obsession, about a teenage girl who decided to dedicate her life to helping people she has never even met: the polar opposite of the apathetic slacktivist stereotype that we often see characterized by people who aren't familiar with the power of social media.

Following a screening at the Edinburgh Film Festival, we Skyped with Ala'a Basatneh and *#chicagoGirl* director Joe Piscatella to talk about the film, the revolution, and how *#chicagoGirl* has inspired teens and college students across the U.S.

First of all, how did this film come about? Joe, did you specifically set out to make a film about Ala'a, or were you intending to make a broader documentary about social media in the Syrian revolution?

Joe Piscatella: I started out to make a broader documentary about social media and revolution. We had done some talking, had interviews, and I realized I wanted a personal story to illustrate what was going on.

I read a blurb about Ala'a getting death threats on her Facebook wall from the Syrian regime, so I found her and told her about this film. And she finally said to me, "Joe, you're asking me all the wrong questions." I thought to myself, you know, "My goodness, I'm the one making the movie, you don't even know what I'm trying to make." She said, "Well, I'm helping to coordinate protests in the revolution," and it sounded too good to be true ... But interesting enough that two days later, my producer and I sat with Ala'a and watched her do it.

Ala'a, how did you get involved with the revolution in the first place? In the documentary, you talk about being a typical high school girl in your teens, but it's clear that quite a transition took place.



Syrian children get ready for a demonstration

Ala'a Basatneh: I decided to help first when I saw the group of children that decided to write "We want to topple the regime" on their school walls. And seeing that they were tortured, I believe one was killed ... to me that was not an OK thing to learn about that's happening in the country where I was born. I decided to reach out for activists, and this is exactly what I told them: "I'm willing to help you with everything and anything I can do for you guys to keep going."

Could you walk me through a typical day in the life of Ala'a Basatneh? The kind of things you do on social media, and how you balance college with your work as an activist?

Basatneh: It's really not balanced. I'm on my phone 24/7, on my laptop whenever I can. In my classes, at work, at home, all the time because of the time difference and because of how important it is to keep in contact with the activists on the ground. It's not that it's six hours online and then the rest of the time I'm not; it's that I'm constantly online. When the movie was shot, I would get Skype calls at four in the morning from activists in Syria, asking me to translate banners that they would be carrying in their protests, so it can end up on international media, on CNN and BBC.

Could you give me a rundown of the type of ways you use social media, through Google Maps and Twitter and so on?

Basatneh: You know, [Twitter] DMs for a period of time were one of the safest ways to contact activists on the ground because for some reason, they couldn't crack the codes and get into those messages. Facebook and Skype ... I keep in contact with activists about helping coordinate protests, evacuating a group of people from neighborhood A to neighborhood B. That comes along with Google Maps, looking at what neighborhood is the closest, the safest. Contacting the activists in that specific neighborhood, helping the families that don't normally have a home or are at risk of a strike from the regime.

The documentary ends with you traveling to Syria for the first time since you left as a child. What kind of impact do you think that had on your work back in the U.S., the way you conducted your social media campaign?

Basatneh: I decided to travel to the liberated areas where the regime was not in control, bringing in medications and cameras and tech equipment to help the citizen journalists and ill people on the ground. I felt like I did more than when I sat on a laptop and talked to them, that I actually took that action and went and saw them and sat down with them, experienced what it felt like to have a TNT barrel bomb dropped six buildings away from me. That the risk of actually being there between them overall was like ... I felt like I was on a different planet, honestly.

So now that the film has come out, what kind of effect do you think it's had on your work? Are people at college more aware of you and what you do?

Basatneh: Yeah, as a matter of fact: One of my friends that I knew back in high school stopped me yesterday. She saw the trailer for the documentary, it hasn't even been screened in Chicago yet, so she's telling me that she really wants to learn more about Syria.

For me that's one of the greatest accomplishments of this movie. It's raising awareness, and it's opening the eyes of college students and high school students that don't know what's going on in Syria. One of the funny messages I got was a friend of mine—I didn't know him much but we took a history course in college together. When the trailer was out, he sent me a message saying, "Now I know what you've been doing all that time on your laptop in history class." They just looked at me as "that girl on her laptop."

When you were filming the documentary, were you aware that it was going to have this kind of response from people in their teens and early 20s, or were you just looking to inform people about Ala'a's work?

Piscatella: What really attracted me to the subject matter was this idea that there were these young people using these tools that so many of us take for granted and just use every day for our own social benefit. They were using them in these very brave ways, to do something very heroic.

When I was making this film, it didn't dawn on me that it would resonate so much with teenagers and college-age students. It really didn't cross my mind. But a little anecdote that illustrates that is when we had a screening and afterwards a Q&A with me and Ala'a.

A gentleman who was probably 50 stood up, and I don't remember his exact question, but the gist of it was, "I think it's very naive for Ala'a and for you as a filmmaker to think that in the scheme of this Syrian crisis, that Ala'a has made a difference, that she's really effecting any kind of change. Syria is a very complicated place, things have

gotten progressively worse, and I think it's naive to think that she's making a difference."

It was one of those questions where as a director, I'm not even sure where to begin to answer it. But before I could open my mouth, two teenage girls at the back of the theater stood up and they said: "She's already made a difference. She's using social media tools that you think are just a novelty, and if you don't see that she's helping individual people and that she's made a difference in their lives, then you're no longer part of this conversation."

<http://www.dailydot.com/entertainment/chicagogirl-hashtag-activism-syria-interview/>



From Ala'a's Twitter feed

Ala'a Basatneh

Only being a college student, Ala'a Basatneh has accomplished things way beyond her years. Along with studying and working full time at schools in the city, Basatneh has gained a distinguished honor globally in the political world. Whether she is attending high level meetings, meeting with congressmen and/or Foreign Affairs Ministers for Iraq, Morocco, Japan, UAE, UK and Italy regarding political issues, or

Secretary Hilary Clinton, she is still just a student as well as someone's daughter.

Furthermore, Ala'a Basatneh has kept up with her educational goals while traveling around the world for these meetings. Having a good education is still her number one priority. Basatneh has not let the honor and esteem from these meetings affect her. Volunteering is something she has done ever since she was 14 years old.



Ala'a speaks at an Amnesty International event

Most importantly, Basatneh is very proud of her culture and her past, even teaching Arabic to a class of 36 students alone at a community center. Building a bridge between the Arab World and the United States of America is her ultimate goal. Majoring in political science and gaining experience from these meetings is her way of helping others see the universal connection between us all.

Ala'a Basatneh has been featured in international newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Basatneh is the main character of a Hollywood Documentary, #chicagoGirl that will be on air in the upcoming months. Balancing her political activism, education, work, volunteering, and personal life is positively challenging. However, nothing is impossible for this young girl.

<http://about.me/Alaabasatneh>

Syrians Abroad Report Harassment and Intimidation

By J. David Goodman

October 3, 2011

At first, Alaa Basatneh kept quiet after receiving a threatening e-mail to her Facebook account in mid-August, worried that it would frighten her parents.

A 19-year-old Syrian activist who lives outside of Chicago with her family, Ms. Basatneh is one of several people who administer a prominent antigovernment Facebook page, Syrian Days of Rage, and coordinate with protesters to post their messages, photos and videos.

"I was in denial," she said. "I was doing all this, but I thought they can't reach me. And then the minute I saw the e-mail, I thought, there's no more denial. My name is on the watchlist. I was scared."

Ms. Basatneh is one of several Syrian activists living abroad who say they have faced harassment and intimidation, and received threats to family members back home for speaking out against the government of President Bashar al-Assad during months of protests against his rule.

A report from Amnesty International released on Monday gathers dozens of anecdotes from activists living in Europe, the United States, Canada and Chile who say they have been insulted by telephone and e-mail, videotaped during demonstrations in front of Syria's overseas embassies and, in at least one case, physically assaulted for expressing their views outside of Syria.

Those with immediate family and close friends still living in Syria also reported threats, interrogations and in some cases beatings carried out by government agents against their loved ones back home.

In its most prominent example, the report details the case of Malek Jandali, a 38-year-old pianist in Atlanta whose parents were attacked in July in the restive southern city of Homs. The attack came less than a week after Mr. Jandali played a protest song he composed during demonstrations in front of the White House. Photographs of the severely bruised faces of Mr. Jandali's mother, 66, and his father, 73, were

published by several news organizations late last month.

"They told us, 'If you don't behave your son, we will behave you,'" the father, Mamoun Jandali, said in a television interview with Al Jazeera last week. Mr. Jandali brought his parents to live with him in the United States after the attack.

After Mr. Jandali's story was first reported in *The Wall Street Journal* in August, Syria's ambassador to the United States, Imad Moustapha, told the *Journal* that the allegations were "slander and sheer lies."

The assault reported to the human rights group occurred in Paris after a demonstration there in late August. Rabee al-Hayek, a 35-year-old software engineer and French resident for seven years, said he and a group of demonstrators were set upon by a small group of men and women carrying pro-Assad banners. "Three of us were hurt, including a young woman," he said.

Amnesty International said its report showed the need for Western countries to look into whether such instances are being orchestrated by the Syrian government in order to stop Syrians living abroad from supporting activists at home.

A spokeswoman for the State Department called the Syrian ambassador, Imad Mustapha, in early July to express concern over such activities.

"The United States government takes very seriously reports of any foreign government actions attempting to intimidate individuals in the United States," the spokeswoman, Victoria Nuland, said at a July news conference. "We are also investigating reports that the Syrian government has sought retribution against Syrian family members for the actions of their relatives in the United States exercising their lawful rights in this country and will respond accordingly."

Ms. Basatneh's case, by contrast, was among the milder ones in the report. The e-mail she received, titled "crazy man" and sent from an account registered to the unsubtle name of pureevil@live.com, threatened to make "an

example" out of her if she ever returned to Syria. It was the only one she has received so far.

She said that while she could not prove the e-mail had come from an agent or supporter of the Syrian government, she said it arrived only days after a friend and protest organizer had been detained, beaten and forced to divulge his Facebook account information by Syrian security forces. "That's how they got to me," she said. "And that's why we try our best to not have the admins inside Syria. Because they will find them, interrogate them, get their password and hack the page."

She said in a telephone interview that she was not afraid of risking further harassment for speaking out and was still spending more than 10 hours a day posting reports on Facebook, communicating with activists on Skype and acting as a conduit for Syria's scattered groups of protesters.



The Basatneh family

"Before the Syrian revolution, I didn't have any friends in Syria or even in the Syrian community," said Ms. Basatneh, who has not been to Syria since coming to the United States in 2001. "Since the revolution, I'm connected. I live it minute by minute right now."

http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/03/syrians-abroad-report-harassment-and-intimidation/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

About the Filmmakers

Joe Piscatella



Director, screenwriter, and producer Joe Piscatella (@jpiscatella) has written on numerous film and television projects. His screen credits include Disney's *Underdog*, *Ozzy & Drix* for Warner Bros. and *Stark Raving Mad* for NBC. He has written television pilots for 20th Century Fox and Touchstone Television and has also done production rewrites on acclaimed animated movies for Dreamworks Animation and Sony Animation. *#chicagoGirl* is his directorial debut and his first documentary film.

Director's Statement

I faced two major challenges when I set out in early 2011 to make *#chicagoGirl*. The first was overcoming background. I write talking-animal movies. That's my niche in Hollywood. I had to jump from an imaginary world of talking dogs into a very real world where my subjects were facing death on a daily basis, where I had to orchestrate smuggling cameras into war-torn Syria and coordinate smuggling out hard drives of footage. The second challenge was to make difficult subject matter accessible to an audience. In a world of 24-hour news, Facebook newsfeeds, YouTube and Twitter feeds, we're inundated with graphic images coming out of places like Syria. I wanted to find stories that put a human face on the narrative. In searching for subjects to follow, I came across a blurb in a small American

newspaper about a 19-year-old American girl in Chicago, Ala'a Basatneh, who had received a death threat from the Syrian regime on her Facebook wall for online work she had done for the revolution. I found Ala'a on Facebook and in our initial phone call, she abruptly said, "You're asking me all the wrong questions." I was taken aback. I was the director of this film. How would she know what questions I should be asking? Then she told me that from her childhood bedroom in suburban Chicago, she was one of the major coordinators of the Syrian revolution. Two days later, my producer, Mark Rinehart, and I flew to Chicago and watched her in action. Using Facebook, Twitter and Google Maps, she organized a protest for her social network in Damascus. I knew we had our core story. Through Ala'a, I connected with people "on the ground" in her social network. I was floored by their passion and their innovativeness. I used social media and the Internet to look up old friends and get the best deal on sneakers. Ala'a and her social network were using these tools to overthrow a government. *#chicagoGirl* is about more than the new tools of revolution. It's about the people who are now enabled by the new tools to make a difference in the world.

Mark Rinehart



Producer Mark Rinehart is an Emmy-nominated producer and director whose network

credits include programming for Travel, Oprah Winfrey Network, and Current Television. He produced *Decoding Deepak*, (a feature film on the relationship between Gotham and Deepak Chopra). While at Current Television, Mark developed and executive produced the critically acclaimed *Embedded* music series. In-depth profiles of artists ranging from Common to Ben Harper earned the show positive reviews in *Rolling Stone* and *Billboard* magazine. He directed the pilot episode that featured Mos Def's recent tour of Japan. Mark also executive produced the Emmy-nominated *TV Free Burning Man* flagship series. Prior to his tenure at Current, he produced multiple episodes of the PBS series, *Spark*. His short film, *Jumpers* premiered at SXSW and screened in multiple festivals, including Silverdocs and San Francisco International. He received an MA in documentary film from Stanford University.

Bassel Shahade



Bassel Shahade was a 28-year-old Fulbright Scholar in the graduate film program at Syracuse University. When the revolution in Syria began, Bassel took a leave of absence from Syracuse and returned to Damascus to film the historic events in his home city. He was one of the first protestors to take to the streets in Damascus and used his worldwide social network to bring awareness to human rights violations in Syria. In May 2012, Bassel sneaked into war-torn Homs to train citizen journalists in how to more effectively film in the streets. Bassel was killed by Syrian government forces while filming with his students. Bassel's credits include the short films *Christmas In Homs* and *Saturday Morning Gift*.

<http://www.chicagogirlfilm.com/#!press-notes/c10fk>

Bassel Al Shahade, Syracuse University Student Killed While Filming a Movie in Syria

By George M. Walsh, May 29, 2012

ALBANY, N.Y. — A student filmmaker who was a well-known Syrian activist was killed while filming the ongoing violence in his homeland, Syracuse University said Tuesday.

Bassel Al Shahade died Monday in the embattled city of Homs, once a stronghold of opposition to Syrian President Bashar Assad, University Chancellor Nancy Cantor said. She did not have details of his death.

Shahade, a 28-year-old from Damascus, was a Fulbright Scholar pursuing a master of fine arts in film degree at the university's College of Visual and Performing Arts, Cantor said in a statement.

Owen Shapiro, a film professor and coordinator of the film program at the central New York university, said Shahade was well aware of the dangers he faced when he left school after the fall semester but that he was determined to tell the story of the uprising.

"He said: 'I have to be with my people. I can't be here with what's going on in Syria,'" Shapiro recalled.

"He was very brave and willing to take the risk," he said. "He wanted the story told of what was happening in his country."

Shapiro got a call late Monday from another graduate student in the Gaza Strip who said Shahade, whom he remembered as outgoing with a sense of humor and only respect for other people, had been killed. Officials from Fulbright told Shapiro he had been shot while filming.

Amer Matar, a friend of Shahade who now lives in Germany, told *The Associated Press* by phone that Shahade was an activist even before the uprising began 15 months ago, when there was really no way for Syrians in the country to express opposition to the government.

The two met a year before the uprising, when Matar was in charge of a program to give aid to Syrians displaced by drought and Shahade was

part of a team making a film on the effort. Matar said he made another film about problems faced by women in Syria.

“He is among the true Syrian heroes who carried cameras,” he said.

His death comes amid reports of a massacre last week in Houla. Matar said Shahade was in Houla over the weekend to film the aftermath of the violence that killed 108 people, including many women and children.

In January 2011, Shahade and Matar helped organize a protest in solidarity with the Egyptian revolution in front of the Egyptian embassy in Damascus that was swiftly broken up by security forces. When the uprising in Syria started, the two friends joined right away, attending protests, shooting videos and organizing with other activists online.

They were detained for two days in August at another protest.

Matar said Shahade wanted to study in the U.S. but felt compelled to return home.

“He had very important scholarship to study film there, but as he told me, he couldn’t live there because there was a revolution in Syria and he said there were historic events, so he had to be there to film them,” Matar said.

Two months ago, Shahade traveled to Homs to train activist videographers there and to work on a film of his own.

The last time they spoke was at a meeting in Syria with other activists, before Matar traveled to Germany.

“He was working on a project, a film about the anniversary of the revolution,” he said. “He was still excited like all the Syrians participating in the revolution.”

Cantor, the university chancellor, said plans to memorialize Shahade on campus will be made public in the coming weeks.

“As a university community, we must deplore the senseless violence by Syrian government forces that took the life of Bassel, and countless others over these many months,” she said. “We

hope and expect that growing international outrage, and yesterday’s condemnation of the Syrian government by the U.N. Security Council will create a more peaceful and nonviolent path to freedom for the people of Syria.”



http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/29/bassel-al-shahade-syracuse_n_1554168.html

About Syria

The Syrian Revolution in a Single Paragraph

May 3, 2012

This sums up the past year pretty well:

“Bashar has not got the message. I, for example, loved him when he took over. I thought he would be different to his father,” he said. He pointed to a part of his little finger. “If he had just given us this little bit of freedom, we would have remained quiet. But whenever he slaughters someone from our families he simply increases our desire to kill him.”

—Assem, a 36-year-old laborer who has joined the rebels

<http://mideastposts.com/middle-east-politics-analysis/the-syrian-revolution-in-a-single-paragraph/>, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/04/escaped-homs-syrian-forces-closed?cat=world&type=article>

Who Supports the Syrian Regime

The Backers of President Bashar al-Assad

Support for the Syrian regime comes from a significant section of the Syrian population which sees the government of President Bashar al-Assad as the best guarantor of security, or fears material and political losses should the regime fall. Equally, the regime can fall back on staunch support by several foreign governments who share some of Syria’s strategic interests.

1. Domestic Supporters

Religious Minorities

Syria is a majority Sunni Muslim country, but President Assad belongs to the Alawite Muslim minority. Most Alawites rallied behind Assad when the Syrian uprising erupted in 2011. They now fear retaliation by Sunni Islamist rebel groups, tying the community’s fate even more closely to the survival of the regime.

Assad also enjoys solid support from Syria’s other religious minorities, which have for decades enjoyed a relatively secure position under the secular regime of the ruling Baath

Party. Many in Syria’s Christian communities—and many secular Syrians from all religious backgrounds—fear this politically repressive but religiously tolerant dictatorship will be replaced by a Sunni Islamist regime that will discriminate against the minorities.

Armed Forces

The backbone of the Syrian state, the senior officers in the armed forces and the security apparatus have proven remarkably loyal to the Assad family. While thousands of soldiers deserted the army, the command-and-control hierarchy remained more or less intact.



Assad dripping in the blood he has spilled

This is partly due to the stark predominance of Alawites and members of the Assad clan in the most sensitive command posts. In fact, Syria’s best-equipped ground force, the 4th Armored Division, is commanded by Assad’s brother Maher and staffed almost exclusively with Alawites.

Big Business and Public Sector

Once a revolutionary movement, the ruling Baath Party has long evolved into a party of the Syrian establishment. The regime is supported by powerful merchant families whose loyalty is rewarded with state contracts and import/export licenses. Syria’s big business naturally prefers existing order to uncertain political change, and has by and large stayed away from the uprising.

There are wider social groups who have for years lived off state largesse, making them reluctant to turn against the regime even if they

are privately critical of the corruption and police repression. This includes top public servants, labor and professional unions, and the state media. In fact, large sections of Syria's urban middle class see Assad's regime as the lesser evil rather than Syria's divided opposition.

2. Foreign Backers

Russia

Russia's support for the Syrian regime is motivated by extensive trade and military interests that go back to the Soviet era. Russia's strategic interest in Syria centers on access to the Tartous port, Russia's only navy outpost in the Mediterranean, but Moscow also has investments and weapons contracts with Damascus to protect.

Iran

The relationship between Iran and Syria is based on a unique convergence of interests. Iran and Syria resent the US influence in the Middle East, both have supported Palestinian resistance against Israel, and both had shared a bitter common enemy in the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.



Rebel fighters train in northern Syria

Iran has backed Assad with shipments of oil and preferential trade agreements. It is widely believed that the regime in Tehran also provides Assad with military advice, training, and weapons.

Hezbollah

The Lebanese Shiite militia and political party is part of the so-called "Axis of Resistance," an anti-Western alliance with Iran and Syria. The

Syrian regime has for years facilitated the flow of Iranian weapons through its territory to bolster Hezbollah's arsenal in the group's confrontation with Israel.

This supporting role from Damascus is now under threat should Assad fall, forcing Hezbollah to contemplate how deeply it should get involved in the civil war next door. In Spring 2013, Hezbollah confirmed presence of its fighters inside Syria, fighting alongside Syrian government troops against the rebels.

<http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/Who-Supports-The-Syrian-Regime.htm>

Saudi Arabia and Syrian Uprising

Why Saudi Arabia supports the Syrian opposition

Saudi Foreign Policy: Breaking Syria's Alliance with Iran

Saudi support for the Syrian opposition is motivated by a decades-long desire to break the alliance between Syria and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia's chief rival for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East.

Saudi reaction to the Arab Spring has been two-fold: containing the unrest before it reaches Saudi territory, and ensuring that Iran does not benefit from any changes to the regional balance of power. ...

Growing Saudi-Syrian Tension

Traditionally constructive relations between Damascus and Riyadh began to unravel rapidly under Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, particularly after the 2003 US-led intervention in Iraq. The coming to power of a Shiite government in Baghdad with close links to Iran unnerved the Saudis. Faced with Iran's growing regional clout, Saudi Arabia found it increasingly difficult to accommodate the interests of Tehran's chief Arab ally in Damascus.

Two major flashpoints have drawn Assad into an inevitable clash with the oil-rich kingdom:

- **Lebanon:** Syria is the main conduit for the flow of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah, a Shiite political party that commands the most

powerful militia in Lebanon. To contain Iranian influence in the country, Saudis have backed those Lebanese groups opposed to Hezbollah, particularly the Sunni Hariri family. The fall or substantial weakening of the pro-Iranian regime in Damascus would curtail Hezbollah's access to weapons, and greatly bolster Saudi allies in Lebanon.

- **Palestine:** Syria has traditionally supported radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas, who reject dialogue with Israel, while Saudi Arabia backs the rival Fatah of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who advocates peace talks. Hamas' violent takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2008, and lack of progress in Fatah-Israeli negotiations, have caused much embarrassment to Saudi diplomats. Weaning Hamas off its sponsors in Syria and Iran would be another major coup for Saudi foreign policy.

<http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/a/Saudi-Arabia-And-Syrian-Uprising.htm>

Syrian Civil War Explained

The Fight for the Middle East

Syrian civil war grew out of a popular uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011, part of Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East. The brutal response of the security forces against initially peaceful protests demanding democratic reform and end of repression triggered a violent reaction. An armed rebellion to the regime soon took hold across Syria, dragging the country into a full-scale civil war.

1. Main Issues: The Roots of the Conflict

The Syrian uprising started as a reaction to the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests across the Arab world inspired by the fall of the Tunisian regime in early 2011. But at the root of the conflict was anger over unemployment, decades of dictatorship, corruption and state violence under of the Middle East's most repressive regimes.

2. Why is Syria Important?

Syria's geographical position at the heart of the Levant* and its fiercely independent foreign policy make it a pivotal country in the eastern

part of the Arab world. A close ally of Iran and Russia, Syria has been in conflict with Israel since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, and has sponsored various Palestinian resistance groups. Part of Syria's territory, the Golan Heights, is under Israeli occupation.



The Levant

Syria is also a religiously mixed society and the increasingly sectarian nature of violence in some areas of the country has contributed to the wider Sunni-Shiite tension in the Middle East. International community fears that the conflict could spill over the border to affect the neighboring Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan, creating a regional disaster. For these reasons, global powers such as the US, European Union and Russia all play a role in the Syrian civil war.

3. The Main Players in the Conflict

The regime of Bashar al-Assad is relying on the armed forces and increasingly on pro-government paramilitary groups to fight the rebel militias. On the other side is a broad range of opposition groups, from Islamists to left-wing secular parties and youth activist groups, who agree on the need for Assad's departure, but share little common ground over what should happen next.

The most powerful opposition actor on the ground are hundreds of armed rebel groups, which have yet to develop a unified command.

Rivalry between various rebel outfits and the growing role of hardline Islamist fighters prolong the civil war, raising the prospect of years of instability and chaos even if Assad were to fall.

4. Is Civil War in Syria a Religious Conflict?

Syria is a diverse society, home to Muslims and Christians, a majority Arab country with a Kurdish and Armenian ethnic minority. Some religious communities tend to be more supportive of the regime than the others, fueling mutual suspicion and religious intolerance in many parts of the country.

President Assad belongs to the Alawite minority, an off-shoot of Shiite Islam. Most of the army generals are Alawites. The vast majority of armed rebels, on the other hand, come from the Sunni Muslim majority. The war has raised the tension between Sunnis and Shiites in the neighboring Lebanon and Iraq.



Assad paints the flag with Syrian blood

5. The Role of Foreign Powers

Syria's strategic importance has turned the civil war into an international contest for regional influence, with both sides drawing diplomatic and military support from various foreign sponsors. Russia, Iran, the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent Iraq and China, are the main allies of the Syrian regime.

Regional governments concerned about Iran's regional influence, on the other hand, back the opposition, particularly Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The calculation that whoever replaces Assad will be less friendly to the Iranian regime is

also behind the US and European support for the opposition.

Meanwhile, Israel sits on the sidelines, anxious about the growing instability on its northern border. Israeli leaders have threatened with intervention if Syria's chemical weapons fell in the hands of the Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.

6. Diplomacy: Negotiations or Intervention?

The United Nations and the Arab League have dispatched joint peace envoys to persuade both sides to sit at the negotiating table, with no success. The main reason for the paralysis of the international community are the disagreements between Western governments on one side, and Russia and China on the other, which hinders any decisive action by the United Nations Security Council.

At the same time, the West has been reluctant to intervene directly in the conflict, wary of the repeat of the debacle it had suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan. With no negotiated settlement in sight, the war is likely to continue until one side prevails militarily.

*Levant is an imprecisely defined region in the Middle East south of the Taurus Mountains, bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the west, and by the northern Arabian Desert and Upper Mesopotamia to the east.

[\[wikitravel.org/en/File:Levant.jpg\]](http://wikitravel.org/en/File:Levant.jpg)

<http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/Syrian-Civil-War-Explained.htm>

Al-Assad Family

The Assad family, it is fair to say, now enjoy a kind of global infamy, largely thanks to the ongoing civil war which has gripped Syria since 2011. The Assad family have controlled Syria for many years, and are a well-established political dynasty which has been involved in politics in this particular part of the Arab world since the early 20th century. The Assads are part of the minority Alawite sect, and belong to the Kalbiyya tribe.

Origins of Power

The Assad family traces its origins to Sulayman al-Wahhish, who lived in northern Syria's mountainous region, in the village of

Qardaha. They are members of the minority Alawite sect and belong to the Kalbiyya tribe.

Legend has it that a boastful Turkish wrestler came to Qardaha and claimed that he could beat anyone there in a fair wrestling match. Sulayman, who was a burly man not easily intimidated, stepped forward and accepted the Turk's challenge.

The two men began their battle, but it was ended almost immediately when Sulayman grabbed the Turk, effortlessly picked him up, and threw him into the dirt. It was a clear victory, and thenceforward the villagers referred to Sulayman as "al-Wahish," which translates to "the animal," "the savage," and/or "the wild man." Al-Wahish functioned as Sulayman's title and the village awarded his whole family this as their surname.

Sulayman continued to accumulate a great deal of honor for himself and his family, fighting against the Ottomans during the first world war. The Ottoman governor of the Aleppo Vilayet sent troops to the area to collect taxes and round up recruits. The troops reportedly were fought off by Sulayman and his friends, who were only armed with sabers and muskets.

Ali Sulayman al-Assad

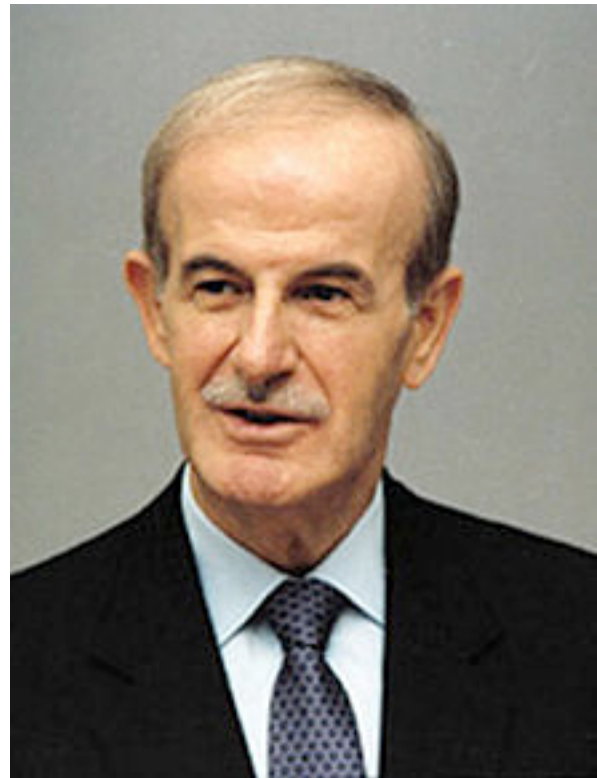
Sulayman's son, Ali Sulayman, was a similarly charismatic and capable warrior and politician, who opposed the French occupation of Syria. It is unclear whether Sulayman or Ali Sulayman's achievements prompted the four families who ruled that village to decree in the 1920s that the family would no longer be al-Wahish and would instead be called al-Assad—"the lion." The epithet became the family's formal surname in 1927.

All members of the extended Assad family stem from Ali Sulayman and his second wife Naissa, who came from a village in the An-Nusayriyah Mountains. It was their fourth son, Hafez, born in 1930, who would begin the process of establishing the family in the national political scene in Syria.

Hafez al-Assad

Ali Sulayman lived until 1963, long enough to see his son's rise to power. Hafez participated in

the 1963 Syrian coup d'état which brought the Syrian Regional Branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party to power, and was appointed Commander of the Syrian Air Force by the new leadership. In 1966, Hafez participated in a second coup, which toppled the traditional leaders of the Ba'ath Party, and brought a radical military faction headed by Salah Jadid to power. Hafez, a former pilot, was appointed defense minister by the new government. In 1970, Hafez al-Assad seized power by toppling Jadid, and he appointed himself the undisputed leader of Syria.



Hafez al-Assad in 1996

Hafez de-radicalized the Ba'ath government when he took power, opening more space to private property and strengthening the country's foreign relations with countries that his predecessor had deemed reactionary. He sided with the Soviet Union during the Cold War [1945–1989] in turn for support against Israel. While Hafez had forsaken pan-Arabism—or at least the pan-Arab concept of unifying the Arab world into one Arab nation—he sought to make Syria the defender of Arab interest against Israel.

When he took power, Hafez al-Assad instituted one-man rule and organized state

services into sectarian lines, with the Sunnis becoming the formal heads of political institutions, while the Alawites were given control over the military, intelligence, and security apparatuses. The formerly collegial powers of Ba'athist decision-making were curtailed and were transferred to the Syrian presidency. The Syrian government stopped being a one-party system in the normal sense of the word, and was turned into a one-party state with a strong presidency. To maintain this system, a massive cult of personality centered around the Assad family was created.

Although Hafez al-Assad used violent and brutal methods to suppress opposition, he established a more secular outlook in the country, with equal status granted to women during his era of control.

Hafez died of a heart attack in 2000. His son, Bashar al-Assad, succeeded him, though he had not been marked for power. The death of Bashar's older brother, Bassel, in a car crash in 1994 saw Bashar assume the position of heir to the Assad family's power.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafez_al-Assad, <http://syriancivilwar.net/the-al-assad-family/>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Assad_family, <http://www.newradiocomics.com/journal/2008/02/better-test-post.html>



Bashar al-Assad

Bashar al-Assad

In the 1980s, having established himself as the main source of initiative inside the Syrian government, Hafez al-Assad began looking for a successor. His first choice as successor was his brother Rifaat al-Assad, widely seen as corrupt. In 1983–84, when Assad's health was in doubt, Rifaat al-Assad attempted to seize power,

claiming that his brother wouldn't be fit to rule if he recovered. When Assad's health did improve, Rifaat al-Assad was exiled from the country.

Hafez's next choice of successor was his own son, Bassel al-Assad. However, things did not go according to plan, and in 1994 Bassel al-Assad died in a car accident. His third choice was his son Bashar al-Assad, who had no practical political experience. This move was met with open criticism within some quarters of the Syrian ruling class, but Hafez reacted by demoting several officials who opposed his succession plan. Hafez al-Assad died in 2000 and was succeeded by Bashar al-Assad as President of Syria, General Secretary of the Ba'ath Party, and Regional Secretary of the party's branch in Syria.

Bashar graduated from the medical school of Damascus University in 1988, and started to work as a physician in the army. Four years later, he attended postgraduate studies at the Western Eye Hospital, in London, specializing in ophthalmology. In 1994, after his elder brother Bassel was killed in a car crash, Bashar was recalled to Syria to take over Bassel's role as heir apparent. He entered the military academy, taking charge of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 1998.

Initially seen by the domestic and international community as a potential reformer, this expectation ceased after 2011's Arab Spring.

In 2011, a series of crackdowns and military sieges on Arab Spring protesters lead to the Syrian Civil War. The Syrian opposition, the United States, Canada, the European Union and the majority of the Arab League have subsequently called for al-Assad's resignation from the presidency. During the Syrian Civil War, Bashar was personally implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity by the United Nations, and was the top of a list of individuals indicted for the greatest responsibility in war crimes for prosecution by the International Criminal Court.

In late April 2014, Bashar announced he would run for a third term in Syria's first multi-candidate direct presidential election in decades, amid serious concerns by the European Union,

the United States and other countries regarding the legitimacy of this vote and the effect it will have on peace talks with the Syrian Opposition.

Bashar al-Assad, president of Syria since 2000, was elected to the presidency on June 3, 2014, with 88.7% of the votes cast. In this first election held for president that allowed candidates to challenge the incumbent on a ballot (rather than holding a referendum)—a result of the Syrian constitutional referendum in 2012—two candidates out of the 24 who submitted applications to run met the constitutional criteria for candidacy. The candidates running against Assad were Hassan Abdullah al-Nouri, from the National Initiative for Administration and Change in Syria (NIACS), a 54 year old MP from Damascus, and Maher Abd Al-Hafiz Hajjar, formerly from the People's Will Party, a 43 year old MP from Aleppo, who ran as an independent. Assad's Ba'ath party garnered 10,319,723 votes, the NIACS earned 500,279 votes, and the independent candidate received 372,301 votes.



"The Dictator's Alleged Victory"

In spite of observers from more than 30 countries, who declared the election was "free, fair, and transparent," its legitimacy has been called into question because of the lack of independent monitoring. The Gulf Cooperation Council, the European Union and the United States have all dismissed the election as illegitimate.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, an estimated 150,000 Syrians have been killed and one third of the country's population of 23 million (some 7 million) have been displaced, with 2.5 million as refugees in foreign countries. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned that amid the ongoing war and large-scale displacement of Syrian citizens, "such elections are incompatible with the letter and spirit of the Geneva communique" and would "damage prospects of a political solution with the opposition."

Bashar was sworn in for his third seven-year term, on July 16, 2014, in the presidential palace in Damascus.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bashar_al-Assad, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hafez_al-Assad, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_presidential_election,_2014

Diaries of a Little Dictator: Syrian artists puppet the regime

May 31, 2014

Even finger puppet shows can be revolutionary. Or at least they can be satirical.

Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator—also called *Massasit Matti* in Arabic, after a popular drink in Syria—is a finger puppet series consisting of 13 videos posted on YouTube that mocks well-known figures of the Syrian regime.

"The work of the group is important because they destroy the cult of personality under which Syrians lived for more than 40 years," says a Syrian filmmaker who asked not to be identified by name.

By tapping into the dark humor found among many Syrians, it manages to make people smile during increasingly bloody times. The first episode features the president—known as

“Beeshu” instead of Bashar—waking up after having a nightmare of mass demonstrations. “Why don’t the Syrian people love me anymore? Why do they want to bring down the regime?” cries the forlorn president.

In another episode President Beeshu appears on a mock episode of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” called “Who Wants to Kill a Million?” The episode parodies an isolated president making decisions with only his own interests in mind. When he is unable to answer one of the questions and asks to call a friend, the presenter responds: “You still have friends?”



<http://aranews.net/2014/05/syrian-artists-puppet-the-regime/>

A Brutal Massacre Was Perpetrated, Allegedly by Government Forces

By Joanna Hausmann, May 3, 2013

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Syria’s Violations Documentation Center have reported that “large scale massacre” occurred today in the Syrian coastal village of al-Bayda near Baniyas. They believed deaths could have exceeded 100. According to the Daily Beast, many of those killed appeared to have been “summarily” executed by shooting or stabbing.

The main opposition group accused the government of this large-scale massacre. If confirmed, this bloodshed in would be the latest in a string of alleged mass killings in Syria. Activists have stated that government troops killed more than 100 people as they seized two rebel-held suburbs of Damascus last month.



Citizen journalist’s image of the massacre released by a group that calls itself The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al- Assad

<http://heavy.com/news/2013/05/syria-latest-news-massacre-airstrikes-chemical-weapons/>

Top 10 Reasons for the Syrian Uprising

1. Political repression

President Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000 after the death of his father Hafez who had ruled Syria since 1970. Assad quickly dashed hopes of reform, as power remained concentrated in the ruling family, and the one-party system left few channels for political dissent. With no peaceful transfer of power since the 1950s, change can seemingly happen only through a military coup or a popular uprising.

2. Discredited ideology

Syrian Baath party is regarded as the founder of “Arab socialism,” an ideological current that merged state-led economy with Pan-Arab nationalism. However, by 2000, the Baathist ideology was reduced to an empty shell, discredited by lost wars with Israel and a crippled economy. Upon taking power, Assad tried to modernize the regime invoking the Chinese model of economic reform, but time was running against him.

3. Uneven economy

Cautious reform of the remnants of socialism opened the door to private investment, triggering an explosion of consumerism among the urban upper-middle classes. However, privatization has favored families with personal links to Assad,

leaving provincial Syria, later the hotbed of the uprising, seething with anger as living costs soared and jobs remained scarce.

4. Drought

To make matters worse, a persistent drought has devastated farming communities in north-eastern Syria, affecting more than a million people since 2008. Tens of thousands of impoverished farmer families flocked into rapidly expanding urban slums, their anger at the lack of government help fueled by the new ostentatious wealth of the nouveau riche.

5. Population growth

Syria's rapidly growing young population is a demographic time bomb waiting to explode. How can the bloated, unproductive public sector and struggling private firms absorb a quarter of a million new arrivals to the job market every year?

6. New media

Although the state media is tightly controlled, the proliferation of satellite TV, mobile phones, and the internet after 2000 meant that any government attempt to insulate the youth from the outside world was doomed to fail. The use of the new media is critical to the activist networks that underpin the uprising in Syria.

7. Corruption

Whether it's a license to open a small shop or a car registration, well-placed payments make wonders in Syria. For those without the money and good contacts, it's a powerful grievance against the state. Ironically, the system is corrupt to the extent that anti-Assad rebels buy weapons from the government forces, and families bribe the authorities to release relatives that have been detained during the uprising.

8. State violence

Syria's vast intelligence services, the infamous mukhabarat**, penetrate all spheres of society. The fear of the state is one of the reasons why so many Syrians simply take the regime as a fact of life. But the outrage over the brutal response of the security forces to the outbreak of peaceful protest in Spring 2011, documented on social media, helped generate the snowball effect as

thousands across Syria joined the uprising. More funerals, more protest.



Syrian children in Homs

9. Minority rule

Syria is a majority Sunni Muslim country but the top positions in the security apparatus are in the hands of the Alawis, a Shiite religious minority to which the Assad family belongs. Most Syrians pride themselves on their tradition of religious tolerance, but many Sunnis still resent the fact that so much power is monopolized by a handful of Alawi families. While not a driving force of the Syrian uprising, the combination of a majority Sunni protest movement and an Alawi-dominated military has added to the tension in religiously mixed areas, such as the city of Homs.

10. Tunisia effect

Last but not least, the wall of fear in Syria would not have been broken at this particular time had it not been for Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street-vendor whose self-immolation in December 2010 triggered a wave of anti-government uprisings across the Middle East. Watching the fall of Tunisian and Egyptian regimes in early 2011, broadcast live on the satellite channel Al Jazeera, made millions in Syria aware that change was possible—for the first time in decades.

**The military intelligence service, or the Mukhabarat in Arabic, is very influential in Syrian politics and is controlled by the President. It is commonly accepted that it provides support to groups outside of Syria, including Palestinian, Lebanese, and Turkish radical groups; monitors Syrian dissidents living overseas; and coordinates the actions of Syrian and Lebanese forces in Lebanon.

[\[http://www.fags.org/espionage/Sp-Te/Syria-Intelligence-and-Security.html, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_Intelligence_Directorate_%28Syria%29\]](http://www.fags.org/espionage/Sp-Te/Syria-Intelligence-and-Security.html)
<http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/Syrian-Uprising.htm>

Syria Is a Microcosm of All the Issues Facing Region

Gregory Harms, April 6, 2013

The influential Egyptian Islamist cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi recently issued a fatwa, or religious proclamation, with regard to Syria. The sheik called for Sunni Muslims throughout the Middle East to join the rebels in their fight against the regime in Damascus. Formerly an advocate of improved relations between the Sunni and Shiite sects, including the Lebanese Shiite guerrilla organization Hizballah, Qaradawi's decree further points to sectarian relations moving in the opposite direction. A week earlier, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah openly declared involvement in the civil war on the side of Damascus and promised victory. Sectarian lines—within Syria and across the greater region—are growing sharper by the minute.



Anti-Assad Protestor

At the geopolitical level, Russia announced its intentions to ship its S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Syria in an effort to bolster the government's defenses and preserve a balance of power. Included in Moscow's calculus is the potential military involvement of the United States and NATO.

In trying to follow the news coverage, one is presented with an ever-increasing number of narrative strands having less and less to do with

Syria. The question is raised, Is there historical ground where the different threads meet?

Currently on display in Syria is just about every major issue the modern Middle East has come to know and be known for. Within the ongoing civil war now raging up and down the country, one can find how the region was created, how it has been ruled locally, how it has been managed externally, and the different byproducts of these realities. This conflict is not simply a dark chapter in the Arab Spring, or just another episode of Middle Eastern violence, but the consequence of policies and phenomena that have their origins in the twentieth century.

Syria, like its fellow Arab neighbors, was born of Western European scheming. After World War I, the Great Powers of Britain and France divided up the Middle East into modern nation-states, Syria being among these new and future countries. Designed by the French, Syria was to exist in the service of its creator, similar to other French colonial holdings at the time. Simply put, it was to provide a source of cheap food and materials as well as a place to unload French exports.

Because Syria was conceived as a vassal state, it was kept politically compliant and feeble. Local landowning political elites essentially governed Syria on France's behalf. One of the principal concerns was to ensure calm against an increasingly indignant and restless population. This was achieved with a measure of anti-imperial rhetoric—purely propaganda—while dutifully tending to French needs; the political relationship with Paris was called “honorable cooperation.” At the end of the day, the unsurprising goal of the Syrian notables was to protect their own wealth and power. ...

This period spanned the two world wars to Syria's independence in 1946. What followed was a series of military coups, producing leaders such as Colonel Abid Shishkali and others seeking a grip on the country's future. Yet, these juntas were factionally unstable and produced repeated internal overthrows. What endured from this era, however, was the military's new role in Syrian political life.

Out of the tumultuous post-independence years also emerged a nationalist-socialist party called the Baath (meaning Resurrection or Renaissance). The Baath Party championed Arab nationalism and sought to unify the Arab world under a singular system. In 1957, the Baath Party achieved power in Syria, briefly formed a union (as a junior partner) with Egypt, and then lost power. After the union with Egypt dissolved (1961), a group of military officers sought to reestablish Baath rule. (The party was originally a civilian, populist movement, but had been co-opted by the military.) Also volatile and prone to overthrows, this cabal became mired in infighting. After a sequence of coups and power plays, one member of the military committee running the country rose to stable power in 1970: Hafez al-Assad. His autocratic regime would last until the year 2000, when he would be replaced by his son, Bashar al-Assad. Like his father, Assad the younger has operated a regime marked by one-party rule, secret police, and total authority. ...

In addition to the creation, leadership, and foreign influence of Syria over the years, three intra-regional factors in the current state of affairs, also echoes of the twentieth century, should be mentioned.



Syria and Iran—with Iraq between them

First, Iran supports and supplies Damascus. This is one of the first issues one reads about in the American press. Tehran's actions in this regard oppose the US-Israeli dynamic. This friction has its origins in the 1979 Iranian revolution, which saw the replacement of the Shah, a US-installed puppet, with the Islamist leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The current leadership in Tehran is merely a successor of his

rule and an outcome of Anglo-American intervention in Iran. For the last thirty years, US-Iranian relations have been kept tense by the United States.

Second, Hizballah supports Bashar al-Assad, is assisting on the ground, and is itself supported and supplied by the Iranians. The militia, regardless of what one thinks of it, would never have emerged had Israel not occupied southern Lebanon for almost twenty years (until 2000) after its devastating assault on that country in 1982. Hizballah is a consequence of Israeli belligerence.

Third, the issue of Islamic extremism has also entered the frame in Syria. The armed resistance called the Free Syrian Army, far from being a unified front, is a patchwork. Radical Islamic groups within the FSA such as Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaida affiliated organization, and Ahrar al-Sham are the heirs of two main ideologies. The first is Islamism, which has its roots in the 1920s and was a political response to Western domination. The goal here was revolution and overthrow of local regimes. The second ideology is a more violent, reactionary approach to Islamism that developed in the second half of the twentieth century, ultimately personified by Osama bin Laden. ...

The elements making up the current civil war in Syria were created throughout the last hundred years. The leadership in Damascus today is a direct result of the country's political history. In a sense, Bashar al-Assad is a corollary of the French policies put in place over forty years before he was born. The resistance to his leadership—part of the wider Arab Spring uprisings beginning in 2011—is a rejection of both his regime and European-American hegemony, present and past. These are the core realities of the current violence. ...

What ... concern[s] planners in Washington is overall regional stability, which the Syrian civil war could threaten. Lebanon and Iraq have already been affected. Low grade tensions are tolerable—even encouraged—but the temperature in Syria might be high enough to warrant top-level diplomacy from the White

House and the office of Russian president Vladimir Putin. ...



Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin, 2006

In the meantime, it is common to hear facile or racist conclusions drawn because of the bloodshed and disorder in areas like the Middle East, where patterns of repression and resistance seem to play out endlessly. Yet, when the different countries became “independent,” it would take decades for the results of the manner in which they were created to fully unfold, to say nothing of the foreign influence along the way. At this very moment, we are seeing the effects of the twentieth century. The policies now relegated to history books are, in some ways, on the news every day in grim detail. The common dismissal of the historical record contained in the assertion “that was then” could not be more inaccurate.

It is in the present where one can find the historical record: amidst the sectarian strife, the fatwas, declarations, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, refugee camps, arms embargoes, weapons shipments, and a list of actors—state and non-state alike—vying for position and influence. As is common, geostrategic maneuvering tends to converge in smaller, weaker countries, and produce a range of dire repercussions. At the moment, Syria encapsulates the history of the modern Middle East.

<http://mideastposts.com/middle-east-politics-analysis/syria-is-a-microcosm-of-all-the-issues-facing-region/>

About Citizen Journalism and Social Media for Activism

The Struggle That Is Citizen Journalism (At Least In The Middle East)

J. Grayson, May 2014

Three years have passed since the Arab Spring, when citizen uprisings broke out against dictatorial governments across the Middle East. State-funded and controlled outlets ignored the citizen uprisings at the time, so citizens from Tunisia and Egypt to Morocco and Syria turned to the Internet, where independent journalists provided the most reliable coverage of what was happening in the streets.

Since then, however, subjective splits have overtaken that digital space and rendered citizen journalism less and less credible on certain fronts.

“Most bloggers/independent journalists are suspected of being local parties’ agents,” Tunisian activist Malek Khadraoui said in a public forum. With no guarantee of professionalism among citizen journalists, Arab audiences are left to choose between state funded/controlled official media and a cacophony of online voices, with little means to discern which ones to trust. ...

Repression has driven activists to infighting rather than coming together as they disagree on how best to resist. “We are drowning in a sea of different campaigns online,” said Palestinian Independent Journalist Abir Koptiy. “Everyone has different priorities.”

At the same time, governments and parties have infiltrated the blogosphere of Citizen/Independent Journalism, rallying to pit opinions against each other as part of a larger power struggle. “If you search #Syria, for instance, you see people bombarding the internet,” said Bahraini journalist Amira Al Hussaini. “There are web-armies, online mercenaries.”

Those who resist ideological affiliation are pressured and arrested ... While some countries

struggle with polarization and government surveillance, others continue fighting blatant and punitive censorship. ... “You take your ability to complain about surveillance for granted. Censorship removes your right to even talk about these issues,” [Yemeni media researcher Walid] Al-Saqaf said. “In a prison cell I have all the privacy I need, but I cannot reach the world to say what I want.”

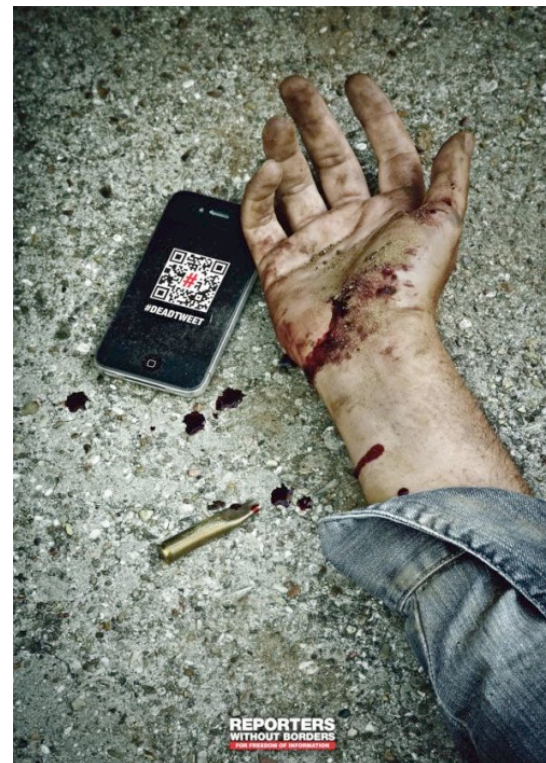
... Post-2011 disillusionment should not stop citizen/independent journalists from sharing strategic, tactical, historical perspectives from across the Middle East.

<http://www.cmoutlet.org/2014/05/the-struggle-that-is-citizen-journalism.html>

Dead Tweets: Citizen Journalists Pay the Price

By Mich Cafe, August 16, 2012

With traditional media officially locked out of Syria since the start of the revolution there in March 2011, citizen journalism has taken over the mantle, at a great cost.



It is through citizen journalism that news, photographs and videos of what is happening in Syria are now relayed to the outside world, at the heavy cost of detention, torture and death. ...

Reporters Without Borders has launched a #DeadTweet campaign to take us into the daily hell of citizen journalists. ...

The Assad government has killed at least 38 citizen journalists and media workers since the start of the uprising in Syria in March 2011. Their only crime was to disseminate information and spread the truth about the bloody crackdown that is still in progress against the Syrian people. Their main weapons are mobile phones and the Internet.



The Syrian Journalist ... Under Fire

The #DeadTweet campaign image shows a lifeless hand covered in earth and blood. Next to it, there is a smart phone with a QR code on its illuminated screen. When it is scanned, a Twitter-style application starts up, taking the user into the live tweet of an imaginary citizen journalist in the midst of the conflict in Homs. The application shows his final minutes in detail through his feed. Events gradually take an unexpected turn until the final outcome.

The press and poster campaign uses the QR code to raise awareness about citizens' efforts to

cover conflicts in countries where authoritarian governments impose a media blackout by trying to shut out foreign journalists. When journalists can no longer do their job, these citizens are an essential information link and play their part in informing the world, sometimes paying the price with their lives. ...

The concept of citizen journalism—or public, participatory, democratic, guerrilla, or street journalism—is based upon the testimony and reporting of the news by the public.

Citizen journalism critics claim it is unregulated, subjective, amateurish and haphazard in quality and coverage, which is, I think, precisely its value.

Abraham Zapruder, who filmed the assassination of President John F. Kennedy with a home-movie camera, way back on November 22, 1963, is sometimes presented as a forefather of citizen journalists.

Thanks to the Internet, we're all now able to share information globally. It is this power that is threatening, especially in times of war and conflict. What you could only get through newspapers and television, is now available instantaneously online through blogs, podcasts, streaming videos, social media networks and web-related platforms. You just need a smartphone, a laptop and an Internet connection.

[Note: #DeadTweet is a legitimate hashtag page at <https://twitter.com/hashtag/deadtweet?src=hash>. However, as often happens on Twitter, the hashtag has been co-opted for recreational use by Harry Styles fans.]

<http://mideastposts.com/middle-east-business/middle-east-media-analysis/dead-tweets-citizen-journalists-pay-the-price/>

CitJo – Citizen Journalism Portal in the Middle East

April 25, 2012

Citizen journalism was critical in the Arab Spring over the past year as ordinary people used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and other social media to push new ideas, organize protests, and document the atrocities of long entrenched

dictatorships. Now they're getting a more formal outlet with the start up of CitJo, a portal that will connect bloggers and videographers with official media agencies around the world. While this hasn't gotten much notice outside the Middle East, it is an innovative approach to a question that remains unresolved in the West (try asking the New York City Police Department who is a journalist). The portal will allow citizen journalists to sell their work under a variety of copyright licenses, giving some of them a potential revenue stream.

According to Mahamad El Tanahy, Managing Director of CitJo,

Our aim is to provide an easy way for citizen journalists to get their word out and generate revenue. We're looking to provide all the features necessary to make citizen journalists' lives easier, starting with a migration of the service to Arabic, launching an online payment service, and much more to come.

It will be interesting to see how this develops, especially if some of the participants begin to be noticed for their work. And there are challenges to be resolved—are news agencies going to accept submissions that are not edited, fact-checked, or screened? Will they be willing to pay for videos if other people are making videos of the same events freely available on YouTube? And there may be competition from existing citizen journalism sites—Al Jazeera's *Your Media*, for example—that take submissions but do not offer payment.

It's a fascinating experiment. Check out the CitJo website [<http://www.citjo.com/>]*—it's nicely done and will give you a glimpse of an innovative journalism experiment in action.*

<http://www.marginlines.com/citjo-citizen-journalism-portal-in-the-middle-east/>

What you need to know about social media activism

By Ben Gilbert, @RealBenGilbert, July 2nd 2014

Protests in the Middle East, known as "The Arab Spring," echoed around the world. On Friday, December 17, 2010, a fruit vendor named

Mohamed Bouazizi covered himself in flammable liquid and lit a match. His body was quickly engulfed in flames and, despite attempts to save his life, Bouazizi died on January 4th, 2011. He was 26 years old. Like how Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation in Saigon nearly 50 years earlier represented the frustration of many Vietnamese, Bouazizi's action became symbolic of a much larger frustration in Tunisian society.

What happened next, however, was a product of modern times: Word spread of Bouazizi's action through social networks, with Facebook specifically becoming a flashpoint for protest organizations across the country. By the time Tunisia's former leader, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, resigned and fled the country in mid-January 2011, over a fifth of Tunisia's population was on Facebook.



What Is It?

The term "social media activism" is ambiguous. That's intentional, as its application varies depending on what it's connected with. Both Occupy Wall Street and ["#YesAllWomen"*] fall under the umbrella of "social media activism," so the term needs to be ambiguous by its nature. With those two examples, you already kinda know what it is, right? Social media activism can be as simple as a trending topic for interested parties to engage in a bigger conversation, and as complex as Occupy Wall Street's multiplatform, multimedia initiative. As the name implies, there's no standard social network used for social media activism; YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Sina Weibo and myriad others are employed as need be.

In the case of Tunisia, Facebook was the social service of choice, with hackers, protesters and everyday Tunisians using the service collaboratively. It served as a message board for sharing images, video and stories, in addition to creating a public forum for communication. ...



Why Should I Care?

Beyond the whole “you’re a participating member of human society” thing, social media activism is a fascinating modern version of protest and communication. Because of the internet, social media platforms and the ubiquity of mobile phones with cameras, activism and protest are now truly global events. Not interested in participating? That’s fair!

The other side of the coin is that, sometimes, these movements affect your life whether you like it or not. If you were in Egypt in early 2011, whether you were part of the conversation or not didn’t matter: The president was overthrown.

What’s the Argument?

While not an “argument” per se, some say that media coverage focuses on the medium—social media—over the message, and it ends up diluting the protest. Author Malcolm Gladwell argues as much in *The New Yorker*: “People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the internet came along. Barely anyone in East Germany in the 1980s had a *phone*—and they ended up with hundreds of thousands of people in central Leipzig and brought down a regime.” Gladwell’s also questioned the efficacy of social media in organizing physical protest; it’s easy for people to participate online, but far more difficult

to turn those words into action (so the argument goes). ...

Want Even More?

We sure hope you do, because there’s *quite a bit* on the subject that’s worth reading. [The MIT Technology Review](#) has a great piece from John Pollock digging in on the hackers behind Tunisia’s uprising. [The New York Times](#) has a thorough background on Bouazizi and similar actions.

And finally, [Jehane Noujaim](#)’s excellent 2013 documentary *The Square* both demonstrates the use of social media activism in a real-life revolution setting, and grippingly details the movement in Tahrir Square. It’s [on Netflix](#), even! Don’t miss it!

*In response to the May 23, 2014 Santa Barbara shootings by Elliot Rodger, activists and general newsreaders alike used the “#YesAllWomen” hashtag on Twitter.

<http://www.engadget.com/2014/07/02/social-media-activism-explainer/>



Professional journalist James Foley, abducted in northwestern Syria while covering the Syrian Civil War. He was beheaded by his abductors, ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), in August 2014, making him the first American to be killed by the group.

Questions for Discussion and Research

1. Ala'a Basatneh left Syria when she was a baby, and she had never returned. Her father had left because of the repression Bashar al-Assad's regime had already shown by 2001—his second year as president. By her own account, she was more interested in social activities with her friends than anything to do with politics or the place of her birth. Yet, even in the photographs shown in the film of Ala'a and her high school friends, Ala'a wears a headscarf, as does her mother. Women in Syria are not required to cover their heads, though many choose to, and the status of women was made equal by Hafez al-Assad during his 30 years as Syria's president. It is generally women with a more conservative observation of Muslim laws and Arabic customs who adopt the headscarf.

Would you call Ala'a "conservative"? What to you makes a person conservative or, as is most often presented as the opposite of conservative, liberal? How about her parents, who, while worried about her safety, seem to support her work—even to her father's traveling to Syria with her to take medical and humanitarian supplies to the Syrian rebels?

Think back to the reasons Ala'a gave for assuming the huge task she has undertaken, and put those into the context of a freshman in college, still living at home. Create a conversation Ala'a might have had with her parents about what she was taking on. How would your parents react in a comparable situation—one that might put you at risk?

2. What do you know about "citizen journalists" other than what was presented in the film and what you read in the study guide? When did you first hear and understand the term, and in what context did you learn it? In what applications have you seen or read citizen journalism? Compare your knowledge about the subject with your classmates' and friends' knowledge.

3. We learn of two citizen journalists who die in the film—Aous and Bassel. While Aous focused on organizing demonstrations and rallies, he also documented them for the world to see. Bassel not only went to Syria to do what he could to support the Syrian rebels, he taught other Syrians to document the resistance activities and the abuses of Assad's regime.

Soon after the revolution began in 2011, Assad banned outside and independent journalists, yet American freelancer James Foley was among the professionals still reporting about Syria. When he was reporting on the uprising in Libya in 2011, he was captured in April by Qaddafi's forces but released 44 days later. Then Foley was captured in November 2012, on the border of Syria and Turkey, by Syrian forces and was moved a number of times over the next year and a half. Somewhere along the line, Foley was transferred from official Syrian custody to being held captive by ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). He was executed in August 2014.

Because they were American, the US government went to great lengths to negotiate the release of Foley and other American reporters held in Syria. Citizen journalists, however, report as they can and rely on others to distribute their reports, but they can be killed in an instant or be arrested, interrogated, and either released or executed—all without fanfare.

Read this short article about some Syrian journalists who fall somewhere in between citizen and professional: <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/09/19/underground-journalism-keeping-fight-against-assad-alive-syria-268784.html> . Their safety is at risk, but they are managing to broadcast both online at www.halabtoday.org and on television.

Compare the roles of these different kinds of journalists. Which kind of journalism has the most impact on the kind of war the Syrian rebels are fighting? Think of important events that have recently occurred and determine where do you think each kind of journalism would be most valuable and least valuable.

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