

# PIIGSty History

## SYRIA: A Story of Religion, Treachery, Empire and War



With the conflict in Syria hitting the headlines for the past number of years, PIIGSty History presents an 'all you really need to know' summary of Syrian history from ancient times to the modern day.

### Introduction

Syria has been at the heart of human civilisation for thousands of years; a relic of competing empires for centuries. The violence now raging across the country often seems random and inexplicable, but it isn't. The key to understanding the current conflict lies in the history of Syria; a turbulent story of religion, treachery, empire and war. Historically, the Syrian border has changed significantly over time. Ancient 'Greater Syria' included the modern states of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and parts of Turkey.



Today, those fighting for control of Syria nurse grievances spanning centuries and are often misunderstood. The Middle East as a whole boasts more recorded human history than any other part of the world, containing the oldest continuously inhabited cities on earth. The ancient 'silk route' ran through this vital region with the area today known as Syria being at a vital crossroads heavily frequented by transiting merchants plying their trade. Soon, the conquerors followed the merchants, beginning with the Romans.

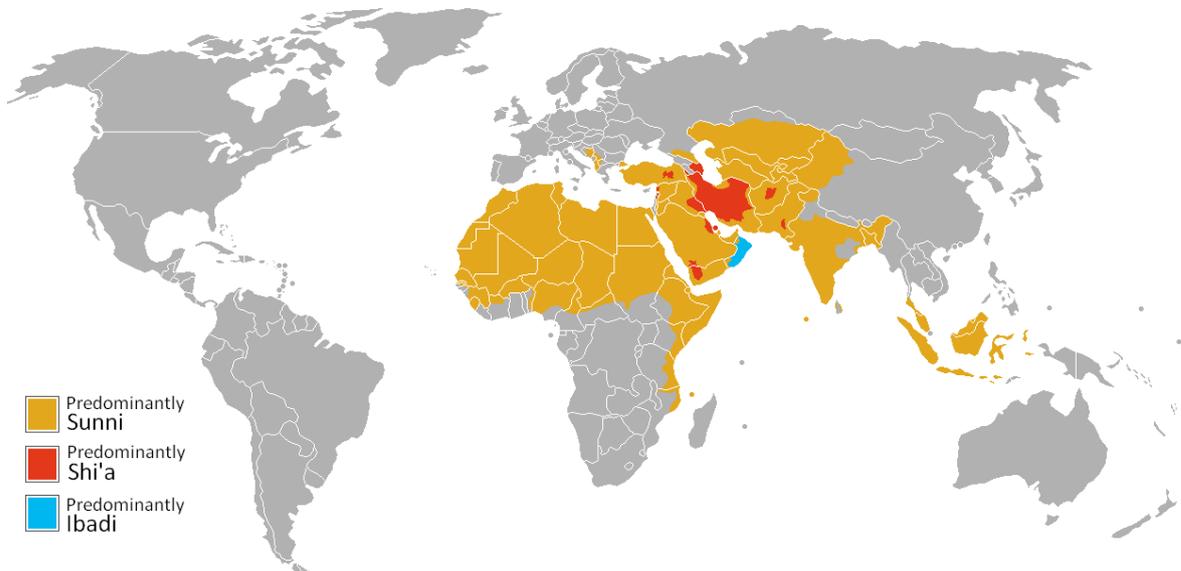
### The birth of Arab Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Umayyads

In the early 4th century, Roman Emperor Constantine the Great began encouraging Christianity. The Roman Empire became a Christian empire with inhabitants converted to Christianity by default. In the Middle East, Christianity was already the dominant

religion, that being the region of its conception. As a result, for centuries, Syria was the centre of the Christian world.

By the 7th century, 300 years of Christian domination began to fracture. Arab tribesmen, united by their leader, the Prophet Muhammad, streamed north on an Arab conquest in search of Syrian riches. They brought with them the new religion of Islam which Muhammad had founded. Between 632AD and 642AD, they captured the old Roman province of Syria and set about building an Islamic civilisation – seeking to expand the frontiers of Islam with Syria as its commercial and religious engine. These conquerors founded the first and greatest Arab-Islamic dynasty – the Umayyads – and soon deepened their control over greater Syria and beyond. Syria (and its capital Damascus) was chosen as the capital of the new Arab Empire, as a stable anchor for the fledgling entity. Syria became then the ‘beating heart’ of Arab-Islam. Hope and enthusiasm soon gave way to rancour and division. Not all Arabs venerated the Umayyads as their rule was seen to be widening divisions in Islam rather than uniting them. The Prophet Muhammad died in 632AD, just before the Syrian conquest. The issue of division centred on the successor as leader of Islam. Some believed the Prophet Muhammad named his cousin Imam Ali as his successor and Imam Ali’s descendants after him in a hereditary line of succession from which leaders of Islam would be extracted for ever more. Adherents of this view (Shia Islam) were known as Shia or Shi’ites. Today Shia Islam is the second largest denomination of Islam in the world.

Other Muslims rejected the hereditary succession (Sunni Islam) and were known as Sunnis. Prominent among them were the Umayyads themselves – who cemented their power (and began centuries of religious conflict) by killing Imam Ali’s son in 680AD, the Prophet’s grandson Imam Hussein. Today, Sunni Islam is the largest denomination of Islam in the world, with 80% of all Muslims adhering to this.



More information on the differences between Sunni and Shia is available from [The Economist](#)

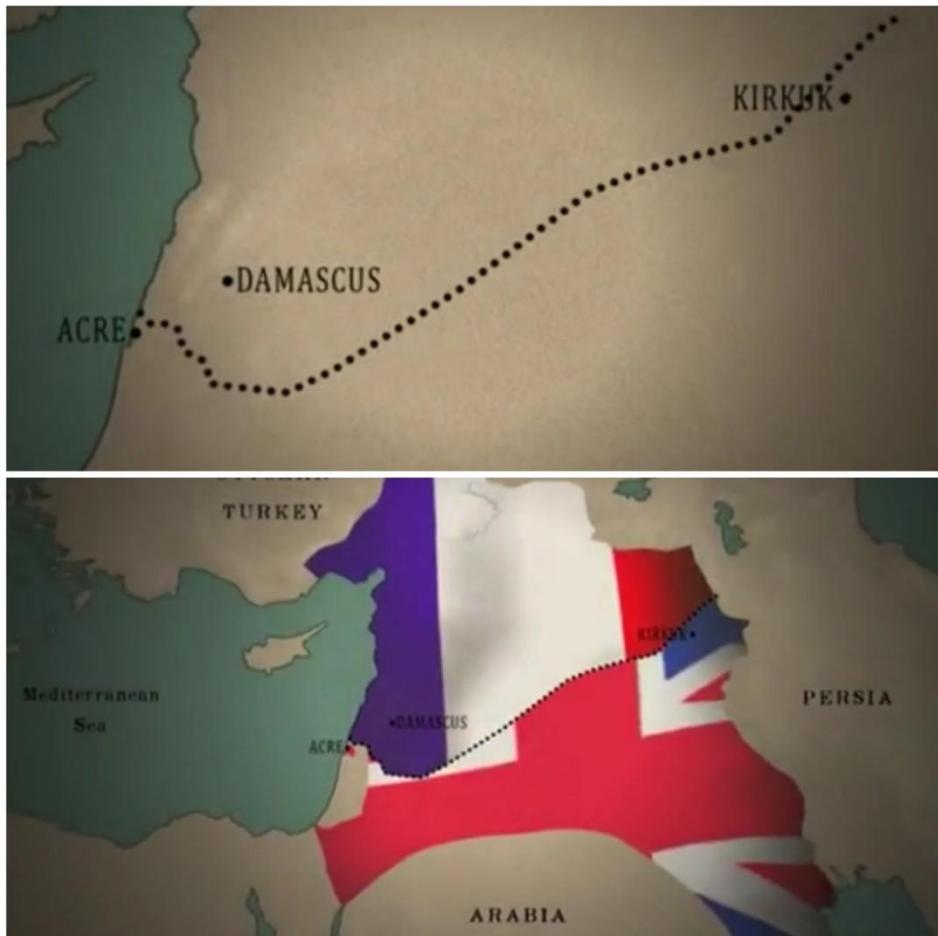
By the late 11th century, a new era of Syrian history began when waves of Christian crusaders from Europe invaded the Holy Land, now Arab Islamic lands. The violent conflict left deep scars in the Middle East and produced implacable opposition to Western intervention in the region which continues to this day. In response, the violence and necessity for protection produced one of the great Syrian leaders – Saladin, the first Sultan (King) of Egypt and Syria. Saladin remains a venerated hero to the Syrians as, through his actions, he united Greater Syria and took back

Jerusalem from the Christian crusaders. Saladin was also a strict Sunni and reduced Shia influence, which had become a repressed minority.

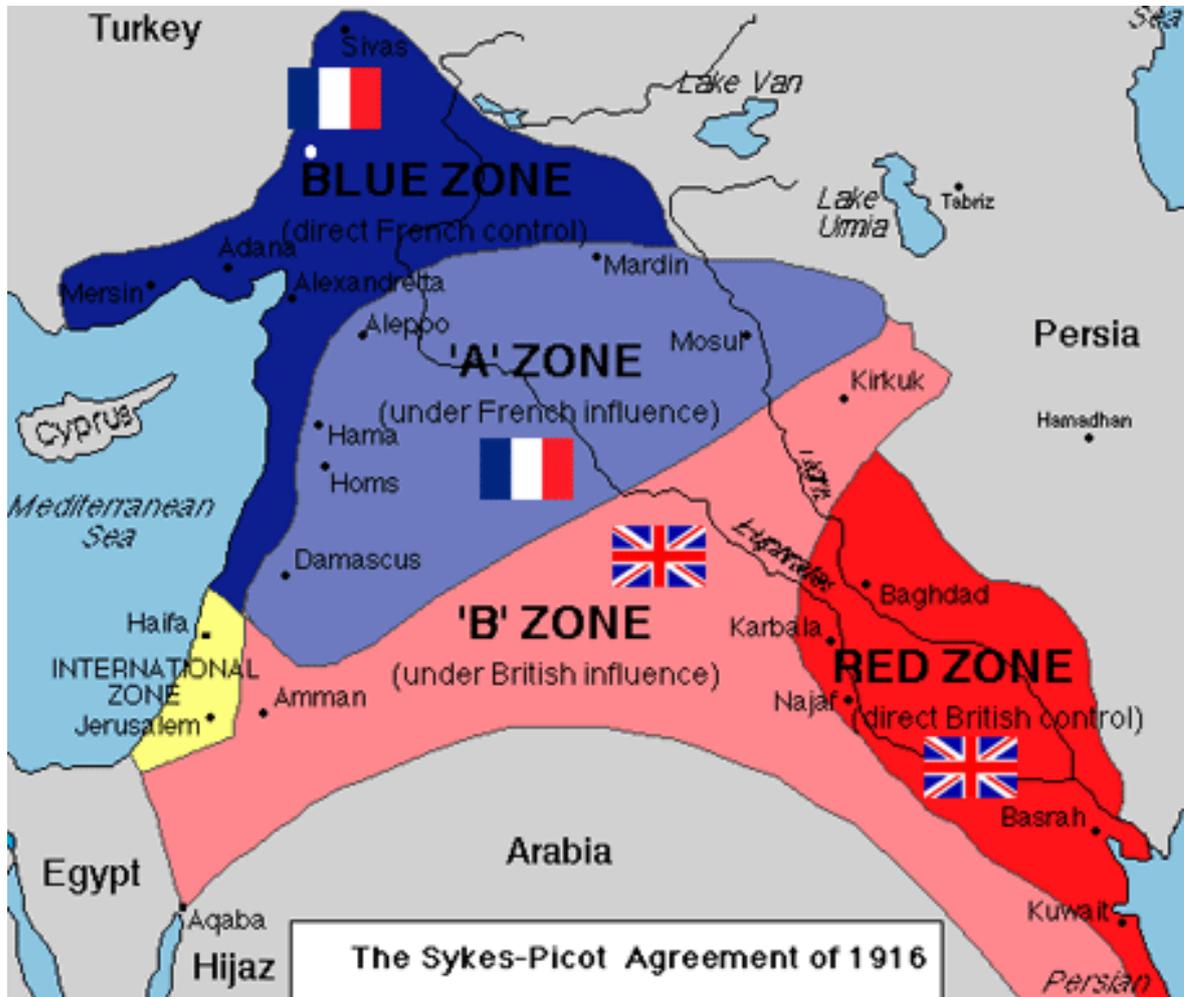
### **The end of Empire - the Sykes-Picot Agreement**

From the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the modern day – Syria fell under control of two great Islamic Empires in succession. One, based in Egypt, The other, under the Ottoman Turks. Story of modern Syria begins with a great global conflagration. World War 1 (1914-1918) cost hundreds of thousands of lives in the Middle East. Syria was then part of the Ottoman Empire and had sided with Germany. To fight the Ottoman Turks (and the Germans), the British joined forces with rebel Arab nationalists – one of their leaders was Prince Faisal – who dreamed of liberating Syria from the Ottoman Empire through a form of secular, pan-Arab nationalism. The 'Arab Revolt' under Faisal and his British military advisor T.E Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) was hugely successful. In 1918, they captured Damascus. To Faisal, this was the beginning of the Arab Kingdom that the British had promised him, his family and followers. But the British had to admit they had also promised Syria to the French, earlier in 1916. As allies in the Great War, France, Britain and Russia (the tripartite 'Triple Entente') had already agreed a secret carve up of former Ottoman Empire territory up victory in the Middle East. Sir Mark Sykes (for Britain) and François Georges-Picot (for France) signed the 1916 [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#).

A blatant act of ill-judged and duplicitous imperialism, the allies drew an arbitrary line across the Middle East, from the port of Acre to Kirkuk. It was decided that land north of that line would be French and south would be British.



Zones would be divided into direct control and 'influence', as follows:



The French arrived in Syria and crushed Faisal's Arab nationalists – who had founded a short lived independent Syrian state. The French then set about breaking apart Syria. To fully tackle Arab nationalism and destroy the influence of Faisal, Syria was further subdivided, taking away traditional Syrian links to the sea through the creation of Lebanon (a safe haven for the persecuted Maronite Christians) - France's Christian allies. In one swoop, the vital ports of Beirut, Tripoli, Tyre and Sidon were taken from Syrian hands. An Alawite state (more about the Alawites shortly) was also created and punitive taxes were imposed on all citizens to pay for the cost of the French war effort. Resentment and resistance mounted.

In 1925, a famous Syrian leader, Sultan al-Atrash led an uprising which was met by further ill-judged French heavy handedness. Entire, formally stable areas burst into revolt. The great Syrian Revolution against the colonial oppressors had begun. The French used brutal tactics to quell the revolt. Fighting in Damascus was heavy with much of the city under siege. Two years of bloody suppression followed before the French re-established control. The French ruled, with collaboration from Syrian tribes, for another 20 years before the outbreak of World War II finally led to Syrian independence. Key to the modern struggle however, as much as French misrule, was the role of the Alawites.

#### **Who are the Alawites?**

The Alawites are a sect of Shia Islam. In Syria today, Sunni Muslim Arabs account for two thirds of the population with Kurds, Armenians, Shia Muslims, Orthodox Catholic and Maronite Christians and others making up the rest – a legacy of a long history of conquerors and empires. The Alawites are the most powerful minority, 12% of the Syrian population. For centuries, the Alawites were suppressed by the Sunni majority

population, in a follow on from the brutality on all Shia from the murder of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein, in 680AD.

The Alawites were declared as heretical by Sunni Muslim clerics and eradicated with murderous zeal and persecuted with a passionate hatred more so than even Jews and Christians. This climaxed with a well-documented 11<sup>th</sup> century slaughter of thousands, causing a drastic migration of Alawite Shia to the hills spanning today's Lebanon/Syrian border, becoming an embattled community nursing bitter resentment. The sectarian divide was exploited by the French colonial rulers. The French hated the Sunnis because they were Arab nationalists. They recruited Alawites into a special militia to keep Sunnis in order – giving Alawites the first chance to make a living after being shunned and a French mandated 'Alawite State' in 1920 with access to the sea.

### **The Alawites and the rise of Hafez al-Assad**

By 1946, newly empowered by the French, the Alawites were prepared to carve out a role in the independent Syria and attempted, just as the Sunnis had tried to do and the French has feverously tried to prevent, to create a pan-Arab state in a return to pan-Arab nationalism not seen in Syria since the 1910s. One man came to dominant – Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite and father of the current President Bashar al-Assad, became the ultimate Arab strongman. Hafez al-Assad made his mark by joining the left leaning pan-Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party, which aimed to establish one Arab secular state across the Middle East. Politically ambitious, he began plotting to take over the now very unstable country. With a group of military officers (Ba'athists) drawn from Syrian minority groups, they completed a successful coup – earning the ire of the landowning Sunni majority. Their religion threatened theirs and the socialism of the Ba'athists threatened their economic position.

In 1970, Assad seized power for himself as President. Turmoil continued. Earlier, in 1967, Assad was Minister of Defence when Israel launched a series of strikes against Egypt, Jordan and Syria. The Israeli's humiliated Arab forces and took control of part of Syria – the Golan Heights. 6 years later in 1973, as President, Assad sought revenge and launched a surprised attack on Israel with his counterparts in Egypt – Assad pumped over 1,000 tanks and 60,000 men into the battle. Israel recovered and retaliated quickly and forcibly, driving the Syrians back deep into Syria. It was an Israeli military victory. However, the surprise nature of the attack and the bravery of the troops restored Arab pride somewhat. Assad's reputation as an Arab strongman grew, a critical pillar for his leadership. The conflict with Israel inflamed the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990). The Soviets were allied with the Syrians – the axis of resistance against the Americans being Damascus, Tehran (Iran) and Hezbollah (insurgent Muslim terrorists in Lebanon) – set up only credible obstacle to American-Israeli hegemony in the region.

Tired of division and conflict, even some Sunni majorities, originally opposed to Assad on religious and economic grounds, supported the incoming new leader to bring stability to Syria. He introduced secular reforms including in education and agriculture. Trying to build a state proved difficult, needing a very strong military to keep order. Syria became one of the most oppressive police states in the world but this brought protection to the minority populaces to which they responded with muted support. Syria, for the first time in centuries, had a chance at a stable and unifying peace. Assad made a bargain with the population – to give obedience in exchange for stability and an end to chaos.

Another fault line began to emerge. Assad's secular Syria was not universally popular. The majority Sunnis wanted a strict Islamic state. Its representative political party, the Muslim Brotherhood, sought to destroy this secularism through a campaign of terror similar to the modern day tactics of Islamic terrorists, by targeting minorities (Christians and Alawites/Shiites). Assad himself narrowly survived an assassination attempt in June 1980. In retaliation, Assad took aim at the key stronghold for the

Muslim Brotherhood, the ancient city of Hama. In February 1982, the rebellion climaxed with a full scale urban insurrection. Dozens of police and government officials were killed – Hama as declared liberated. Assad's brutal crackdown killed between 10,000 and 20,000 Sunni people. Through strong military tactics, for the next 20 years the terrorism of the Muslim Brotherhood was contained.

## **Assad dies**

Assad's power and support lay firmly in his ability to quell the majority Sunni population into accepting his minority regime through ensuring stability in Syria. With this goal, he mostly succeeded. Then on June 10, 2000 – Assad died.

Amid the outpouring of public grief, Assad's son Bashar, a 33 year old London trained doctor, succeeded him as President. Bashar al-Assad had crossed the Islamic divide by marrying a Sunni Muslim, dramatically raising hopes of political reform and a new era for Syria. The 'Damascus Spring' followed with key elements of modernisation reforms and political liberalisation. But this didn't last long. In less than a year, political reforms were abandoned and arrest and torture of political opponents resumed. Economic reforms contributed to growing dissatisfaction – benefitted urban, middle class citizens, but also industrialists with ties to the regime, so called 'robber barons' to cherry pick new opportunities in a 21<sup>st</sup> century Syria. Agricultural drought caused a huge migration to the cities but jobs were not easy to find and unemployment mounted, particularly among the young.

By 2010, Syria was a tinderbox waiting for a spark. The spark came in the form of the 'Arab Spring' which spread through the Middle East toppling oppressive authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia and Libya. Thousands spilled onto the streets in protest. By summer 2011, an increasingly number of civilians were taking up arms. Hundreds of different groups have since formed, under a loosely associated group called the 'Free Syrian Army' – predominately from rural or poor areas.

The conflict today is primarily a Sunni revolution (against the minority Alawite Shia regime). They believe if they can seize back power, the natural order can be restored. However, the state army remains loyal to Assad and Alawites form an integral part of that support. This community is key in his struggle to retain power in Syria, motivated by the fear of Sunni Islamic extremists taking power and their loyalists in surrounding nations. To them, their homeland is under threat.

## **The geopolitical struggle**

Syria is again at the centre of a global struggle for diplomatic victories. Russia (with long historical ties since post-WW2) and Shia dominated Iran, support Assad. Sunni Arab states (importantly the Saudis and Qataris) and the Western powers (including the US and Britain) increasingly backing elements of the opposition (or at least partial support for 'arming the rebels' to fight Assad). Syria has become a proxy geopolitical war a method to weakening Iranian influence in the region. All while non-violent, non-extremist Syrians continue to die, caught in the crossfire from the rebel war nobody wants.

Simply put, there is no simple solution.

*Some elements of the text were taken as a partial transcript from the BBC documentary 'A History of Syria' (2013) with Robin Barnwell*