



## The Long Road to Aleppo

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The deadly siege of Aleppo and the ongoing war in Syria isn't just a humanitarian tragedy. It's also a political one — one that began four years ago as a hopeful offshoot of the Arab Spring, and has boiled over into extreme violence this month with one of the world's most horrifying incidents of civilian murder. As Aleppo falls to government forces, the terror can seem inexplicable, but its roots go back decades.

Some necessary context: Syria is wedged between Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan, near the Mediterranean Sea. A country of just over 18 million people, it contains some of the world's oldest kingdoms — including the 6,000-year-old northern city of Aleppo, once the nation's largest metropolitan area. Before the war, Syria was widely known for its religious and cultural diversity. Though majority Sunni Muslim, Aleppo had one of the largest Christian communities in the Middle East, and up until the establishment of Israel in 1948 was home to a large Jewish community as well. In just 11 years, the city's population has shrunk from 2.1 million people to an estimated 40,000, as families carrying everything they own have fled the country — or died trying — to escape a brutal civil war.

To make sense of that war, look first to its deep roots in modern Syrian history. Since gaining its independence from France in 1946, the government has been overthrown *18 times*. Until the mid-1970s, tumult reigned: Syria nearly merged with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic until yet another coup halted the union, and also went to war with Israel, losing badly. Chaos flared internally as the military battled those in favor of a parliamentary democracy. The country signed a pact with the Soviet Union for military support in 1956, beginning a cozy relationship with Moscow that continues today. Then Hafez al-Assad — the father of current president Bashar al-Assad — took control in a coup in 1970.

Hafez al-Assad was a Ba'athist — a member of the political party founded in 1947 under the motto, “unity, freedom, socialism.” With the support of the government, the Ba'ath Party gained control of the entire country by 1973. It enforced secularism and a socialist, state-controlled economy, and promoted a concept of Middle Eastern nationalism that demanded an end to Western influence in the region. Hafez was in control: Syrian schoolchildren started lessons with

the song, “Our Eternal Leader, Hafez al-Assad.” But the Ba'ath Party had enemies — like the Muslim Brotherhood. And that’s where we find roots of the war that began in 2012.

The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a conservative political and religious organization created in the 1940s, disliked the Ba'athists’ desire for socialist economic policies that would give the government more control over private businesses. But most of all, they believed that nationalism — the belief in the supremacy of your nation of origin — shouldn’t matter more than shared religion. Syrians, Iranians, and Saudis, their thinking went, should all be Muslims first and foremost. In 1964, the group had grown large enough to become a powerful voice of opposition to the Ba'ath Party, and was banned. Violence soon followed: Muslim Brotherhood members attempted to assassinate Assad in 1980. But Assad was a military man, having served in the Syrian Air Force and participated in a military-led coup against the government in 1962, and was willing to fight fire with fire; that same year, Emergency Law 49 made membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood punishable by death.

At the beginning of his time in office, Assad was seen as a steadying influence after years of chaos. But that facade shattered in 1982, when the Syrian government killed between 20,000 and 40,000 people in Hama, a city in western Syria, to stop a Muslim Brotherhood insurgency. After the air force bombed the city for days, 12,000 government soldiers were sent into Hama and were witnessed torturing and executing people on sight. The violence broke up the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, and made it clear that Hafez al-Assad was perfectly willing to use fear and death to maintain control of the country when politics didn’t get him what he wanted.

The second son of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad was never supposed to be president. He was going to be an eye doctor; his older brother, Basil, had been raised by their father to lead. But Basil was killed in Damascus in 1994, when he drove his Mercedes into a concrete barrier while trying to make a civilian flight to Germany. Bashar was brought back to Syria from London, where he had been studying ophthalmology, and groomed to take over the country. When his father died in June 2000, Bashar ran for the presidency — unopposed — and won.

At first, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom were hopeful that Bashar could be more reasonable than his father, especially after he freed some political prisoners soon after coming into office. “Somewhat ironically, Bashar al-Assad was viewed in the West as a potential reformer when he initially came to power,” Emma Ashford, a visiting fellow at the Cato Institute, told MTV News. “Sadly, he quickly chose to consolidate power instead, and since the start of the civil war, he has proven willing even to massacre his own people to maintain his position.”

Like his father, Bashar has portrayed himself as a bulwark against chaos. In 2002, he told visiting U.S. legislators that the massacre at Hama wasn’t a tragedy, but an example for a successful strategy against terrorism. His perception of the events at Hama echoes that of the violence happening today; to the younger Assad, the Syrian Civil War and the crisis in Aleppo are not an expression of government brutality against innocent civilians, but rather a “race between terrorists and reformists,” with terror groups being supported by outside governments.

Bashar won reelection in 2007, again facing no opposition. From 2007 to 2010, Syria faced a series of crises, including the most intense drought in the nation’s history and massive unemployment. Then, in 2011, the popular Arab Spring movement swept across the Middle East,

demanding reforms and civil rights. And when it spread into Syria, Bashar responded with violence, setting military tanks against protesters. The U.S., Canada, and the European Union took action by issuing sanctions against Bashar and the Syrian government, meant to freeze assets and prevent members of the Assad regime from traveling. This didn't slow Assad's attempts to curtail dissent, however. "In his mind, and to his supporters," Aron Lund, a fellow at the Century Foundation, told MTV News, "he is defending Syria's independence and trying to reestablish stability." By July 2012, the country was in a full-blown civil war, with rebel groups fighting against the Syrian government nationwide.

Aleppo was one of the first cities to suffer. Rebel groups, some controlled by the Islamic Front (which wants to overthrow Bashar's government and install an Islamic state), moved into the city from nearby towns and quickly clashed with government forces. "Aleppo has been a key piece of territory for both the Assad regime and opposing militant groups in Syria," Ashford said, "mostly because of where it is located geographically" (it is the country's largest and northernmost city). By 2013, rebels had seized much of the city, but the government retaliated with an air-bombing campaign, killing thousands. The city itself has been largely cut off from food and medical supplies for three years, and the U.N. reported that rebels were using civilians as human shields as early as 2012. The Syrian government told the population of Aleppo in November of this year to flee or risk being targeted as terrorists, but with escape routes being repeatedly bombed either by rebel groups or government planes, there were no safe pathways out of the city. On December 22, after Syrian government forces gained control of the eastern part of Aleppo, some civilians were able to leave for the city of Idlib. Idlib, currently the largest rebel stronghold in northern Syria, now fears it will be next to face the wrath of Bashar.

External actors like the Russian government have only made matters more complicated. Syria's old ally joined the conflict in September 2015. Like Bashar, the Russian government asserts that its fight is against terrorist groups like the Islamic Front and, naturally, the more infamous ISIS. Though this argument might be more politically expedient than true, there *are* terror groups supporting Syrian rebels. "ISIS itself does in fact attack the Assad regime," Ashford said, "but it is typically more concerned with holding the territory it has taken in Iraq and Syria [than fighting Assad directly]. In addition to ISIS, there are al-Qaeda-linked groups among the Syrian opposition. The difficulty of separating those groups from the more moderate groups within the Syrian opposition is one key reason why the conflict is so intractable."

Freelance journalist Anna Therese Day, who has been on the ground in Syria and the Middle East since 2011 covering the Arab Spring, told MTV News that the Syrian rebels *themselves* have often been targeted by terror groups in retaliation for refusing to give in to their demands: "They regularly absorb attacks from ISIS — when they're already spread too thin in their fight against Assad." Day added that the Syrian government's anti-terror rhetoric doesn't hold water when it comes to its relationships with groups on the ground, noting that Bashar al-Assad has aligned himself with the terrorist organization Hezbollah.

So far, the U.S. hasn't gotten involved on a large scale in the fight against Bashar's government, apart from taking steps to fund some rebel groups while launching operations against ISIS in Syria. Last week, President Obama lifted government sanctions against arming Syrian rebels directly (an act the Russian government called "hostile"). But as Day said, "It's been kids with guns versus government jets, helicopters, and weaponized chemicals for nearly six years now."

American support, she said, hasn't been nearly substantial enough to enable the rebels to really stand up to the Syrian government.

Donald Trump's election could change all of that, and not for the rebels' benefit; the president-elect shows signs of being more willing to take the side of the Syrian government against a rebellion 50 years in the making. Bashar al-Assad has praised Trump's anti-terror rhetoric, and believes he could be a "natural ally" for the Assad regime. During the second presidential debate, Trump said that though he didn't like Assad, "Assad is killing ISIS." ISIS, not the civil war, is Trump's priority, and because of that (and his close ties with Russia), he might be more willing to let the Russian government run the show in Syria, while ending U.S. support for any rebel organizations.

"Trump's administration is probably most likely to take a hands-off approach to Syria," Ashford said, "letting Russia and Assad have their way while he focuses on the campaign against ISIS. He may also try to strike a deal with Russia to jointly target ISIS." That would put Trump, and the U.S. government, on the side of a Syrian state still targeting civilians trying to evacuate Aleppo. Those civilians are now in an impossible situation: try to leave and risk death from either government bombs or rebel snipers, or stay and be targeted as a supporter of "terrorism."

The Syrian Civil War is perhaps the most complicated issue facing the president-elect in the Middle East. On one side is a government, purportedly seeking reforms, that has shut down free elections and tortured those who dare to ask questions. On the other side is a rebellion supported both by ordinary Syrians seeking civil rights and by terror groups wishing to stamp out religious and cultural minorities. And in the middle of it all are thousands of innocent people, unable to flee to one side or the other without risking death. As Holocaust survivors call for those responsible for the atrocities against civilians across the country to be punished, for most in Syria, there are no clear answers — just fear.