

Norbert Hirschhorn: Making a desert

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Sometime in March 2011, 15 boys in Deraa, a city in the south of Syria, spray-painted anti-government slogans on their schools' walls. They had been inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt that led to the ouster of those countries' dictators. The boys were arrested by the regime's security forces, tortured, and thrown back to their families with the taunts, "get yourself new sons, or we will come and make some for you." Non-violent protests by ordinary citizens erupted and soon spread nation-wide, people finally rebelling against a cruel, corrupt dictatorship.

The regime of President Bashar al-Assad responded with violence and within a few months many of its military officers and soldiers, refusing to fire on unarmed civilians, formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and a full-scale civil war was in progress. More than two years along, the regime has the upper hand, although just barely, with its shameless, massive bombing of neighborhoods where the rebels hold out in a large number of cities and towns. The slaughter finally roused international outrage when over a thousand citizens were killed by rocket-delivered poison gas. Helicopter gunships, starvation, and destruction of hospitals and murder of medical staff are additional weapons used against the rebellion. Snipers and thugs on motorbikes sow terror. Over half of the country's housing has been destroyed. Statistics reflect the brutality: 120,000 dead, the majority of whom are civilians, thousands more severely injured, millions of refugees streaming into bordering countries (Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq) and beyond, and millions more displaced within Syria, totalling a quarter of the nation's 23 million people. Diseases like polio have reappeared, many children have become malnourished, and too many suffer psychological trauma.

Syria bears the remnants of ancient civilizations. The city of Aleppo in the North has been continuously inhabited for 8,000 years. In Damascus the "street called straight" still exists -- built by the Romans and mentioned in the Acts 9:11 ("And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go to the street which is called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for one named Saul, a man of Tarsus: for behold, he prayeth."). I've visited Syria several times in the past, walked its ancient streets, markets and quarters, and engaged with the decent, hospitable people who deserve a better fate.

It's difficult to explain the origins of the civil war without trivializing the matter. The Alawites, a minority religious sect, were poor country folk who gained power when recruited to the military by the French colonial overlords after World War I. They now rule the country after the current president's father, Hafez-al-Assad, staged a series of coups in the 1960s to become absolute ruler, while suppressing or co-opting the dominant Sunni Muslim majority. The Alawites are an offshoot of Shiaa Islam, whose centuries-old schism with the more orthodox Sunnis began in the dispute over the succession to Prophet Mohammed. But the cause of the uprising grows more out of increasing poverty, unemployment, and oppression by a ruthless police state. Religion is often used by leaders to rouse the necessary passions leading to violence -- we have seen this between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, for example. Once the uprising began, outside forces piled on: Shi'a Iran supporting the Alawite regime, Saudi Arabia (Iran's foe in the Middle East) supporting the Sunni majority. Russia supports the Assad regime to keep its influence alive in the region as part of its power struggle with the US, while al-Qaeda intervenes, seizing an opportunity to extend its power and reach. It is now an effective force in the opposition. Add in Turkey, the Kurds, Hezbollah, and Israel and one has the makings of a widespread catastrophe.

Is there anything outside western powers can do to stop the suffering? Intervention could be justified by the United Nations initiative called "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)", as promulgated in 2005: When a state is unable to protect its citizens from genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity, the international community is obligated to do so -- with diplomacy, humanitarian aid, economic sanctions; and with military force as a last resort. There are many who criticize this concept, because it could lead to an open-ended commitment such as we've seen in Iraq and

Afghanistan, with unpredictable outcomes. A book about the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war by journalist David Hirst is insightfully titled, "Beware of Small States."

Perhaps there can be a diplomatic agreement to end the violence, but great damage has already been done, with more to come. Syria as a nation may not recover for decades, and, just as in Lebanon, its people will be traumatized for generations. The Roman historian Tacitus (57-117 AD) observed his Mediterranean world and wrote, "To ravage, to slaughter ... they call it empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace."