

The Road to Hell: A Brief History of Modern Syria

by Dana Visalli

In spite of the ongoing struggle for dominance in Syria by the various factions, there is in fact less and less to dominate, as the country has largely been destroyed by the four-year war raging there. It is commonplace to see a picture of a Syrian army soldier flashing a “V”



Today Syria is largely destroy; to understand why, read on.

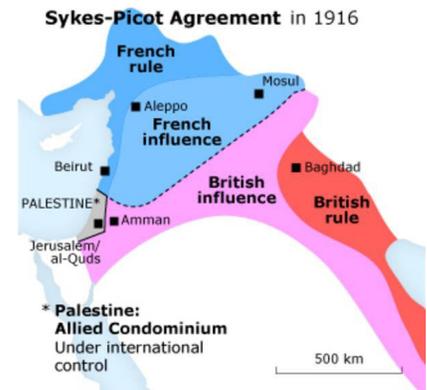
for victory sign after some recent success in battle, while in the background most of buildings in the town or city depicted lie in ruins, and the former occupants of the dwellings are living elsewhere in refugee camps. More than 400,000 Syrians have been killed in the four-year war, at least one million have been wounded, and an estimated twelve million Syrians (half the population of the country) are refugees, some inside and some outside the country.(1) An entire generation of Syrian children are growing up without an education in a landscape laid to waste. In this sense Syria has become hell on Earth. How did this happen?



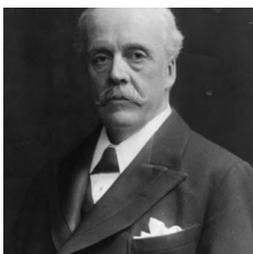
A brief reminder of what we are discussing here: the human family

It might seem that Syria is inherently difficult to unite and govern and is therefore in constant danger of fracturing, composed as it is of a plethora of religious sects and ethnic groups, including Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Druze, Greek Orthodox Christians, Maronite Catholics, and among ethnic groups primarily Arabs (90%) and Kurds (9%). But somehow Syria’s pluralistic society experienced 400 years of relatively peaceful coexistence as part of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore there must be a divisive force today that is consciously or unconsciously driving a wedge into the formerly pluralistic society and causing it to splinter. A brief review of Syrian history since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire may help clarify why Syria is shattered into pieces today.

While it was the allied forces of the United States, England and France that brought an end to the Ottoman Empire when it was defeated along with Germany at the end of World War I, it was primarily Syrian Arabs fighting for an independent Syria that defeated the Turks in Syria and took control of Damascus in 1918. (2) Soon afterwards, elections for a Syrian National Congress were held, with delegates representing all sectors of “Greater Syria,” which at that time included Lebanon and Palestine. Despite earlier British promises to Arab leaders that Arab territories would be free to rule themselves (in trade for Arab participation in the British war effort), Britain and France signed a secret accord called the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916 dividing up the Arab world between them as “spheres of influence and control.” In the agreement Syria was given to France, while Britain took control of Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. The newly formed Syrian parliament refused to acknowledge any right claimed by the French to any part of Syrian territory. In 1920 France issued an ultimatum to the Syrians to relinquish control, and then intervened militarily and occupied Damascus in June 1920, dissolving the Syrian Congress.



How the Middle East was divided according to Sykes-Picot.



Author Balfour & his Declaration

PALESTINE FOR THE JEWS.

OFFICIAL SYMPATHY.

Mr. Balfour has sent the following letter to Lord Rothschild in regard to the establishment of a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people:—

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to and approved by the Cabinet:—

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of other communities in Palestine.

In the Sykes-Picot Agreement Palestine was split off from Syria as a separate entity, and control of that territory was soon given to Britain. This was in anticipation of turning Palestine into a new Jewish state, as had been promised in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, even though at that time Palestine was 85% Arab and only 7% Jewish. The leading theory for why the British government made this agreement is “to assist in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.” (3) Arthur Balfour (for whom the Declaration was named) was a fundamentalist Christian who believed that the Almighty had chosen him to be an instrument of the Divine

Will, the purpose of which was to restore the Jews to their ancient homeland, as a precursor to the Second Coming of the Messiah (as prophesied in the bible, see for example Luke 21:24). For the Jews to succeed in this divinely inspired task they had to drive 700,000 Palestinians out of the country. Israel now claims 80% of what had been Palestine, while there are 4,255,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the West Bank. Understandably, this imposition of a Jewish state on Arab land has not been well-received by the Arabs.

The hope that some kind of god-like figure will appear out the clouds to solve human problems is a ludicrous piece of insanity.



French rule over Syria was unpopular and was resisted. A Syrian revolt for independence broke out in 1925 with fierce battles being fought and Damascus being shelled by the French. Syrians declared independence a second time in 1936, but the French maintained control through force of arms. Independence was declared a third time in 1941, when France itself was occupied by Germany. When the French government came back into power in 1945, it attempted to regain its Syrian colony (just as it attempted to regain control of Vietnam and the rest of what it called “French Indochina”), aerielly bombing and shelling Damascus, killing 400 people, destroying hundreds of homes and burning the parliament building to the ground. Continuing pressure from Syrian nationalist groups forced the French to evacuate the last of their troops in April 1946 and Syria became an independent state in that year, overseen by a government which had been elected by the Syrian people in 1943.

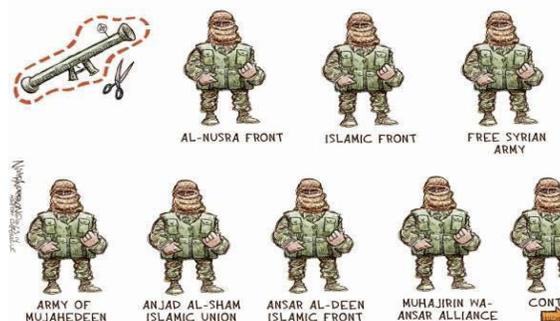
Deane Hinton, a Foreign Service officer with the American Legation at the time, was bitter about the whole Zaim debacle:



Direct U.S. involvement in Syria began in 1949, when the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored a coup that overthrew Syria’s first elected president, Shukri al-Quwatli. (4) The overriding U.S. policy objective in Syria at the time was allowing the construction of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, which the democratically elected government of Syria had blocked. The pipeline project was immediately ratified following the successful coup. When U.S. State Department official Dean Hinton became aware of the planning for the coup, he presciently stated, ““I want to go on record as saying that this is the stupidest, most irresponsible action a diplomatic mission like ours could get itself involved in, and that *we’ve started a series of these things that will never end.*” (5)

After this initial imposition of American will on Syria, instances of U.S. intervention in Syrian affairs are almost too numerous to recount. (6) In 1956 the CIA planned to once again overthrow al-Quwatli, who had been re-elected to the Syrian presidency the previous year. When that plan failed another coup attempt was fomented by the CIA in 1957, followed by a CIA-planned triple assassination of three Syrian government leaders (who had helped foil the 1957 coup attempt), this being part of a larger plan to disrupt the functioning of Syrian society. This effort included supplying weapons to paramilitary groups including the Islamic fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, leading then it was hoped (according to the CIA plan) to an invasion of Syria to establish a government compliant with U.S. demands. These well-documented affronts to Syrian sovereignty will give the reader an understanding of American efforts to control the policies and the politics of Syria and the Middle East without enumerating the longer list of outrages against the Syrian people. It also goes a long way in explaining why the Syrian government evolved from democratic beginnings to a controlling authoritarian state: there were constant efforts from abroad to destroy it.

Today's Picture Puzzle: Arm the Right Syrian Rebel Group



A series of papers written by Israeli and American policy think tanks in the 1980s and 1990s advised that the best way to enhance the security of Israel would be to break up the Arab world into small, disorganized statelets. The

initial division of the Middle East under Sykes-Picot was devised to deflect Arab unity. In 1920 the French created the new state (or statelet) of Lebanon out of the coastline of Syria, ensuring that Syria would be landlocked with no access to the sea. In 1922 the lands of Palestine was extracted from Greater Syria by Britain.

In what would appear to be a continuation of this policy of fracturing Arab unity, an Israeli paper titled *A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s* recommended “the division of the whole area into small states by the dissolution of all existing Arab states.” (7) An American Report issued 1996 noted that “Israel can shape its strategic environment by weakening Syria”, and recommended regime change in Iraq as a step towards undermining the Syrian government. (8) In 2006 William Roebuck, chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Damascus outlined strategies for destabilizing the Syrian government and presented the increasing presence of Islamic extremists as an ‘opportunity,’ (9) and indeed the following year the Bush administration began to fund Islamic fundamentalists in Syria, including the Muslim Brotherhood. (10) Robert Kennedy Jr. wrote in a lengthy article on Syria in early 2016 that the war in Syria did not start with protests in 2011, but rather “when Qatar proposed to construct a \$10 billion, 1,500 km pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey”—which Syria opposed. (9)



The fruit of American foreign policy in the Middle East: 400,000 dead in Syria and 12 million refugees. It's a similar story in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A more accurate starting point for the war in Syria would be the secret drafting of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which operated under the grandiose presumption that the British and the French had the right to dictate the future of other societies and nations. A second step towards the current war in Syria was the pathological imaginings of Arthur Balfour (and other fundamentalist Christians), who perceived himself as a divinely chosen messenger, with the message being the transfer of Palestine from the Arabs to the Jews in order to induce the return of the Messiah according to biblical bullshit. Then came years of American covert and overt intervention, including repeatedly supporting and arming Islamic fundamentalists. The propriety and legality of this sordid tale of decades of American intervention in the internal affairs of Syria (and many other societies and countries) is summarized by an observation of political commentator Noam Chomsky, who stated recently that if the laws formulated at the Nuremberg trials in Germany at the end of World War II to try and sentence the Nazi war criminals were to be upheld, “then every post-war American president would have been hanged.” (12)

It should be noted that America’s inimical behavior towards Syria is not an isolated phenomenon; the United States has engaged in serious interventions into the functioning of other nations at least 70 times since the end of World War II (13), slaughtering an estimated 20 to 30 million people in their home countries in that time (14). Americans with any sense of ethics, intelligence of love for the rest of humanity who want to participate in altering this tragic scenario are going to have to come up with “a new way of thinking,” as Albert Einstein put it. The core problem is twofold, 1) Human beings are genetically and culturally programmed to seek and adhere to external authority, to do as they are told to do. But in our era this programming is proving to be highly dysfunctional, because it is a simple fact that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The United States government, which has almost absolute power, carries out one mindless atrocity after another (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Korea, the Philippines, Libya, Iraq, to name a few), but the masses of people continue to believe in the authority of government as if it were a religion.

2) The second problem is that most human beings have not developed a deep sense of relationship to the Earth, which is not only our only home, but is the source of our very lives. As a result almost everyone is willing to support a pathological government, paying for the continuance of the grotesque military industrial complex and the U.S. nuclear arsenal—both of which threaten the viability of the biosphere—and remain utterly mute in the face of continual atrocities against the human family and the Earth itself. The only way forward is for people to wake up from this programmed dream of subservience to a higher (governmental) power and discover their genuine identity

as sovereign members of the Community of Life, with all the joys, sorrows and responsibilities that such awareness entails.

Dana Visalli is a biologist living in Washington State; he has visited Iraq and Afghanistan often and attempted to visit Damascus in Syria in March of this year. He has essays on Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam at www.methownaturalist.com



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Syrian Refugees and the Earth Household

by Dana Visalli

With a Lebanese population of four million, Lebanon is currently hosting over one million Syrian refugees from the violence in Syria that has torn that country apart. I wanted to touch in with the human stories of these people, and so I traveled to Lebanon in March of this year (2016) in hopes of visiting one or more of the refugee camps that have sprung up all over the country. Most of the camps are humble affairs, taking in from one hundred to one thousand people. The dwellings are typically tent-like structures with large tarps thrown over a wooden frame. Despite the fact that these camps now dot the Lebanese landscape, entry into them is both tightly controlled by the U.N. and not particular safe once you are allowed in, so it was my good fortune to visit two camps and be able to walk around and talk with some of the inhabitants (with the help of a translator).



The first of two camps visited in March



Empty lives: pepsi & plastic

Both camps that I visited were in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. The Al Jaraheya camp was a collection of about 30 wood-framed structures housing about 200 people. A dominant theme of the camp that comes to mind is *emptiness*. This small, lost world is not lacking in people, but it is empty of any social or cultural context or content. For example we took a tour inside one of the “homes”; there was almost nothing in it. There was a rug on the floor, a small stove (but no fuel) in the middle of an approximately 15 by 15 foot room, and a television; other than that it was just open space. An attached side lean-to had a simple sink, drainboard and a single-burner propane stove.

In a “community center” social area there was just a small plastic table and four plastic chairs; nothing else. Four pepsis—which of course are devoid of any nutritional content—were brought and placed on the plastic table in this environment that was devoid of any cultural content. The devastation and the deprivation of any form of meaningful existence visited upon these refugees in their home communities in Syria had followed

them across the border to Lebanon. There is no work for these people, no books to read, no activities, just overwhelming emptiness in a sterile environment.



Emptiness: Inside a refugee tent

Abu Razak, young man of 25, has been in the camp for one and a half years. His village near Homs was razed to the ground by the Syrian government. People in his area were known to be critical of the Assad government; one of their major issues was the mass killing of a large number of people in an uprising staged by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 in the city of Hama. People in the area where this violence took place were deeply traumatized by the event, but they had never been allowed to talk about it; if they did speak publicly they would likely be arrested by government agents. Abu Razak said his people “were not even allowed to think” for fear of reprisals by the government. (On the other hand education was free in Syria and Razak dropped out of school after the 8th grade, to his regret now). How was life in the camp? His answer was similar to others I asked, “We are alive thank God, but life in camp is hard.”

Young Selwa (she did not want to give me her name so I told her to just make one up; she laughed and said, ok, call me Selwa) has been in the camp for two and a half years; her home and entire village are also completely destroyed. Who destroyed it, the government or the rebels? She said the responsibility for the destruction was shared between the Assad government and the rebels. Both sides are constantly fighting, and the people are caught in the middle. She is 29 years old with two young children; her husband is stuck in Syria because currently no more Syrians are allowed to cross the border to Lebanon.



Women in the camp: Selwa on the right

Surviving the economics of the camp is challenging. Most camps are on private land, and most landlords charge a month rent for each tent; at Al Jaraheya the rent is \$50 a month per tent; multiply that by 30 tents and it seems the landlord is making a tidy sum off of the refugee’s misfortune. There are also charges for electricity and water. There is little work to be had for the refugees, but if the rent isn’t paid in a timely manner tents and the people in them are removed from the camp. Each person in the camp gets a card for \$27 worth of food a month; sometimes people sell this sparse supply of food in order to raise money to pay the rent.

My guide Tarek tells me afterwards that everyone in the camp is against the Syrian government. They are mostly from the poorer strata of Syrian society, who are the ones who often seemed to have felt most neglected by the government, while the more well-to-do people tend to support Assad (this is certainly not categorically true however).

The second camp was considered more hazardous than the first. It is much larger and has been in place longer; a raid there a year ago netted many guns. Some women will ‘trade sex for money’ at the camp—with both Lebanese and Syrian men attending the services. Tarek and I never really quite obtained permission to enter the camp, so we spent our time standing on a road passing through it talking with a gaggle of men and children that gathered around us until we were kicked out. There was general agreement among those gathered that the United States was behind the violence being perpetuated in Syria by the fundamentalist rebel groups, especially ISIS and Al Nusra. I asked them why the United States would want to destroy Syria, and an answer flew from the mouth of an old man almost before I finished the sentence: “Israel. Israel wants the Arab world broken up into small pieces,” he said, “and it wants to see the Arabs fighting against one another.” He probably had that about right, as I noted in my previous report there is an Israeli action plan published in 1982 that calls for fragmenting the Arab world.

At just about that time the Lebanese owner of the camp happened by. Upon learning that I was an American, and was there out of a sense of concern for the Syrian refugees, he said he had a story to tell me. It seems there was this very poor man, who complained to God about his poverty. God replied that he would give the man a donkey, a sheep and goat, and he could make a living with these animals. But soon the man was back, complaining that he couldn’t sleep at night, because the animals constantly made a racket. God advised him to get rid of the donkey and things would be better; but still the other animals were rambunctious and wouldn’t let the man sleep. So God ad-

vised him to get rid of the goat, and then to get rid of the sheep; then at last the man could sleep and he was happy; he had completely forgotten about the original complaint that had initiated the cycle of emotions.

“And you Americans,” said the owner, “are like this poor man. You create this enormous problem out of your own unhappiness, destroying the country of Syria with your weapons and ignorance and maliciousness, driving the Syrian people out of their homes. And then afterwards you look upon the results and ask with feeling, “My God what happened here, this is a terrible situation, how can I help.”

To take in the magnitude of this human diaspora, one has to take the story of any one refugee individual or family, and multiply that by the 12 million Syrian refugees that currently exist, or for full effect multiply by the 60 million people on the planet today who have been driven out of their homes, by far the majority of them by violence. The impoverishment of these people’s lives is analogous to the impoverishment of the global biosphere that is currently taking place on the planet, with the widespread loss of plant and animal populations and species. Anyone willing to take this all in will see clearly that the human species is challenged to change behaviors and strive to learn what it means to live ecologically balanced lives. I find such an inquiry extends from where I get my food to whether I am willing to pay for a nation’s continual wars and nuclear arsenal. It is a personal journey for each individual.

Dana Visalli
Charre, Lebanon
March 2016



“They say that if God loves you, He will let you live a long life, but I wish that He loved me a little less. I wish that I didn’t live long enough to see my country in ruins.” Ahmad, a 102 year old Syrian refugee