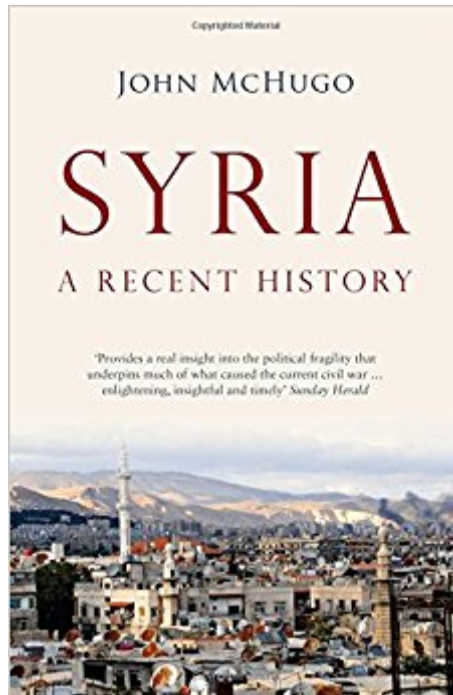




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# **Syria: A Recent History**



## Synopsis

Syria's descent into civil war has already claimed an estimated 200,000 lives while more than nine million people have fled their homes. This is now the greatest humanitarian and political crisis of the twenty-first century. In this timely account, John McHugo charts the history of Syria from the First World War to the present and considers why Syria's foundations as a nation have proved so fragile. He examines the country's thwarted attempts at independence under French rule before turning to more recent events: religious and sectarian tensions that have riven Syria, the pressures of international conflicts, two generations of rule by the Assads and the rise of ISIS. As the conflict in Syria rages on, McHugo provides a rare and authoritative guide to a complex nation that demands our attention.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

'Enlightening' Robert Fisk, Independent '[Provides] a real insight into the political fragility that underpins much of what caused the current civil war - Remarkably prescient - At the very start of this enlightening read, McHugo makes the point that to the English-speaking world, Syria is a far off country which relatively few people have made a serious effort to understand. In writing this insightful and timely book, he has gone some considerable way to rectifying this neglect.' Sunday Herald '[A] very timely modern history of Syria ... McHugo provides the reader with a high level of sound analysis. Perhaps the most interesting contribution is his concluding remarks concerning the debate over whether new borders will be imposed on the region. The book is written both with academic scrutiny and with the empathy of an individual who cares greatly for his area of study.' Journal of Peace Research 'Providing historical context for the Syrian crisis, McHugo uncovers

uncanny parallels between the pacification strategies of the French in the 1920s and the Bashar al-Assad regime today, exposing the continuous role of violence in the region's (flawed) state formation.' Raymond Hinnebusch, Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St Andrews 'A fluent introduction to Syria's recent past, this book provides the backstory to the country's collapse into brutal civil conflict' Andrew Arsan, St John's College, University of Cambridge 'Fascinating and timely, admirably written with original vision' Nikolaos van Dam 'An elegantly written popular history ... A work of great ambition, with a coherent chronological narrative ... Should be recommended reading for undergraduates, policy-makers and interested members of the public who wish to learn how Syria's different communities are shaping the current civil war and are likely to be shaped by it. [It asserts] innovative rubrics for processing the myriad horrific details which reach us daily from Syria's battlefields'. International Affairs 'Anyone with any interest in Middle Eastern history and politics must read Syria. There was a need for an accessible guide to the past century of history, which this admirably provides.' Geographical Magazine

John McHugo is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Syrian Studies at St Andrews University. A board member of the Council for Arab British Understanding and the British Egyptian Society, he is also chair of the Liberal Democrat Friends of Palestine. McHugo's writing has featured in History Today, The World Today, Jewish Quarterly and on the BBC News website. His debut work, A Concise History of the Arabs, was published to critical acclaim in 2013. McHugo was shortlisted for the Salon Transmission Prize in 2014.

John McHugo's book focuses on 1920-2015 and provides a clear and concise overview of Syria's history over the period. Syria's population is about 92% Arab, but it has many religious factions who have not always got along. Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1919 and was under French rule 1920-1946. Since 1970 it has been ruled by the Assad family. McHugo speaks Arabic and first visited Syria in 1974 while studying for a graduate degree in Islamic history in Cairo. He then became a London based lawyer and spent a lot of time in the Middle East. McHugo argues that the actions of the West since 1919 have often destabilized Syria and made it difficult for it ever to become a normal country. The main aim of the Syrians has been to keep the country free of foreign domination. He argues that Syria has no reason to trust the West and that is why it has often allied itself with Moscow. American commentators still believe that the US has a role to play in solving the problems of the Muslim world and countries like Syria, but this book makes it clear that we are no longer seen as honest brokers by the Arabs. The US has always supported Israel and

Israel is viewed as a hostile foreign aggressor by the Syrians. McHugo tells us that the Assad regime has been brutal and corrupt and that its security services have even tortured children. Syria has seen a lot of bloodshed, before and during the recent civil war. He suggests that getting rid of Assad would be a good start, but does not support partitioning of the country since this would require ethnic cleansing and would result in more bloodshed. He suggests that for the foreseeable future the country is likely to be run by warlords. The Ottoman Empire was dismantled by the Allies and in 1920 France was handed a Mandate by the League of Nations to rule the country. Most Syrians did not understand why the French had been sent to rule them. The French were hostile towards Islam. They wanted to eradicate the religion and prevent democracy taking hold. They were brutal and unpopular. McHugo believes that the French made a mess of running the country and did not improve the lives of its people. The French hoped to again rule Syria after WW2, but the Syrians wanted them gone. The French carried out a massacre in 1945 and lost the support of Britain. France was kicked out of the country in 1946 and they abandoned Syria. Syria needed help and guidance with its new democracy but it was on its own. The global Cold War tussle between the US and the USSR turned Syria into a pawn. The Saudis have regularly meddled in the country's affairs and tried to put their own man in charge in 1955. The US tried to organize a coup to overthrow the Syrian government in 1956 and failed. Syria was democratic until it merged with Egypt in 1958. The Assads were able to take control of the country in 1970 because they had the backing of the army. The Ba'ath party supported the country's new leader, Hafez al-Assad, and Syria became a one-party state. Hafez ruled until 2000. His son Bashar rules today. Syria is made up of many different religious factions: Sunni Muslims (75%), Christians (10%), Druze (3%), and Alawites (11%). Ba'athism was perceived by the Bush Administration as evil, but Michel Aflaq, its main thinker, was a Christian. The London Times described him in 1959 as 'the Ghandi of Arab nationalism'. Ba'athists originally advocated socialism and cared about the poor and complained about the selfishness of the elite. McHugo claims that the various Syrian factions peacefully co-existed at one time. The French practiced divide and rule and introduced sectarianism. The Assad family has continued this practice. The Assads are Alawite, which is a branch of Shi'ism. The Assads have only trusted other Alawites to run the army and the security services. The Assads turned the country into a police state and like the French saw Islamic militancy and democracy as twin threats to their rule. Things started to go wrong for Assad in 2011, when authoritarian rulers were being overthrown during the Arab Spring. The Assads had improved literacy and the number of university graduates. However, unemployment was 65% among those aged under 25. This created a lot of educated young people who were dissatisfied

with their lot and wanted change. The Ba'athists still believed in socialism but the government was unable to create enough jobs. Ba'athists had no idea how to run a modern Western style economy. The war in Iraq, and the flood of refugees into Syria created further strains. The Arab Spring was the spark which set things off. The point of no return for the regime started in 2011 when its security services started shooting demonstrators. This quickly escalated into a civil war. McHugo describes the various groups involved in the fighting. Assad is supported by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. Syria had supported Iran in its war with Iraq in 1980, much to the dismay of the rest of the Arab world. Hezbollah believes it is fighting against American and Israeli hegemony in the region. The Russians want to show that they are players again on the world scene and can't be pushed around. McHugo highlights the power struggle between the revolutionary Shi'ism of Iran and the Wahhabism of the Saudis, which began in the 1980s. The US, Saudis, and Qataris all back factions in the conflict. The fighters on the Sunni side defect from one faction to another. McHugo argues that Islam is not well understood in the West. According to McHugo, extremist groups like ISIS and al Qaeda are not Islamic. He believes that honesty, justice and mercy are core Islamic values and indiscriminate violence is not. It is not Islamic to execute Christians who won't convert to Islam. Neither is killing Shia Muslims because you view them as heretics. McHugo argues that ordinary Syrians have traditionally supported a more moderate form of Islam than the Saudis. He believes that ISIS also contains too many foreign nut jobs to emerge as a credible long-term government in Syria. The book was published in 2015 and there was a popular theory at the time that the regime was working with ISIS to kill off the moderate Muslim groups. If the various Sunni factions are fighting each other that is good for the regime. The antics of ISIS also discredits the whole Sunni opposition to Assad in the eyes of the international community. The regime is probably betting that an ISIS victory won't be acceptable to the West. Assad seems unable to reconquer the whole country, but McHugo believes he can carry on more-or-less indefinitely, with the help of Russia and Iran. This is a history book and explains how we reached the current situation but does not offer any real solutions. He suggests that only Syrians can stop the fighting but at the moment there is too much foreign meddling to allow that to happen.

Clear, straightforward telling of Syrian history from World War I to last year. Very informative in terms of understanding how things got to where they are today. Strong Israeli partisans will no doubt object to McHugo's sympathy for the Arab-Palestinian cause, but I found a non-polemical presentation of that point of view eye-opening, albeit to some extent one-sided. Highly recommended.

Great book for people who want to separate fact from fiction about who is responsible for the debacle in Syria. If you don't read often and like to read TWEETS on important subjects, this book is not for you.

Excellent and succinctly written. Provides the reader with some idea of the very complex and convoluted factionalism in that part of the Middle East.

Syria is my father's native country. He never spoke about it since he left Syria in the 1940s and until his premature death in 1984. I never went there and everything I learned from Syria's history is from this remarkable little book by John McHugo. This book made me cry. It is sad to learn how this country is apparently inexorably descending the road to self-destruction. While my tears are trickling on my face, Syria is being teared up apart! I am just beginning to want to know more about my father's country precisely at a time when Syria risks to cease to exist.

Good read so far.

This book is awesome, it gives you history and facts to let you understand what's going on and also it raises some questions which everyone of us in the Middle East should ask

This is an enjoyable and persuasive read. It manages to be based in solid scholarship while at the same time accessible. Recommended.

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