

Shay Kent  
 Urbandale High School  
 Urbandale, IA  
 Syria, Malnutrition

## Syria: The Fight to Overcome

### Introduction

Franklin D. Roosevelt has been quoted as saying, “We can never insure 100 percent of the population against 100 percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life,” and we have yet to discredit this statement. We have people dying daily all around the world from violence, disease, and malnutrition. Syria is a prominent example of this, with its civil war causing violence leading to disease and malnutrition throughout the entire country.

### The Problem

In 2006 a devastating drought destroyed family farms throughout Syria<sup>1</sup>, causing rural farming families to move to urban slums as written in Aron Lund article “*Drought, Corruption, and War: Syria’s Agricultural Crisis*” for the *Carnegie Middle East Center* (Lund). The Guardian’s journalist Kareem Shaheen then reported in the article “Syria: Shocking Images of Starving Baby Reveal Impact of Food Crisis” on how sieges caused by the civil war have led to Syrians struggling with having enough food to sufficiently feed themselves and their families leading many Syrians to be malnourished (Shaheen). With malnutrition being a prominent part of life in Syria this also means that disease is a prevalent problem; malnutrition can cause a person’s immune system to weaken. With the rampant malnutrition and the shortage of doctors in the area, even the common cold can be life threatening.

### Syrian History

Syrians did not always struggle with malnutrition and disease. Syria once had its own “breadbasket” that helped them flourish. Then that changed: a drought struck and as protests became riots a full-blown civil war started and life changed. *The Guardian* had journalists Kareem Shaheen and Patrick Wintour write the article “*‘Facing disaster’: Children Starve in Siege of Syria’s Former Breadbasket*” where they described how the former “breadbasket” as they called it of Syria was now cut off from everyone else and had become unrecognizable. Abdel Hamid<sup>2</sup> tried to describe the new Syria but was only able to say “I could try to describe to you how terrible the conditions are in which we are living, but the reality would still be worse,” when he was asked. The country was not always a conflict-ridden place and the people were not always malnourished, it was once a very prosperous nation (Shaheen and Wintour).

Just seven years ago Syria was an up-and-coming country emerging with a great economy. Syria was seen as a model for other developing countries. However, after seven years of war, a longer history of instability, over 500,000 casualties of all ages, religions, sides, and innocent civilians, Syria is struggling to function as a country. One of the problems Syria is struggling with is highlighted in Aron Lund’s article “*Drought, Corruption, and War: Syria’s Agricultural Crisis*” for the *Carnegie Middle East Center* where

1 Majority of food in Syria was still coming from family farms

2He chose not to give his full name for security reasons

he talks about their struggle to cultivate crops because of Syria's current state (Lund).

When you look at the *British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) "Syria Profile-Timeline"*, where they compiled a timeline of Syrian History you can see how many power changes there have been. Syria has been ruled by the Ottomans, the French, and the British. Syria also united with Egypt for a few years before they separated again, that's when things started to get troubling again. It all began with Syria's Arab Socialist Ba'ath party. The Ba'ath party is now the leading political party in Syria who took over after Syria and Egypt split. The only other political party in Syria is the opposing Muslim Brotherhood who is helping lead rebel forces. Many do not agree with the Ba'ath parties ideas or actions; this has caused many problems, including protests which turned into riots that then turned into a civil war in 2011 (BBC).

Still looking at the *BBC's "Syria Profile-Timeline"* it is shown that Syria has been ruled by the Assad family since the early 1970's. After Hafez al-Assad supported the Ba'ath army when they seized control of the Syrian government, he set in motion the ability for the Assad regime to be formed. Before overthrowing then-Syrian president Nur al-Din al-Atasi in a coup in November 1970, Hafez al-Assad was Syria's Defense Minister for four years and then became the president of Syria himself (BBC).

According to *The Telegraph's "A Brief History"*<sup>3</sup> three years into his reign, al-Assad dropped the requirement in the Syrian constitution that stated that Syria's president must be Muslim, an action that appeared to many as a step toward Syria becoming fully democratic. This same action, however, sparked some of the first major protests and riots during the Assad family reign. These riots would not be the last for the Assad family, as later President Bashar al-Assad (Hafez al-Assad's son) took major actions that led to many protests and riots which eventually turned into Syria's civil war in 2011 (The Telegraph).

One of the impactful actions that contributed to the war also helped create a food crisis. Aron Lund of the *Carnegie Middle East Center* reported in the article "*Drought, Corruption, and War: Syria's Agricultural Crisis*" that when President Assad's son Bashar became president, he wanted Syria's economy to focus more on urban sectors as opposed to the agriculture sector under which it had been thriving. The new President Assad was generally successful with his goal until a drought struck in 2006. At that point, Syria was still providing the majority of its own food from family farms. The 2006 drought ruined these farms and food security in Syria. The drought continued for four years and many Syrians did not think that the government did enough to help. By 2011 protests started and the drought only exacerbated them. Then an all-out civil war started in May of 2011 and this once again halted most growth that Syria could have in its agriculture sector (Lund).

In addition to growth being stopped in many places, different sides of the war are cutting parts of Syria off from the rest of the world; for example, the region of Ghouta desperately needs food and medical supplies but aid can not reach those who need it. In fact, when talking to the international newspaper *The Guardian* for the article "*Syria: Shocking Images of Starving Baby Reveal Impact of Food Crisis*" by Kareem Shaheen, Doctor Yahya Abu Yahya reported that lots of new mothers came into his clinic with their young children severely malnourished because they (the mothers) could not produce enough milk for the children (Shaheen). A big part of the problem is the fact that the area is considered a de-escalation zone, so while there is no fighting in the area most de-escalation zones are surrounded by one side in the

<sup>3</sup>While only being called "A Brief History" it is on Syria specifically

war; Ghouta is surrounded by Assad's forces which very rarely allow foreign aid into their territory.

### How We Can Help

Because it is hard for aid to get to the areas where people are most severely in need, help can't necessarily come in the more traditional forms of aid from charities and other countries. In order for most Syrians to have reliable access to food, they need to find a way to get these foods without a lot of outside help from charities and other countries.

One of the most promising ways for Syrians to have a reliable source of nutritious food is with the Nabe 15 bean, also known as the "Super Bean." *The Aid and International Development Forum* reported that Nabe 15 that is currently being distributed in Uganda by the United Nation (the UN) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to help feed refugees fleeing to Uganda has been extremely helpful. The Nabe 15 bean are a group of beans that are non-genetically modified, found to be able to withstand disease and drought and only take 60-70 days to mature. The Nabe 15 bean has been farmed in extremely hard-to-cultivate places and overall has been a huge success in Uganda (*Aid and International Development Forum*); I believe that Nabe 15 beans could drastically improve life for many Syrians.

Awareness of the Syrian Civil War is generally high around the world, but even more well-known are the children of Syria. According to the international charity *Save the Children*, Syria is now the most dangerous place for children and Syrian children suffer all six of what the UN defines as the six grave violations<sup>4</sup> (*Save the Children*). In the news article "Syrian Schools Grow Edible Playgrounds to Boost Diets of Hungry Children" on *Reuters* and *Voices of America*, journalist Alex Whiting talks about how some Syrian schools have started to build playgrounds combined with gardens (Whiting). This teaches kids about farming while allowing them to have fresh food, play, and it is a form of subsistence farming that should be expanded in Syria with the help of the FAO, *Save the Children* and the United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

Children are not the only ones being impacted by the current climate in Syria. Nearly every Syria is suffering from hunger and/or malnutrition. Because of the war, having large, reliable farms is unrealistic, and with soaring prices in markets, it can be hard for many families to be sure they will be able to eat every month. Instead, Syrians should have more control over their own food by localizing where their food is coming from. If Syrians plant their own gardens or work with their neighbors to grow a garden, then they have something to eat if the markets are too expensive or have been ruined. Having a semi-subsistence method of farming in the country would help families save money and have more reliable access to food. If for some reason they are completely confined to the city they are in, like in the Ghouta region, then they at least have some way to feed themselves and their family. Once the original Nabe seeds are distributed with simple instructions and the help of the FAO, a semi-subsistence way of farming could be a big help for most Syrians.

<sup>4</sup> The six grave violations are: The recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, sexual violence against children, attacks against schools and hospitals, the abduction of children, and the denial of humanitarian access

As mentioned earlier, in places like Ghouta, it is hard to enter or leave the area because of the heavy military presence. Most of the time in Syria when it is not possible for humanitarian workers to go into an area it is because of the fighting. Often in these places that need help the most, aid workers are unable to have access to the territory for months. While this does not mean that we can not help people in those areas, it does mean that we have to approach this situation differently than other situations. In most situations humanitarian workers are able to get into the places that need help, but because in some parts of Syria this is not an option, we would have to work with all parties of the war to help them. When it is possible and safe, then humanitarian workers can go into an area and help in any way they can. In my proposal they would be distributing Nabe 15 beans and helping people learn the basics of growing, storing, and cooking them.

There is a solution to this complication. In February of 2018 the UN called for a ceasefire after over 335 civilians were killed in eastern Ghouta; the reasoning provided was not only to provide a time for the two sides to try to calm down and work toward peace, but also for humanitarian workers to go in and help in any way they could and for civilians to leave if they wanted to according to *The Guardian's* article "*Aid agencies call for urgent ceasefire in besieged Syrian enclave*" written by Peter Beaumont and Emma Graham-Harrison (Beaumont and Graham-Harrison). If the fighting is too dangerous for humanitarian workers to be in an area, then it is too dangerous for innocent men, women, and children to be there too and a ceasefire should be called for the sake of the innocent civilians who are in danger.

### Syria's Current State

Syria was once an up-and-coming nation in the perspective of the rest of the world, but years of a grisly and chaotic civil war have taken that from them. The Syrian Civil War has also taken the lives of many Syrian civilians, all of which were preventable if the war stopped. While hope still remains that the conflict will end soon, the facts are that the war is at one of its most brutal points and it is not expected to get better soon.

In February of 2018, the Assad regime tried to take back Damascus from rebel forces by launching airstrikes in the area and chemical attacks in Eastern Ghouta. *The Guardian's* Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen reported in the article "*Fighting resumes in eastern Ghouta despite 'humanitarian pause'*" that even after a ceasefire was called pro-government troops still continued to attack Eastern Ghouta. While the attacks after the ceasefire was called were not as severe as before the ceasefire, the rest of the world was still rightly upset by the Assad regime's actions. However, some aid and humanitarian workers were able to enter Eastern Ghouta through special channels set up through the ceasefire and it was much safer because of the ceasefire (Chulov and Shaheen).

Given the political climate in Syria, there are going to be some places that are harder to access than others. If we have access to a specific town or area in Syria, for even just a day, then it would be easier to distribute Nabe beans throughout that town or region and allow many more people some form of hope, like those in Uganda.

### Conclusion

While Roosevelt was correct that we cannot protect everyone from every life challenge, there is still work

we can do to improve life for those around us. While people in Syria will still die from disease, missiles, and simply old age, we can help stop deaths from malnutrition.

Syria was once a growing, thriving country, one that many hoped would lead the way for a more peaceful Middle East. With a booming economy and great culture, Syria was seen as a near-perfect model for a Middle Eastern country. They had healthy and happy people who did not have the problems of a war-torn country.

However, nothing is perfect. This “perfect Syria” was, unfortunately, years ago and is not the case today. Today Syria is in the midst of arguably one of the bloodiest civil wars in history with one of the highest civilian casualty rates. This “new Syria” is torn between rebel forces and government-backed forces. They also struggle with many third-world problems because of this raging conflict, including malnutrition, disease, and limited or no access to aid and humanitarian efforts.

Syria has many problems, many of which could be reduced if people were not so malnourished. If malnourishment was not as big of a problem then that would start a chain reaction. If people are not malnourished then they are less likely to get sick. If they are not sick or the body can handle it better, then they are less likely to need a doctor. If people are not malnourished then they will not need doctors and nutritionists as often to help with their malnourishment, lessening the strain on doctors and nutritionists in the region.

While we can not protect everyone from all the horrors of life, we can help some. By helping end malnutrition and hunger in Syria then not only are we helping those who are no longer malnourished but in return others will benefit. For example, the significant amount of aid workers currently in Syria would not be needed there if people were better off; children who depend on those who are dying of malnutrition would benefit greatly from having more stable families. While I agree with the words of former United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, I do believe that we can help as many as possible. Realistically we can not help everyone and I know this, but if we are able to bring hope to at least one war-torn country like Syria then it can be called a success. If we give one country hope who is to say it will not spread?

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