Setting the Stage

How it all began
The iron hand of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his self-serving government had proven to be more than the people of Daraa could bear. Inspired by the protests of the Arab Spring a year earlier, and infuriated by the Syrian government’s repressive rule, the citizens of Daraa took to the streets to voice their outrage over the arrest and torture of 15 boys who painted the slogan “The people want to overthrow the regime” on one of the walls of their school. Government forces responded to the demonstration by opening fire on the crowd, killing five and wounding many others. The events in Daraa inspired similar protests across the country.

Note to Teachers
The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues such as violence and death. Prepare students for the topics that will be discussed and allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.

The Evolution of a Civil War
What started as a few isolated protests suddenly became a nationwide phenomenon and, the more the movement grew, the more violent President Assad’s army became. Within months, the crisis evolved into an all-out civil war. It was the president’s hope that the military might of the Syrian army would stop the uprising in its tracks. Instead it spawned a spirit of militancy among the common people and caused many members of the armed forces to defect to the protesters side — thus pitting the extremely well-armed and well-trained Syrian army against a makeshift rebel army consisting of protesters and ex-soldiers.

Conflict hotspots
Conflict hotspots began to emerge across Syria with the city of Homs being one of the most intense battlegrounds. In the fall of 2011, government forces went door-to-door and arrested scores of alleged rebels — killing at least 18 people (including an eight year old girl) — in an effort to regain control of the city. Homs didn’t bend so the army spent the next several months firing on unarmed crowds and bombarding residential neighbourhoods with high-powered artillery shells and air force bomber jets. The same gruesome theme emerged in Houla, Damascus, and Aleppo. In Houla, 108 people were killed in one day when government forces shelled neighbourhoods and summarily executed suspected opponents of the regime. In Damascus, the historic capital of Syria, government forces protected political resources with tanks, warplanes, and an intense military presence. That didn’t stop the insurgents from setting off car bombs and engaging in tactical
guerilla warfare to stake their claim to parts of the city. Syria’s largest city, Aleppo — a place that managed to dodge the violence for most of the conflict — suffered the same fate as other jurisdictions: bombardment by the army and air force, innocent civilians killed alongside rebel fighters, and atrocities too horrible to describe.

**Stalemate and Diplomacy**

Fifteen months after the conflict began, Syria’s civil war could only be characterized as a stalemate — this despite the fact that the Syrian army found itself far better equipped than their rebel counterparts. While both sides clung to their respective strongholds, diplomats tried to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict. The Arab League made several attempts to get the Assad government to dial back its aggressive assault on its own people but, as the carnage mounted, they felt they had no choice but to kick Syria out of the 22 member regional community. Meanwhile, the United Nations dispatched Kofi Anan to try to broker a deal between the rebel forces and the Assad government. While it appeared he had successfully brought the two sides together, the Syrian army’s repeated violation of the Anan plan ceasefire made a diplomatic solution untenable. Eventually Anan quit and his successor, Algerian Lakdhar Brahimi, declared, “There is no disagreement anywhere that the situation in Syria is extremely bad and getting worse, that it is a threat to the region and a threat to peace and security in the world.” (BBC, September 24, 2012) The regional threat took on added significance in September 2012 after a Syrian army mortar attack on a border town in Turkey. The Turkish government responded by giving the army permission to engage in cross-border operations if the Syrian attacks continued.

**Assad’s Grip Weakening?**

For those seeking regime change within Syria, the two-pronged stalemate was extremely disheartening. It was unlikely that a sustained rebel led guerilla war would win out against a far more powerful Syrian army, and it was also clear that the international community was unwilling to risk a global conflict by imposing a military solution on the crisis. However, a few events within Syria in the summer of 2012 did prove encouraging for the rebels — first, the defection of several high profile leaders within the regime and, second, a well-orchestrated attack on a Syrian military compound in Damascus. In July, the Syrian ambassador to Iraq defected, as did a number of high-ranking military leaders, in support of the rebel cause. A month later, Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab, appointed a few months earlier to appease the rebels, also defected and pledged his support for the overthrow of the Assad government. Then, in September, rebel forces positioned two car bombs close to Syria’s main military compound in Damascus. Once the car bombs detonated, the military base was in shambles and a brief firefight between the army and rebels ensued.

UN partners united in their decision to use air strikes to aid rebels fighting Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, unanimity was not the order of the day when it came to Syria. China and Russia vowed to use their Security Council veto power to block any UN resolutions designed to remove President Assad from power. The US and Canada moved from condemnation of the actions of the Assad government to a call for his resignation. With China and Russia pitted against countries like the US and Canada, any kind of outside military intervention to aid the rebels was not going to take place without causing a global crisis. It seems the same stalemate that emerged in the conflict between the rebels and the Syrian government also took hold on the diplomatic front.

**The International Community**

Meanwhile, the international community struggled to respond to the crisis in Syria. While
Outside observers marveled at the ability of the rebels to get so close to such a key Syrian army post, with many wondering if someone inside the compound aided them.

Huge Humanitarian Crisis
Despite these signs of encouragement for the rebels, the civil war remained a stalemate heading into the fall of 2012. A little over a year after it began, Syria’s bitter and bloody conflict had left upwards of 30,000 people dead — including 2,000 children — and almost three million wounded. Over a million people were left homeless with close to 300,000 refugees seeking shelter in countries neighbouring Syria. Some human rights observers claimed that 160,000 refugees had settled in camps in Jordan alone. While the fighting raged on — and the stalemate became more and more entrenched — a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions continued to evolve.

To Consider

1. Describe the event that started Syria’s descent into civil war.

2. How far was the Syrian government willing to go to stop the rebel threat? Specifically describe some of their tactics.

3. How successful have efforts by outside agencies to broker a peace deal been?

4. How has the international community reacted to the civil war in Syria?

5. How serious is the humanitarian crisis facing the people of Syria? What needs to be done to bring the crisis to an end?
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing Questions

1. Imagine if a group of protesters held a demonstration in your town calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Now imagine that the government dispatched the army to quell the protest and the soldiers fired on the crowd, killing some of the protesters. How do you think the Canadian public would react? Describe the reaction and the reasons for the type of reaction you described.

2. How do you think our allies would respond to this kind of incident?

Viewing Questions

1. Why is Mohib Masri so angry? What happened to him? Is his anger justified?

2. Why are opponents of Syria’s national government frustrated? What actions would they like to see taken to deal with the government of Bashar al-Assad?

3. What warning has UN envoy Kofi Annan given to the world regarding Syria?

4. How many people has the Assad regime been accused of killing?
5. What role are Russia and China playing in the conflict?

6. What decisive blow did the rebels deliver to the Assad government seventeen months after the conflict began?

7. Describe the morale of the government troops and the rebels. How do the two sides differ?

8. What happened at the protest Hakim attended in Homs on April 22, 2012?

9. Why did Kofi Annan resign his position as lead UN diplomat dealing with the crisis in Syria?

10. Who bears the most responsibility for the atrocities happening in Syria?

11. What major political blow rocked the Assad government in the late summer of 2012?

12. How high has the death toll risen in Syria? How many people died in August 2012 alone?
Post-viewing Questions

1. UN envoy Lakdhar Brahimi fears that the Syrian crisis could pose a threat to security in the world. Why does this appear to be true?

2. The Syrian government represents a minority of the country’s population. If the majority is calling for regime change, how is the minority able to cling to power?
ACTIVITY: Groupthink

Your task is to understand the meaning of the term groupthink and see if it applies to the events in Syria.

What is groupthink?
In 1972, research psychologist Irving Janis came up with the term “groupthink.” According to Janis, some groups grow to be so enclosed and cut off from others that they become incapable of making efficient, realistic and moral decisions. Instead of doing what is best for all, the preservation of the group with the power becomes the primary objective. The focus shifts from brainstorming in an open forum to come up with practical and tangible solutions to enforcing unanimous decisions that best suit the preservation of the group.

Some characteristics of groupthink include:

- Illusions of invulnerability – the group is paramount and must be protected at all costs
- Collective rationalization – the group rationalizes decisions and ignore outside criticisms or warnings
- Belief in the inherent morality of the group – the group is right; everyone else is wrong
- Stereotyped views of outsiders – the views of critics of the group are discounted because they are portrayed in a simplistic and derogatory fashion
- Direct pressure on group members to agree – members must not express views that are contrary to the group perspective or they will be dubbed an enemy and excluded from the group
- Self-censorship – no views that go against those of the group are allowed to be expressed
- Illusion of unanimity – all group views are assumed to be accepted by every member of the group
- Self-appointed “mind-guards” – some group members act as guardians of the group, keeping contrary opinions away from the group and the group leader in the interest of maintaining group cohesiveness

Source: Psychologists for Social Responsibility (http://www.psysr.org)
Step One

Review the Setting the Stage and Video Review sections of this News in Review story.

Step Two

Work with a partner and try to see if the actions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government demonstrate some of the components of groupthink. Put your answers in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC OF GROUPTHINK</th>
<th>ACTION TAKEN BY ASSAD’S GOVERNMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illusions of invulnerability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective rationalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the inherent morality of the group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotyped views of outsiders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct pressure on group members to agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-censorship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illusion of unanimity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mind-guards”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Make sure you fill in at least five spaces on the chart. Some of them may remain blank because they are not clearly presented in Setting the Stage or Video Review. However, almost all sections of the chart call on you to make inferences (forming conclusions based on evidence and/or reason).
Follow up

Go online and research the crisis in Syria. See if you can find additional examples that support a groupthink mentality in the Assad regime. Revisit the chart and add any new information that you discovered.

Try these sites in your search for additional information:

- CBC’s coverage of the Syrian civil war (www.cbc.ca – search words: Syria in crisis)
- BBC’s account of the Syrian crisis (www.bbc.co.uk – search words: Syria conflict)
ACTIVITY: Save the Children

In September 2012, the human rights group Save the Children released a report outlining the horrifying arrest, torture, and murder of children in Syria. In Untold Atrocities: The Stories of Syria’s Children, Save the Children documents the stories of children and parents who have survived the conflict. Please read the three stories listed below and complete the activity that follows.

Khalid, 15-years-old
Khalid vividly recalls the day armed men came to his village. He tried to escape but he was captured and taken to his school — which had been converted into a jail. Khalid commented to Save the Children personnel, “It’s ironic — they took me there to torture me, in the same place I used to go to school to learn.” According to Khalid, the school had been converted into a torture chamber. His mood frequently shifted from abject fear to profound sadness. During his ten days in captivity, he was blindfolded and bound with a plastic cord. He was forced to remain standing for two days straight. He shared his confinement with another boy who was only 12. Khalid recalls thinking, “What can he have done? He’s a 12-year-old boy.”

Mohamad, 15-years-old
Mohamad witnesses 25 people in his village get massacred before his eyes. They killed people using a variety of brutal methods. Those who weren’t killed were thrown into prison to suffer at the hands of the men who attacked the village. Mohamad notes that the attack occurred during Ramadan, the most sacred month in the Muslim calendar. He stoically concluded, “I feel they have neither religion nor understanding.”

Nabil, father of a 10-year-old boy named Ala’a
Nabil and his family lived in a village called Saydeh before they fled the violence in Syria. His family went days without food after armed men stormed into his house and willfully destroyed the little food they had. His 10-year-old son, Ala’a, recounted this story to people from Save the Children.

For Nabil, going without food was not the most disturbing thing he endured during the civil war. He recalled an event that he could not believe possible. One day, two tanks rolled into his village. The soldiers had abducted and tied several children to the tanks, forming a human shield against anyone thinking of attacking. Nabil said, “I was close to losing my mind. I have never felt so helpless as the moment I saw those children strapped to those tanks.” Naturally, no one attacked the tanks. And no one knows what happened to those children after being used as pawns by the soldiers.

Source: Untold Atrocities: The Stories of Syria’s Children. Save the Children (www.savethechildren.org.uk)
Step One: Your emotional reaction

Highlight the portion of each story that causes the strongest emotional reaction for you. In two to three sentences, describe why you chose each passage.

Step Two: Empathize with the victims

How will the events described in each story change the lives of the people who witnessed or experienced these events?

Step Three: What should be done?

The stories demonstrate a willful disregard for human dignity and life. What should be done to protect the lives of children in Syria?

Further Exploration

Go to the Save the Children website and read Untold Atrocities (Note: The stories are very disturbing and incredibly heartbreaking. Please keep this in mind as you read the full report). How does reading the full report put the crisis in Syria in perspective? How has the information changed the way you see the crisis?