

Are We Getting Involved in Syria? Here's What to Expect If We Don't



By [Brian Frydenborg](#) September 18, 2013

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Photo Credit: AP

Right now, Syria's conflict is already directly affecting each of its neighbors. Just the refugee situation alone is massive: A year ago, there were only 230,000 Syrian refugees, but now there are over 2 million, with [one Syrian becoming a refugee every 15 seconds](#). Coupled with other problems, the unfortunate metaphor of a ticking time bomb is all too

apt. Amid all the [hysteria](#), [mad conspiracy theories](#), and [erroneous reporting](#), it is time for more reasoned and context-driven analysis of likely outcomes of different levels of U.S. involvement. Beginning with Syria's two most vulnerable neighbors, Lebanon and Iraq, we will examine what will probably happen with little to no U.S. involvement, which includes the current paltry level of humanitarian aid and tepid support for the dwindling number of moderate rebels.

Lebanon:

Along with Iraq, Lebanon has been affected more by the fighting in Syria than any other country. Lebanon, a tiny country not even three-quarters the size of Connecticut, only has a population of just over 4.3 million with a precarious balance between Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians. For decades, [Palestinian refugees from the conflict with Israel and their descendants, numbering about 455,000 people](#), have added further pressure to the Lebanese state. Refugees left in camps for years have been catalysts for wars all over the world, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo from after the [Rwandan Genocide](#) through the present day, in a conflict sometimes referred to as [Africa's World War](#). In the Middle East, Palestinian militants in refugee camps helped spark the [Lebanese Civil War \(1975-1990\)](#), and in Lebanon this led to a [Syrian occupation \(1976-2005\)](#) and multiple interventions by Israel: a [1978 invasion](#), a [1982 war](#), and [an occupation in the south \(1982-2000\)](#). This occupation, in turn, led to the creation of the [Shiite militia Hezbollah](#), and also led to [Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon](#). Today, [Hezbollah is fighting on behalf of Syrian's government](#) against the rebels.

Over the course of the Syrian Civil War of the past two years, Lebanon has seen an influx of [over 731,000 Syrian refugees](#), upending the demographic balance. Coupled with the Palestinians, that means over 1.1 million refugees, equal to one quarter of Lebanon's own population, are

destabilizing an already fragile and strained state that has suffered decades of war, invasion, and foreign occupation that only ended in 2006. This August saw a bombing in Beirut [targeting Hezbollah](#), and a dual bombing in Tripoli [targeting Sunni mosques](#), the worst such violence to hit the country in over eight years and some of the deadliest attacks since the [Lebanese Civil War \(1975-1990\)](#). Hezbollah and Sunni militias from Lebanon are crossing into Syria to fight there and after these bombings, the Syrian conflict threatens to erupt in Lebanon. Add to this mix the fact that refugees are streaming into Lebanon in large numbers every day, and the Lebanese state may be overwhelmed and collapse in a matter of months. In fact, the U.S. [just began evacuating many of its diplomatic staff and their families from Lebanon](#), and [warned Americans to stay out of the country](#).

Likely result of U.S. inaction: Some combination of Iraq-style violence, another civil war, and/or Syria gets more involved in Lebanon.

Iraq:



Photo Credit: AP / Khalid Mohammed

Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, the [Islamic State of Iraq](#) (referred to as Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia/Iraq by the U.S. military during the Iraq War), has recently expanded its operations into Syria, where it's been growing in power and been attracting thousands of foreign recruits. [It rebranded itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#) to reflect its growing influence, "the Levant" being a term that refers to the Eastern Mediterranean. A recent headline from *The New York Times* summed up the way Iraqis see the situation in Syria perfectly: "[Iraqis, Looking Across Border, See Replays of Past and Fears for the Future.](#)" This is as the growth of Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and the war there have [been "fueling" a seemingly unending series of attacks](#) in Iraq this year. The month of August alone saw over 800 killed and over 2,000 wounded, while just on September 4, [50 were killed and over 180 injured](#). A UN envoy recently said that [almost 5,000 have been killed and over 12,000 wounded](#) so far this year in Iraq, and these levels of violence [have not occurred since Iraq was pushed to the brink of civil war in 2006-2007](#). And, oh, [Iraq has over 183,000 Syrian refugees](#).

Likely result of U.S. inaction: Thousands more dead and wounded, massive destabilization of Iraqi state up to and including civil war, and loss of government authority to sectarian militias and Al-Qaeda affiliates.

The following article in this series discusses what's in store for other Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and Turkey, if the U.S. does not take action in Syria.