

Dear Samantha,

Thank you for your April letter last week. I see that you are once again in an exciting transition point in your life – completing exams and preparing for your semester in the US. I'm glad that you are feeling good about both of them.

I was also delighted to receive your two questions – although I feel rather overwhelmed by them (especially the one about the war in Syria). I am very pleased that you are asking questions like this. To ask them reflects a sensitivity to questions that need to be addressed. It is also lovely to see the range of such questions – from war and international relations to religion and institutional organization.

It reminds me of the way in which watching TV or going to the movies with you always meant being ready to answer questions like “What is he doing?”, “Why did he do that?”, “Who is that?”. Although it may have been annoying to anyone wanting to focus on the show (and perhaps those in nearby seats) I was always pleased to hear those questions as an indication of your engagement, curiosity, and willingness to ask others for clarification. I'm glad that this tendency has not diminished – and expanded to some of the big questions of our time.

I don't think that I can answer either of the questions in a satisfactory manner (in “for dummies” style or otherwise) but I can pass on a few observations and impressions that might help you as you try to make sense of these complex issues. In the end, I encourage you to explore your own approach to making sense of them – and using the critical evaluation skills that you have been learning over the past few years. Such skills have been extremely important in my own life as I tried to make sense of the distortions and propaganda about the Vietnam War, Iran invasion, world affairs, religion, and public policy, but they have taken on a new urgency with the impact of the internet.

With respect to the Syria question, here are a few comments that you might keep in mind as you try to make sense of its complexity. I'll get to the United Church one in another letter.

- Keep a map at your side when thinking about these issues. You will see that Syria is one of the larger states at the eastern end of the Mediterranean – bordered on the north by Turkey, the east by Iraq, the south by Jordan, and the southwest by Lebanon and Israel. Other important players in this region are Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.
- This region of the world has always been fought over throughout human history. It has been coveted by various empires which have grown and died in the region (Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, etc.). In the early period it was attractive to empires because it was the point of intersection of major trade routes, cultural innovations, and wealth. Trade from India, China, Africa, and Europe came through there so the control of that trade was a major source of wealth for anyone who could manage it.
- The current interest in the region is complicated by the focus on oil. Some of the major oilfields in the world are located in this region, so anyone who can get access to them will get wealthy, and anyone who is dependent on oil tries to make sure that the supply keeps flowing – and at a low price.
- Russia, Europe, and the USA are all involved in whatever takes place in Syria as part of their interest in oil. One of the threats to controlling the supply is OPEC: an organization which collectively controls a large part of the oil market by agreements regarding its supply and price. The Arab states (with Saudi Arabia the leader) largely control this organization.
- Many of the states in that region are governed by networks and individuals who are able to stay in power as a result of alliances, payoffs, threats, and promises – with largely lip-service to more democratic forms of power-sharing. This applies to Israel as well – one of the few nations in the region with a history of democratic-style governance.
- Each of these states is fragmented by regional groups with long histories of animosities and grievances. In Syria, for example, the Kurds are a group in the northern part of Syria with many of their population in eastern Turkey and western Iran. Turkey considers them a threat to their position as does Syria and Iraq.
- Under such conditions, the control of armies and associated arms is an important factor. The extremely lucrative arms trade has for years targeted middle east countries because of their enormous oil wealth and multiple

centres of power. Arms merchants have been able to trade-off the countries for higher prices and more arms. As a result, most of the national and regional groups in the region have massive armies with associated technology. Canada has been a contributor to this situation by selling vehicles and materials that are used by these governments to control their populations.

- Within this context, the justifications for various actions and motivation of the populations is an important element. As is so often the case, religious and cultural ideologies play an important part of the rhetoric. One of the most often used is the division between the Shia and Sunni branches of Islam. Like the Catholic and Protestant differences that were used to justify the European wars in Switzerland, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Scotland, and Ireland, the Shia-Sunni animosities have been used to justify war, slaughter, and territorial acquisition. At present, the Sunnis dominate in the region, especially in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, and Turkey. Shia populations are relatively large in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. These differences are related to both beliefs about who should be the leaders of Islam and many of the cultural practices associated with it. I don't consider the beliefs of the various religious groups to be the primary issue here, but the people who get to control the details of those beliefs and use them for their political and personal objectives.
- Most of the large and/or powerful nations of the world have been involved in the middle east issues for a number of reasons: from control of trade (e.g. the Suez canal in 1869 and 1956), oil, arms, and wealth. Russia gets some of its oil from Saudi Arabia, but it is probably even more interested in influencing OPEC to ensure that the price of oil meets its (Russia's) own interests as an oil producing nation.
- Most of Syria is led by Bashir al-Assad – a rather ruthless leader who has been willing to use nasty weapons against the Syrian population (including chemical weapons). His actions generated a relatively large number of rebel groups who challenged his regime during a civil war which escalated around 2011. Iran, Russia, and Shia groups in Lebanon have supported al-Assad with a US-led coalition becoming involved under claim that they were fighting ISIL (an Islamic group utilizing terrorism in its attempt to establish an Islamic state). This was convenient for al-Assad since the defeat of ISIL meant that it was one more rebel group with which he no longer had to deal.
- Through the contributions of the USA and Russia, the al-Assad regime has now become more powerful, but it means that new tensions have arisen as a result of the recent conflict. For example, in order to fight against ISIL, the USA formed an alliance with the Kurds in northern Syria – training them and supplying arms. However, Turkey views the Kurds as enemies and is now engaged in conflict with them.
- The alliances and animosities of the region are famous for their changing nature, distortions, betrayals, and lies. One of the most famous is the way in which the USA supported Iraq and Saddam Hussan, but in the end fought a war against him on the trumped-up charge that he was building nuclear weapons. Similarly, the USA was once an ally of al-Assad, but turned against him when he supported genocide and chemical weapons in his fight against the rebels. This meant that al-Assad successfully turned to Russia for support. The USA and Russia even co-operated in their fight against ISIL. Now, it looks like the USA will abandon the Kurds to Turkish aggression since the Kurds are no longer useful for the fight against ISIL. The USA continues to support Saudi Arabia in spite of the fact that Saudi money supported Osama Bin Laden who helped organize the 9/11 event.
- In general, when trying to make some sense of these types of situations, I check out the history of their relationships – with a constant eye on the money and resources: who has them, who wants them, and who gains from particular winners and losers. The rhetoric and justifications that go with it all, I tend to discount since they are often distortions or lies developed to create an advantage for the speaker.

As you can see, this is like a real-life game similar to those board games where countries and groups position themselves and fight for control and resources. Unfortunately, these ones mean that thousands of innocent people are killed, maimed, or left homeless in the process.

I hope this helps to create some context for the issues you have identified. Remember that my version is only my version, so you still need to treat it with a critical eye. What this means is getting information from a number of very different sources in order to develop your own interpretation and response to the issues.

Thank you for asking.

Love,