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Syria's Climate Conflict

Written by Audrey Quinn

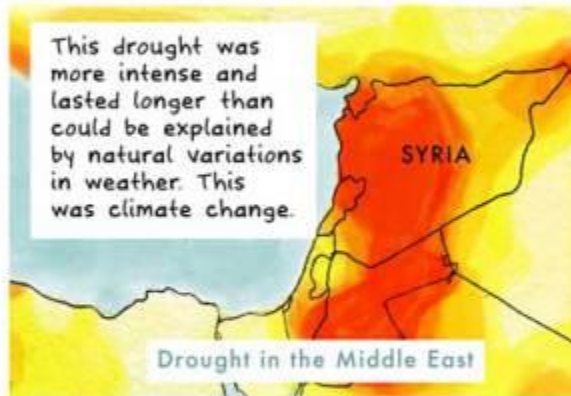
Illustrated by Jackie Roche

Legend has it, the spark of Syria's civil war came from a few cans of spray paint in the southwest city of Daraa

Between 2006 and 2011, over half of the country had suffered under the worst drought on record.



This drought was more intense and lasted longer than could be explained by natural variations in weather. This was climate change.



Drought in the Middle East

Nearly 85% of livestock died.



Syria's famed fields of Halaby peppers withered away.

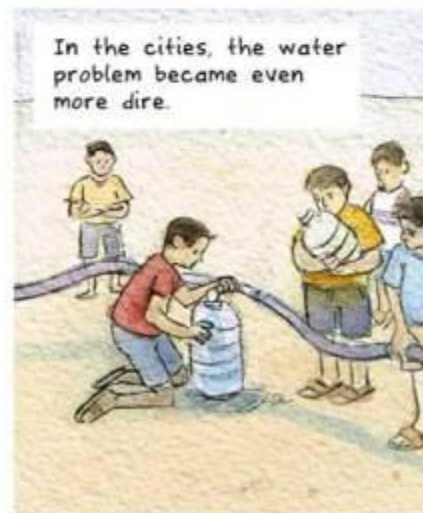
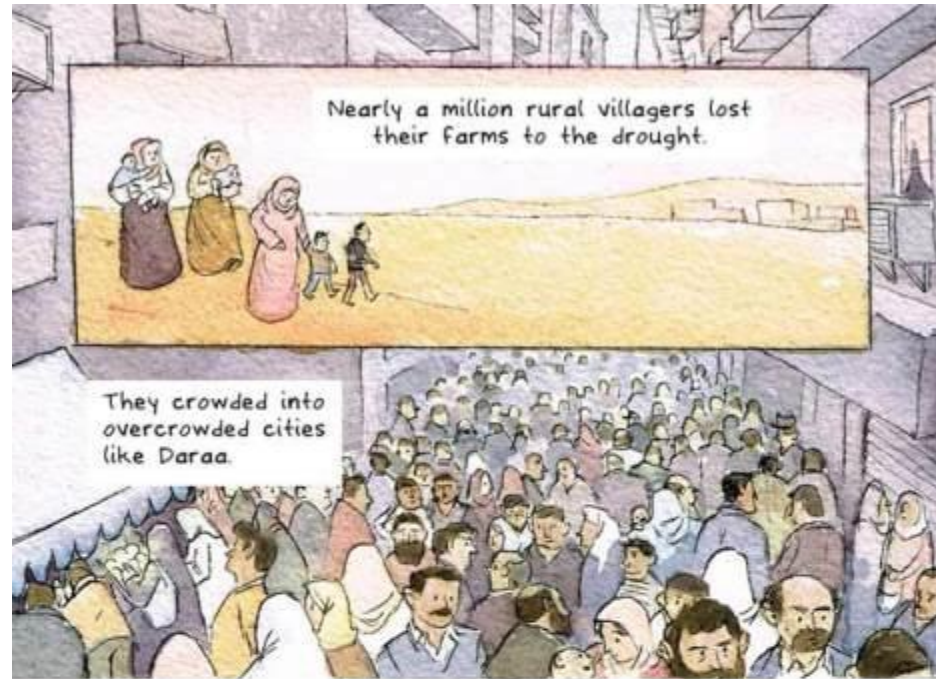


President Bashar al-Assad's offered little help. His government awarded well rights along political lines, so farmers had to drill their own illegal wells.



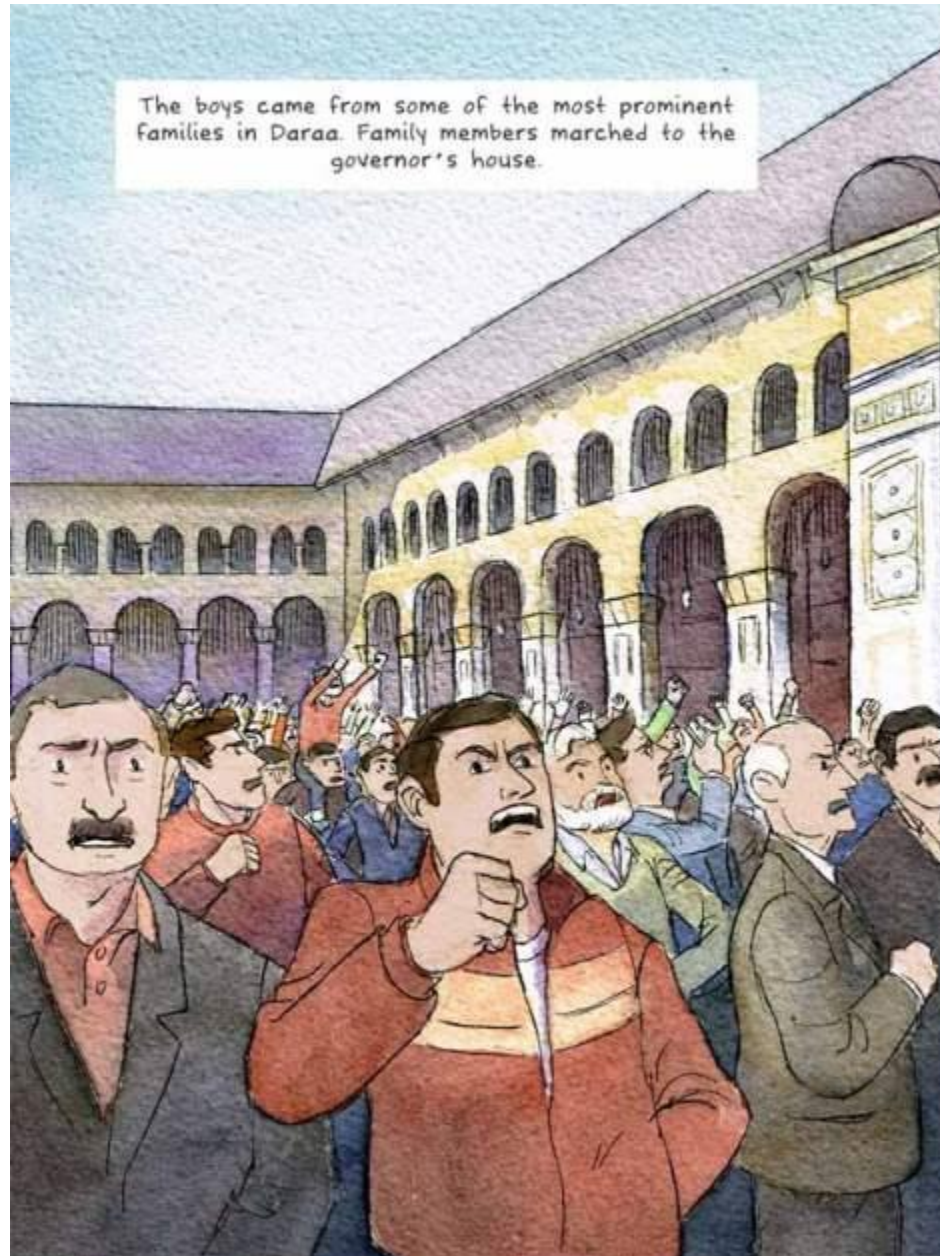
And people who spoke out against him regularly faced imprisonment, torture, and even death.



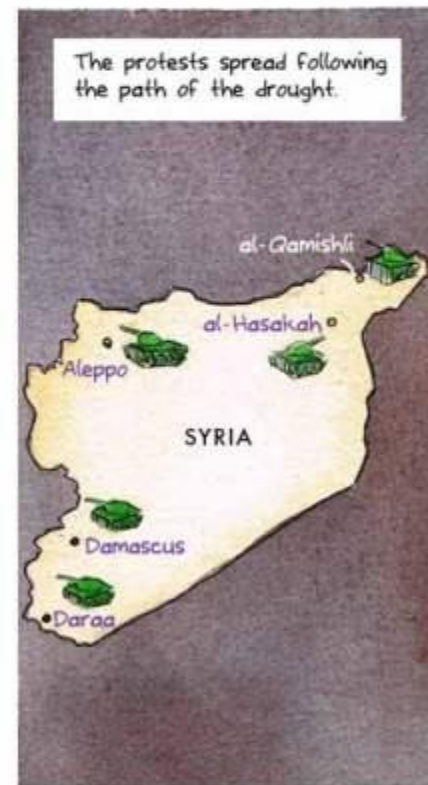




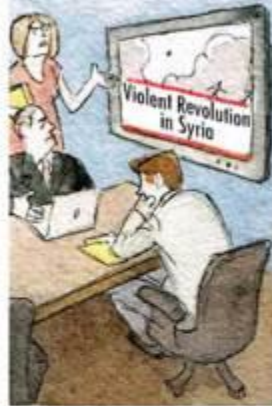
The boys came from some of the most prominent families in Daraa. Family members marched to the governor's house.







This kind of sustained uprising—it wasn't supposed to happen in Syria.



Seattle-based reporter Alex Stonehill had been in Syria in late 2010. He was shocked when the revolution began a few months later.

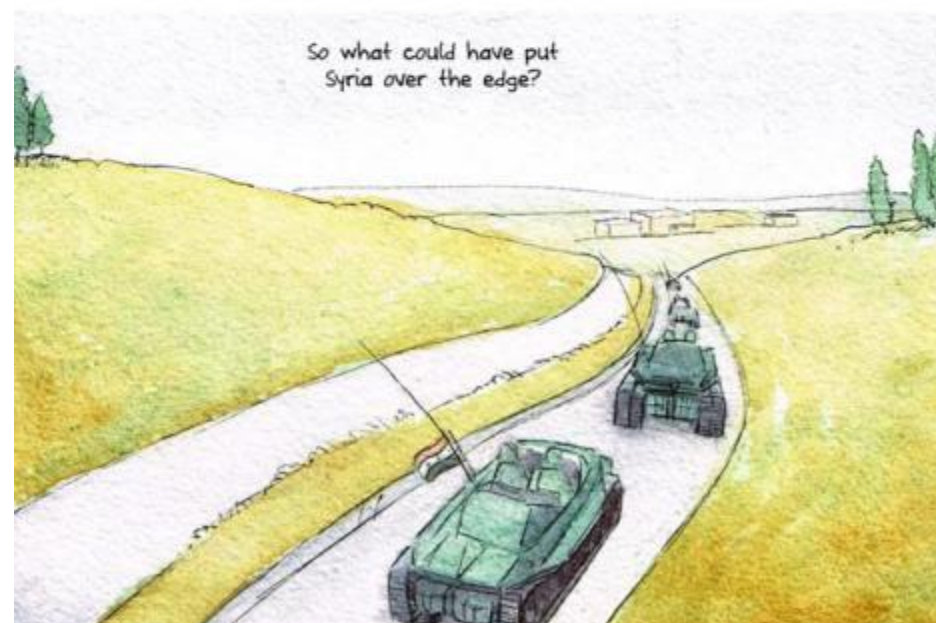
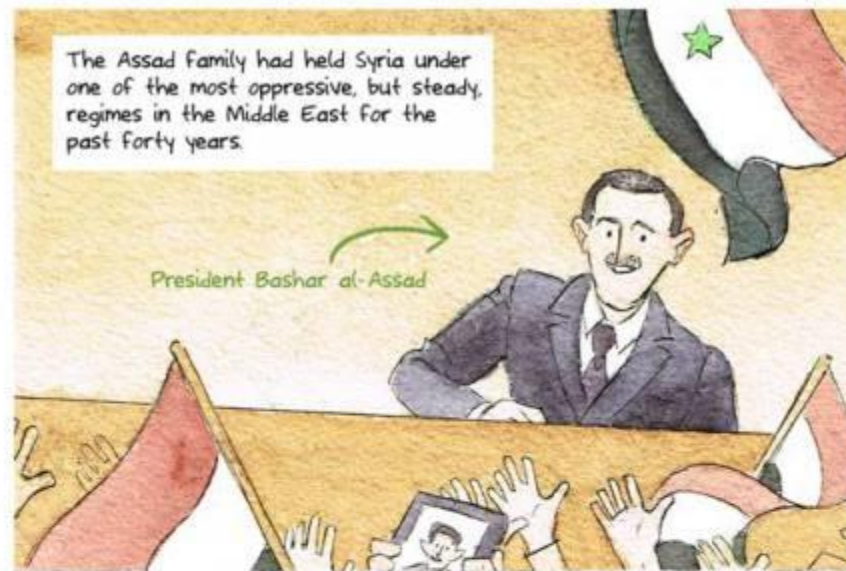
Before the war started, things were pretty stable. Even when stuff started happening in other places I didn't expect it to happen in Syria.

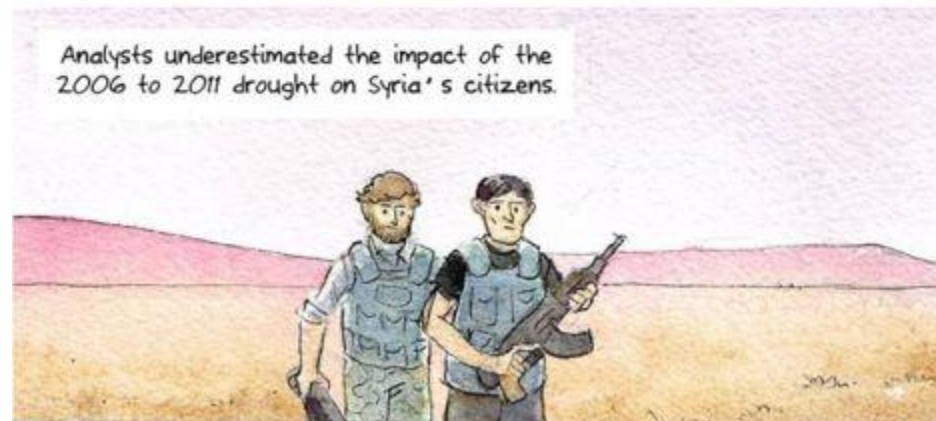
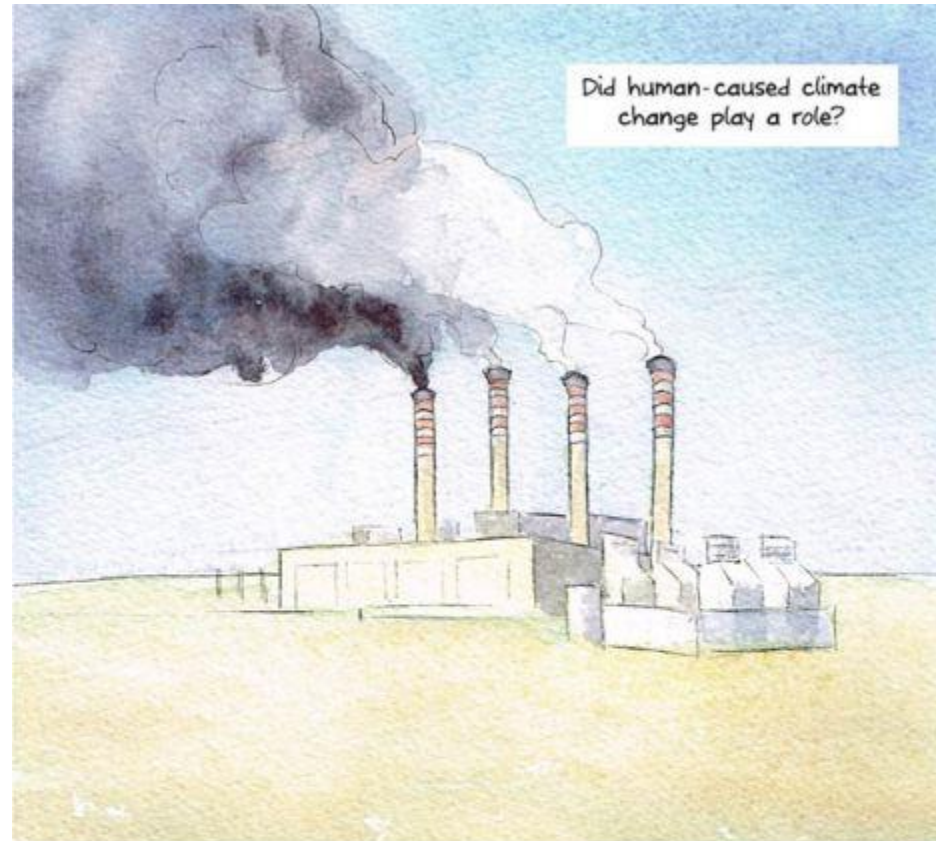


Right up until the first protests in Daraa, international security analysts had proclaimed Syria immune to the rising Arab Spring.

"Demonstrations in Syria are unlikely to pick up anywhere near enough momentum to seriously threaten the regime of President Bashar al-Assad."







Francisco Femia is the director of the Washington, DC based Center for Climate and Security.

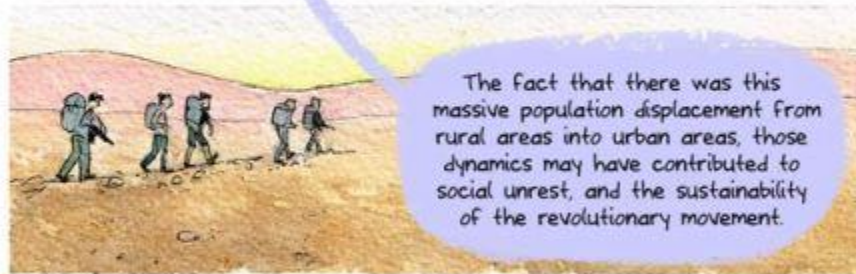
As an international community we're not looking into environmental stress enough.



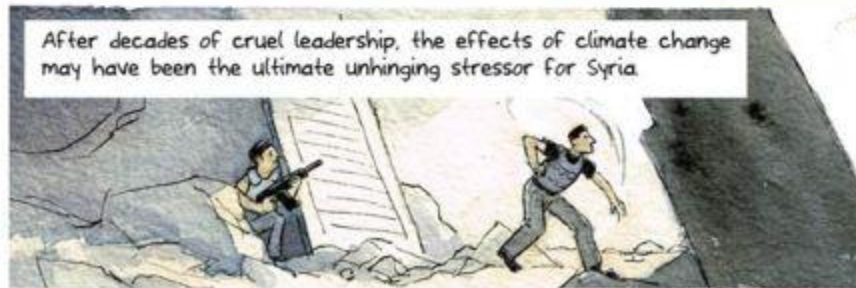
It is really significant when you look at 1.5 million people entirely losing their livelihood. This was five years of extended drought. People just couldn't live anymore in rural areas.



The fact that there was this massive population displacement from rural areas into urban areas, those dynamics may have contributed to social unrest, and the sustainability of the revolutionary movement.



After decades of cruel leadership, the effects of climate change may have been the ultimate unhinging stressor for Syria.



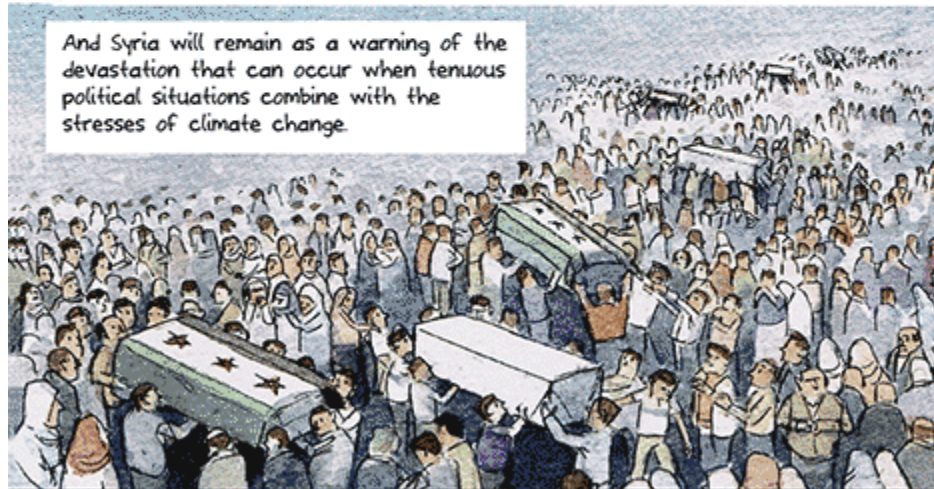
Even if this climate-stressed country recovers politically, Syria is on path to lose nearly 50% more of its agricultural capacity by 2050.



If current rates of greenhouse gas emissions continue, more extreme droughts will return and water shortages will worsen.



And Syria will remain as a warning of the devastation that can occur when tenuous political situations combine with the stresses of climate change.



SYMBOLIA

YEARS OF LIVING
DANGEROUSLY