

Directions:

1. Annotate the text to show evidence of a close reading and understanding of the text.
2. Write a one-page response on a separate sheet of paper.

A Conquered Foe Returns To War-Torn Syria: Polio

In a refugee camp in eastern Lebanon, aid workers put sandbags around plastic tents to keep winter rains from flooding dirt floors. For weeks now, the threat for Syrian refugees was the coming cold. Now refugees have a bigger fear: polio.

Source: Deborah Amos and Rima Marrouch, NPR.org / November 2, 2013

A childhood disease that causes paralysis and sometimes death, polio can spread rapidly, especially with the huge movement of people fleeing the war.

Some 4,000 Syrians still cross into neighboring countries every day, at least half of them children.

Lebanon hasn't had a polio outbreak in 12 years. The announcement of 10 confirmed cases in eastern Syria is a wake-up call for the region, one that requires a regional response by health workers and aid agencies, says Dr. Fouad Fouad, professor of health services at Amerian University Beirut.

"I think it's not about just 'fast enough,' they should be 'wide enough,'" Fouad says as Syrian refugees stream into neighboring Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. "They have to reach now five countries ... It's not easy at all. it's very difficult, but it's a must, now."

In Lebanon, health officials are sending out 5,000 workers for door-to-door immunizations. This weekend, a center is opening at the airport and at the border to immunize young children as they arrive.

In Syria, the government launched an immunization campaign as soon as the first polio cases were reported.

UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, is a key agency supporting the immunization program. UNICEF organized a vaccine airlift that arrived in Beirut and will be trucked into Syria.

An immediate focus is the eastern Syrian city of Deir Ezzor, where the outbreak was first reported, says Juliette Touma, regional spokesperson for UNICEF.

"In the past few days we managed to reach, at UNICEF, with partners, more than 40,000 children in Deir Ezzor, where the polio cases were confirmed," Touma says. "This is only the beginning."

The goal is to reach 1.6 million children across Syria, an enormous challenge in wartime, she says. To reach the most vulnerable children, aid agencies have to negotiate not just with the government, but with rebel groups, to allow them to work in areas they hold or surround.

"The challenges are huge," says Touma. "Our staff has to cross sometimes over 50 check points. It's a huge risk to reach people in need."

Rebels present another challenge: Some are foreign fighters. Health officials strongly suspect that the virus that infected Syrian children could have come from Pakistan, Fouad says.

That's a tragedy, he says; polio was eradicated in Syria 14 years ago. Syria was the first country in the Arab world to introduce mass immunization.

"So we are facing now strange people fighting in Syria," Fouad says. "We're seeing strange diseases that we thought were finished. It means now, it's a collapsed system. So, no one wants to say it's a failed state, but at least in some part, it is."

Briefing: The Sunni-Shiite War

Syria's civil war has devolved into a brutal sectarian conflict that could engulf the entire region.

Source: TheWeek.com/October 26, 2013

Why is Syria so pivotal? The conflict in Syria began in March 2011 as a pro-democracy movement, like other Arab Spring uprisings. But as foreign fighters have poured in on both sides, the rebellion has morphed into a sectarian civil war that other Islamic nations see as pivotal for the entire region. Syria is the only Middle Eastern country that has a majority Sunni population but is ruled by a Shiite minority. The Assads, who took power in 1970, are Alawites, a subset of Shia Islam that broke away in the 9th century. Together with orthodox Shiites, Alawites make up just 13 percent of the population, yet they have dominated the government, business, and the country's aristocracy. Now that the regime has lost control of half of Syria, the Alawites and other Shiites fear the wrath of the Sunni majority, and they are appealing for help from Shiites abroad. The Sunni rebels have also asked fellow Sunnis for aid, arms, and fighters.

Are the two sects radically different? No more so than Catholicism and Protestantism. Both Sunnis and Shiites follow the five pillars of Islam: revering Allah as the only god and Mohammed as his Prophet, praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, giving to charity, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca. The split occurred in the religion's infancy. When Mohammed died in 632, his followers argued over whether he should be succeeded by one of his fathers-in-law, Abu Bakr, or by one of his sons-in-law, Ali. Abu Bakr won, and became the first caliph. Ali, whose followers say Mohammed chose him as heir, briefly ruled as the fourth caliph but was assassinated in 661, and his son Hussein was killed fighting for the caliphate in 680.

Why did that split last? It gave both groups their names, a strong sense of identity, and a different style of worship. Shiite or Shia comes from *shi'at Ali*, meaning followers of Ali, while Sunni means those who adhere to the *Sunna*, or sayings of the Prophet. In Shiite eyes, the defeat of Hussein bequeathed them a legacy of oppression and exclusion. They place great emphasis on identifying and venerating Mohammed's descendants as Allah's representatives on earth, and that leads them to give the clergy a central role in political life. Shiites are religiously obliged to follow the teachings of their clerics, imams, and ayatollahs. Sunnis, by contrast, have no formally organized clerical hierarchy but see Islam as accessible to anyone who studies devoutly. That belief allows for the rise of extremist fringe groups like al Qaida.

Have the two always fought? No. For most of the 20th century, rulers in the Muslim world kept religion and politics largely separate. (An exception was the Saud dynasty in Saudi Arabia, which promoted Wahhabism, a puritanical strain of Sunni Islam.) The turning point was the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the emergence of a Shiite theocracy. Since then, in political conflicts across the Muslim world, Iran has served as a sponsor to embattled Shiite minorities. Iran reached out to Lebanese Shiites, for example, creating and funding Hezbollah, its strongest militant proxy.

Is Iran sending fighters to Syria? Indirectly, yes. The foreign influx to Syria started on the Sunni side. Rebels, frustrated that Western countries wouldn't send them weapons, turned to jihadists for help, including al Qaida sympathizers from across the region — especially Iraq (*see below*). This spring, Hezbollah jumped into the conflict on the side of the regime, apparently on the direct orders of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. "This battle is ours," Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said in May. There are now up to 4,000 skilled Hezbollah fighters, trained by Iran, battling rebel groups in Syria. The Sunni rebels have a new backer of their own: The Saudis are funding a militant leader in Syria with the aim of uniting the disparate Islamist militias under the banner of the Salafists, Sunni hard-liners.

What does that mean for the region? Big trouble. In a broad sense, Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing for influence over the entire Middle East and are willing to fuel civil wars in pursuit of their goals. Many Sunni-ruled nations have large, restive Shiite populations, particularly Bahrain, Yemen, and Kuwait. Sunni rulers fear that these populations could become radicalized by the Syrian conflict and stage uprisings of their own. King Abdullah of Jordan, a Sunni, has warned of the danger of a "Shiite crescent" spreading across the Middle East. "The fires in Syria will blaze for some time to come," said Ryan Crocker, former U.S. ambassador to several countries in the region. "Like a major forest fire, the most we can do is hope to contain it."

Iraq on the brink Two years after the U.S. pulled out of Iraq, the country is engulfed in violence and spiraling downward toward a full-on Shiite-Sunni civil war. The Shiite majority, which suffered brutal repression during the reign of Saddam Hussein, gained power after the U.S. invasion and occupation. But elections did not produce political stability or end the power struggle between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has sought to shore up his power by cracking down on the opposition and jailing Sunni leaders, deepening the Sunnis' sense of oppression. This year, Sunni resistance groups — some affiliated with al Qaida — have conducted a wave of bombings that have killed and injured hundreds of people virtually every week. More than 6,000 Iraqis have been killed in the last year, including 1,000 in September alone. The same Sunni jihadi factions are operating in both Syria and Iraq, moving back and forth across the border, and have formally merged into an organization they call the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The group recently put out a video showing its fighters helping Syrian rebels capture an air base. "The spark has begun in Iraq, and the fire will grow, God willing," the narrator says.

Possible Response Questions:

- Explain a connection between both articles on Syria. How do they parallel each other?
- Explain the significance of Syria to the United States.
- Choose a topic from either piece and respond.