



The Syrian Civil War & its Ongoing Effects

UN Human Rights Council

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Letter from your Chair

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to ClarkMUN XI and the UN Human Rights Council on the Syrian civil war and its ongoing effects. I am Alec Hoffman and I am ecstatic to be your chair this year! A little about myself, I am currently a sophomore majoring in political science with a concentration in law and society. My home is Los Altos, California, a lot warmer, but I have really come love it here on the east coast. Outside of MUN, I am a part of the Clark Cross Country team and the USMC PLC. In my free time, I love to cook, exercise, and take care of my pet cherry shrimps and snail.

Not only are Middle Eastern politics a passion of mine but it is also a topic that everyone should be more aware of. The Middle East has become a region increasingly characterized by international intervention and rivalry, and the consequences thereof. The Syrian civil war has come to embody this more than any conflict in recent history and we as global citizens can learn so much from understanding it. There are countless perspectives on the civil war that I urge this committee to reflect. Each delegation should be able to deliver a unique take on how to bring lasting peace to Syria and reconcile the many effects the war has had outside of its borders.

The background guide provides a good overview of and the context to the Syrian civil war. However, I greatly implore all delegates to do research outside of the guide on your individual countries and their unique stances on the war in order to best find a solution to the conflict. Please contact me if you have any questions about the committee or conference, I am happy to talk. I look forward to seeing you all soon!

Best regards,

Alec Hoffman | Chair UNHRC | alecwhoffman@gmail.com

Introduction and Role of This Committee

The United Nation Human Rights Council was founded to respond to human rights abuses across the globe with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a guideline. Generally, the HRC has achieved this through preventative measures when infringements upon human rights seem to be imminent or have recently begun. However, the HRC has on numerous occasions responded to violations post facto through the passage of resolutions and undertaking of inquiries. Our topic deals with the countless human rights violations given rise by the Syrian Civil War that is to be addressed by this committee.

This topic asks delegates to attempt to resolve these violations both within Syria and those that have spread outside of its borders directly as a result of the civil war. You will first have to address the magnitude and scope of these infringements that have affected countless combatants, civilians, and refugees. Then you will have to formulate a way to best solve these violations, keeping precedent from the past in mind. All the while delegates will have to handle the political realities of the situation and what affect their solution may have on specific factions in the civil war, the countries that support them, and the balance of power in the region.

These questions have continued to divide the international community in real life. Although consensus has been reached in many issues such as the condemnation of chemical weapons and terrorism, tensions arise over the issues of the selective granting of humanitarian aid to specific actors and even selective condemnation of human rights violations. Many nations even disagree over the extent of these infringements, often downplaying those committed by the actors they support and exaggerating those of their enemies. Indeed this topic will be a difficult one to fully comprehend, much less adequately solve, but with enough ingenuity and diplomacy from your delegation, perhaps it is possible.

Historical Background

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War was in no way an isolated event but rather a part of the series of protests and uprisings across the entire Middle East and the Maghreb brought about by the Arab Spring. Indeed, the catalyst for the Arab Spring was in faraway Tunisia after the self-immolation of a young man, Mohammed Bouazizi in December 2010. This would snowball into widespread peaceful demonstrations that would culminate in the overthrow of the dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in February 2011 (Angrist 25). Few suspected that Syria would be vulnerable to these new waves of protest as its dictatorship under Bashar al-Assad seemed too entrenched and resilient. However, this narrative of Syrian immunity would swiftly shatter after mass protests broke out in Dir'a in March 2011. (Lawson 448)

The cause for the Syrian civil war is multifaceted but can largely be explained by its ethno-sectarian origins, of which were exacerbated by the Assad regime. In 2011, Syria had a population of 22.6 million, composed of some 75% Sunnis, 14% Shi'ites and Alawites, of which the Assad family belongs, and 10% Christians. The vast majority of the population are Arab, but Kurds form roughly 10% of the population, living primarily in the mountainous northern regions of Syria (Lawson 467). The Assad family has ruled Syria since the 1970 coup, with Bashar al-Assad following his father, Hafez al-Assad in June 2000. This regime is characteristic of the various Arab socialist "republics" that arose during the Cold War. The government is ruled exclusively by the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, in which the party itself controls or co-opts most industry and civil society. Elections are infrequent, without legitimate opposition, and thus without any chance for a democratic transition. Civil rights and political liberties are equally abysmal in this aspect. Furthermore, Alawites maintain an especially privileged position within Syrian society, holding most government and military positions, largely at the expense of the Sunni majority and Kurdish communities. (Lawson 468)

The protests, beginning small, localized, and only asking for reform, were initially far from chanting the phrase "Ash-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām" or "The people want the fall of the regime" that had become commonly spoken throughout the Arab world at this point. However, soon the demonstrations would rapidly spread and increase in intensity and force. Syrian police and army troops would respond with swift repression in brutal crackdowns, even using live ammunition to squash dissent. As an answer to such repression, the demonstrations

would escalate in May 2011 in the city of Homs as protesters took up arms against security forces. Homs would represent the turning-point when the Syrian uprising transformed from largely peaceful protest to its inevitable descent into civil war. (Lawson 449)

To say that the factions, alliances, and international actors in the Syrian civil war are complicated is an understatement, to say the least. The war can largely be seen as a four-way proxy war between the regime, the Kurds/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the opposition, and ISIS. The Assad regime has received significant and direct military support from Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy group in Lebanon. In the current state of affairs, it seems the regime has prevailed, controlling both the cities of Damascus and Aleppo. However, the SDF has established a strong presence in the north of Syria but has recently come under increasing threat by the Turkish military. The Kurds had received considerable support from the USA but have recently lost that aid since the Trump presidency. On the other hand, the opposition is not one coherent group but rather a conglomerate of various militias of varying ideologies and goals, some even in violent conflict with one another. Notable groups include the Free Syrian Army (FSA), various proxy groups, and Nusra, Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate. The opposition is largely supported and funded by regional actors such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Finally, ISIS while playing a prominent role in the mid-2010s, has largely been vanquished from Syria but still maintains a violent presence throughout the world. (Curtis) (BBC)

The longevity of the Syrian civil war can largely be attributed to its international component. It has become emblematic of the new "Arab cold war" between Saudi Arabia and Sunnis versus Iran and Shi'ites. International and regional powers have served to fan the flames of sectarianism, exacerbating and elongating the duration of the conflict. The fact that Assad is in power after nine years serves to prove the resiliency granted by international backing by Russia and China, and regional support by Iran and its affiliates. Meanwhile, the lukewarm support by the United States of the opposition and Kurds has proven inadequate to match the regime's backers. (Curtis) (Phillips)

The costs of the civil war have been tremendous. Casualties are estimated at over 500,000 dead and 1.2 million injured, with life expectancy having declined by 20 years since 2011. Furthermore, the World Bank predicts economic losses to be over \$200 billion. 40-60% of Syrians are unemployed and 80% live in poverty. 6.6 million Syrians are now internally displaced persons (IDPs) and over 5.4 million are now refugees outside Syria. Of these refugees, roughly 4.72 million reside in various refugee camps located within neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and

Jordan (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). The Syrian civil war is far from over and these costs are escalating by the day.

Topics for Discussion

1. What side/s in the civil war has my country either directly or indirectly supported? The regime? The Kurds? Opposition groups? If so, specifically what opposition? Islamists? Secularists? Jihadists?
2. Has my country received Syrian refugees? If so, to what degree? If not, has my country supported Syrian refugees in other ways? Have they actively resisted the flow of refugees? How has the refugee crisis affected domestic politics? Can my country support more refugees? How may refugees be voluntarily repatriated after peace?
3. What is my country's human rights record ([freedomhouse.org](https://www.freedomhouse.org))? Has my country strived to support human rights internationally? If so, what human rights advocacy groups do they belong to or support? What rights are owed to refugees, IDPs, combatants, civilians? Do they differ or all they are fundamentally the same?
4. Where does my country lie within the greater Middle Eastern conflict? What other regional and international entanglements and organizations is my country involved in that may affect its stance within the Syrian civil war? Do they support Iran or Saudi Arabia? Do they recognize Israel?
5. Does my country have historical ties to the region? Do these serve to compel my country into a greater continued interest in the region? Are these for reasons of obligation? Strategy? Remaining legacies and economic stakes? Does the conflict benefit or deter my country's interests?
6. Can the civil war only be resolved by force and can all sides come to a peaceful resolution? Does the imbalance of power in some areas of Syria and the stalemate in others restrict a

proper peace settlement? Do the realities of the power balance mean that any plausible agreement will have to accommodate for Assad? What are the moral implications of this?

7. Do the Kurds deserve a homeland? Will this be in the form of an internationally recognized and fully independent nation? An autonomous region within an established country? What would my country want to see for the Kurds due to its strategic interests and history?
8. What will ensure lasting peace after the conflict? What will prevent the outbreak of another civil war? What would be a permanent and reasonable solution? How can human rights be guaranteed?
9. What will be left to self-determination in resolving the conflict and the post-war settlement? What will be reserved for international bodies? Should the international community largely delegate the process to Syrians themselves in respect of the principle of sovereignty? Is self-determination a human right? Or is the conflict due an internationally driven solution due to its international context and dynamics?
10. What will peace mean in the broader context in the Middle East? The world? What can my country do to prepare for this?

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