

# UNSC Crisis

The Syrian Civil War

Delegate Background Guide



# **A Letter from the Crisis Director..**

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the United Nations Security Council! My name is Michael Karezin, and I will be your crisis head. I'm looking forward to working with all of you on this engaging and important topic. I am currently a junior at Commonwealth and I've worked on COMMUN for the past three years. I've also been doing Model UN as a delegate since 6th grade. Your chairs this year will be Daria Plotz and Charles Brainin.

Our topic, the Syrian Civil War, is a deeply complex ongoing humanitarian issue. However, we will begin the crisis on October 1st, 2019, so disregard any knowledge of events after that date for the purposes of our committee. What grew from Bashar al-Assad's response to peaceful pro-democracy protests in 2011 has evolved into a multi-dimensional and global armed conflict which has cost the lives of at least 400,000 Syrians and created 5.6 million refugees in a country whose total population is only 22 million. Position Papers are not required this year, but if you would like to submit one (which we encourage!) please send it as a PDF to or one of the chairs or me by the date of the conference, April 17.

If you have any questions, concerns, or simply would just like to reach out, feel free to email me at [mkarezin@commschool.org](mailto:mkarezin@commschool.org), or your chairs Daria ([dplotz@commschool.org](mailto:dplotz@commschool.org)) and Charles ([cbrainin@commschool.org](mailto:cbrainin@commschool.org)). I can't wait to "meet" all of you and see where this crisis goes!

See you soon,

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## Introduction to Crisis

Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000, succeeding his father, who had commanded a strict and brutal regime. The son was initially expected to be more liberal than his father. However, Assad stopped pro-reform activism during his first year in office, beating down hopes of a more tolerant government.

In 2011, anti-authoritarian protests sparked a harsh response from the Assad regime, causing numerous clashes between protesters and the regime. Many protesters were Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of the Syrian population, in contrast to the Shi'a Alawite Muslims who dominate Syrian government. This sectarian division exacerbated tensions between the two groups. Sometime during the fall of 2011, these protests escalated into full blown war. As the war continued and became more violent, international powers began to take sides. The United States, European Union, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and their allies came together against Assad, choosing to support the moderate rebel groups, while China, Russia, Hezbollah (an Iranian-backed militia group based in Lebanon), and Iran continued to support the authoritarian regime. The war also allowed Islamic extremist groups such as ISIS to gain territory and exacerbate the conflict.

Throughout the war, international forces attempted to introduce cease-fires. Unfortunately, many of these attempts failed, and this civil war has resulted in massive conflict and disorder, as well as an enormous humanitarian and refugee crisis. Millions of Syrians were displaced and remain in need of safety and basic resources. Some of these displaced people were able to enter Europe due to a previously imposed open-border arrangement with Syria. However, this influx of refugees has left the European continent reeling. The Syrian civil war has resulted in violence, destruction, and instability, and solutions must be found in order to cease the bloodshed, unite international forces, and solve the humanitarian crises that plague the Syrian people.

## Problem Statement and Research Questions

The Syrian Civil War and the subsequent formation of ISIS has left approximately 12 million Syrians in need of humanitarian aid and caused around \$143 billion of economic damage. While keeping your country's interests in mind, how can the UN resolve these issues in the most peaceful and effective method possible? Consider the following questions.

As Syria is currently controlled by multiple groups with conflicting motivations, a more straightforward way to peace would be to restore unity and re-establish order to the region; however, that is easier said than done. Would this be a possible solution? Could your country simultaneously further this cause and their own?

While the Syrian Conflict is fundamentally a Civil War, it is also a series of overlapping proxy wars. From the standpoint of your country, to what extent should the international community be involved with the Syrian Crisis? If it should be, in which areas: political, financial, humanitarian?

## History

In the last days of World War I (1914-18), France and the United Kingdom agreed on a secret plan to divide the soon-to-be-conquered Ottoman Empire into territories. France would take control of some, while the UK would control others. This became known as the Sykes-Picot agreement, after its two main negotiators, and is important here due to its establishment of the borders of modern Syria. Syria fell under French control, ending approximately 400 years of Ottoman rule of the state, much to the anger of the Syrian people. French colonial rule was marked by revolts and popular uprisings. Notably, between 1925 and 1927 the Syrian people united against French rule in the Great Syrian Revolt. In 1936, Syria again attempted to gain independence, negotiating a treaty which allowed for home rule while allowing the French considerable military and political power in Syria. Syria did not succeed in negotiating its independence until 1946, when British and Free French troops stationed in the nation during World War II (1939-1945) withdrew and France officially ceded all power to the Syrian government.

Independence proved complicated, however. The decades following 1946 were marked by instability and repeated coups. Syria joined with Egypt in 1958 to form the United Arab Republic before dissolving the union three years later. This union, although short lived, provided a place for exiled Ba'ath Socialist Party members to congregate, allowing them to plan and then execute a coup in 1963. The coup was led by Salah Jadid, mentor to young Ba'ath member Hafiz al-Assad. Al-Assad eventually overthrew his mentor, gaining power in 1970 in yet another coup. In 1971 he became President, ending decades of instability.

Assad rebuilt the Syrian military, formed an alliance with the Soviet Union, and gained popular support and loyalty through expensive public works projects. He

brutally crushed dissent, imprisoning and torturing revolutionaries. He also sought to establish Syria as a power player in the Middle East through strategic alliances with Egypt and Lebanese Muslims and attacks on Israel. He had a long-standing dislike of Saddam Hussein, leader of Iraq, and at various points allied with both Iran and the United States against him. In 2000, he died and was succeeded by his son Bashar al-Assad.

Initially, Syrians hoped the younger Assad would be more tolerant and grant more liberties than his father had, but these hopes were soon crushed when Assad stopped pro-reform activism with threats and arrests within his first year in office.

In 2002, the United States accused Assad's government of acquiring weapons of mass destruction, damaging Assad's reputation in the west. Although in subsequent years a cessation of hostilities seemed likely, in 2010 all sanctions on Syria were renewed amid accusations of Syria sponsorship of terrorism.

In 2011, likely influenced by the Arab Spring uprisings, a group of children in the impoverished, drought-stricken province of Da'ar were arrested and tortured for writing anti regime graffiti. Their arrests provoked mass outrage in the province, leading to larger protests throughout the country. The regime cracked down brutally, increasing international attention to the cause. It is also important to note that many of the protestors were Sunni Muslims: members of a different sect than the ruling Alawites, a branch of the Shi'a sect, a division which exacerbated tensions. The sectarian division was not complete near the beginning of the conflict, but as it wore on, Assad attempted to harden the division, portraying the protestors as Sunni extremists. As the protests became more and more extreme, the regime cracked down brutally, besieging civilian centers and blockading their access to utilities, food, and water. As the war became more violent, the international community began to take sides. The US, European Union, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others formed an anti-Assad bloc, while Russia, China and Iran continued their support for the regime.

Over the course of 2011, armed clashes between the protestors and the regime became increasingly common. It is hard to choose a specific date when the protests became a civil war, but sometime during the fall of 2011 is the most commonly-cited period. Throughout 2011 and early 2012, there were several attempts by the international community to negotiate a cease-fire, but all were unsuccessful. In June 2012, the international community produced the Geneva Communiqué, a plan for negotiations to produce a transitional Syrian government. However, it was unclear whether or not



Assad would be included in the government, so the Communiqué's plan was never instantiated.

From the beginning, the opposition forces had been disorganized, and they successively organized under several names: the Syrian National Council from August 2011 to early 2012, then the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. In the summer and fall of 2012, the rebels won a string of victories, gaining territory and establishing a foothold in Aleppo, Syria's largest city. However, in 2013 the military situation reached a stalemate. The rebel forces held their gains in the north of the country but did not have the equipment to continue to gain territory. Meanwhile, the government became increasingly weakened by defections and corruption and failed to win territory from the rebels in a series of violent skirmishes.

Throughout 2012 and 2013, the international community increased its attention to the Syrian conflict. Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia funded and armed rebels, while Iran and the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah supplied arms and aid to the government. The United States also supported some rebel groups, although it was concerned to arm groups which would later turn against the US.

On August 21, 2013, it became known that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against hundreds of civilians in the suburbs of Damascus. The regime denied the accusations, but they still garnered international outrage. The US, UK, and other Western nations considered retaliatory military action, but measures to authorize such an attack failed in the US Congress and UK Parliament, and the prospect faded. Instead, the US, Russia, and Syria signed an agreement in September to place all Syrian chemical weapons under international control. The agreement was carried out, and all chemical weapons were removed from the country by the deadline of June 30, 2014.

In 2013, more extreme Islamic groups began to gain power within the rebel coalition. The Nusra Front initially led the coalition. However, in April Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, announced he would combine his forces in Iraq and Syria under the new name the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIS seized al-Raqqah, a major city in eastern Syria, that year, and from there continued to make large territorial gains close to the Iraqi-Syrian border. These advances were sudden and significant enough to frighten the international community, and in August the US launched airstrikes against ISIS to prevent them from gaining control over territory held by Iraqi Kurds, a minority ethnic group scattered through many Middle Eastern countries, notably Turkey, Syria, and

Iraq. ISIS in response launched a successful fear campaign, producing videos of the beheadings of Western journalists and aid workers to attempt to increase the group's prominence and notoriety. On September 23, the US-led coalition expanded air strike targets to include those in Syria.

Over the course of the next few years, ISIS dramatically expanded its territory and power, terrifying the Western world and the Assad regime alike.

By the summer of 2015, Russia had also begun to take a more active role in the conflict. Initially, they said their air strikes were targeted toward the Assad regime, but it soon became clear that they were targeting the rebel forces. This created the possibility of a proxy war between the US and Russia. However, it was averted by a cease-fire in late summer. The cease-fire collapsed in September, and violence again broke out, now concentrated on the city of Aleppo. After months of brutal violence, the rebels fell, and Aleppo returned to government control.

By 2016, ISIS had begun losing territory. Their vast gains had left them overstretched, and they proved unable to defend their new land against all three of their enemies: the US-backed Kurdish army, the Assad-Russian coalition, and various Turkish-backed rebel groups. In the north, Kurdish and Turkish forces took back land on the Turkish border, a strategic stronghold for the group. Meanwhile, the Nusrah Front and other ideological rivals to ISIS merged into the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and pushed ISIS out of Idlib, a major city in the northwest. By 2017, ISIS had been relegated to its strongholds near the Iraqi border, with its de facto capital in al-Raqqah. In June, the Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) launched a US-backed attack on al-Raqqah, culminating in ISIS's defeat in the city in October. By late 2017, ISIS was no longer a powerful player in Syria.

As ISIS weakened, the Assad government grew stronger. This prompted increased Western intervention, with the US and France, among others, launching air strikes against the regime in response to new chemical weapons charges.

In 2018, Israel entered the conflict, targeting Iranian forces in Syria. In response, Iran shelled the Golan Heights, a disputed territory between southwestern Syria and northeastern Israel. Israel responded by launching a heavy barrage of attacks in Syria, destroying most Iranian military infrastructure there.

Despite these attacks, the Iranian-allied Assad regime continued to gain territory from the rebels, retaking Dar'a and trapping all rebels in Idlib.



The fighting now began in Idlib. Turkey sent arms and fighters to support the rebels, while the government amassed troops along the border of Idlib province. Russia and Turkey attempted to escalate the situation by making a deal to create a 9-12 mile wide buffer zone, from which both sides would have to withdraw equipment. Both sides agreed, and although there was worry that more radical factions of both would refuse to abide by the deal, all equipment was withdrawn from the buffer zone.

We are now at October 1, 2019. What happens next is up to all of you.

## **Timeline**

2011: Anti-Assad protests begin after a group of children are arrested and tortured.

2012-2012: Insurrection and armed rebellions against the government begin.

2012-2013: There is a rise in fighting and conflict between the government and rebel groups, especially ISIL/ISIS.

2013: UN imposes peace mandate, which falls apart quickly.

2014: ISIL conflicts escalate further, there is a rise in attacks.

2014: US began attacks against Assad, siding with Syrian rebels.

2015: Russia becomes involved, siding with Assad against the US, ISIL and the moderate rebels.

2015: Russian and French attacks in Syria increase in strength and frequency.

2015: US bombs Syrian army camp.

2016: ISIL attacks escalate.

2016-2017: Turkish and Lebanese involvement increases, militia advances.

2016-2017: Russian ceasefire.

2017: US missile strike, UNSC meeting.

2018: US withdrawal.

2019: Turkey sends aid to the rebels escalating the conflict.

2019: Turkish attacks lead to negotiations.

## **Bloc Positions and Portfolio Powers:**

### **China**

Supports the Syrian government and believes that the Syrian terrorists should cease their actions in order to arrive at a peaceful conclusion and create diplomacy between the two parties. China believes that refugees should be provided for, but territorial integrity must be maintained. They stand firm in supporting the current political leaders.

Portfolio powers: China has many missiles which they can provide to help the Assad regime such as M-9 and M-11 missiles which can deliver powerful chemical weapons. Additionally, China has donated over \$90,000 in recent years to support the government and provide some humanitarian relief. They can donate massive amounts of money to Assad if they so choose.

### **European Union**

France, Belgium, Estonia, Sweden, and Germany all support the rebellion that is occurring in Syria, but have been struggling with the influx of refugees. Although they would prioritize civil discourse between the two parties, they believe that the current political leaders in Syria are not providing for the citizens and therefore a rebellion is just and should be supported. Several sanctions have been put in place to help demonstrate this message to the public. The E.U. has many nations on UNSC and has taken in about 100,000 Syrian refugees. They will continue to provide this humanitarian aid and additionally have stopped monetarily aiding Syria through the European Investment Bank.

Portfolio powers: The EU can choose whether or not to accept refugees and provide humanitarian aid. They can also put sanctions on Syria, hurting the Assad government.

### **Russian Federation**

One of Syria's largest supporters is the Russian Federation. They have supported the current government of Syria for over a decade and believe that the legitimate government should stay in power. They will continue to provide military aid in Syria to support the government in combat against terrorist groups such as Hayat Tahrir

al-Sham. They call for the terrorism to cease in order for peace to be achieved.

Portfolio powers: Russia has been providing Syria with missiles to help the regime such as the S-300 which is an anti-aircraft system that can help the government to fight against opposition. They can provide Assad with more or fewer missiles. Additionally, Russia is geographically close to Syria which allows them to provide quicker aid. Russia has 5,000 troops in Syria and can send 20,000 more.

### **United Kingdom**

Aligned mainly with the European Union, the United Kingdom believes that the current administration in Syria should step down as they are not providing for their citizens. They will not support Assad, but will spend money to help refugees and the opposition.

Portfolio powers: The UK has similar powers to the EU. Additionally, they continue to supply humanitarian aid and have provided more than \$3 B since 2012. Should the conflict turn to war, the UK can provide 7,000 troops.

### **United States**

One of the strongest supporters of the opposition is the United States. They have maintained sanctions on the government and economic and humanitarian aid for the refugees and those opposing the government. They call for a ceasefire and for the current administration to step down. The United States has the largest military of members in the UNSC which can be used to help the opposition. Additionally, the US has a lot of trade with nations that are involved in the conflict which can be turned into tariffs to help ensure the peaceful cooperation of Syria. The U.S. had several thousand troops in Syria for years up until 2018 when they were withdrawn. It remains unclear if troops will be resupplied or if the U.S. has shifted their focus towards humanitarian aid as opposed to military force against the Assad Regime.

Portfolio powers: the US can send 40,000 troops to Syria. They can also impose economic sanctions on the Assad regime or any of Assad's allies, and can send humanitarian aid to the Syrian people.

### **Dominican Republic**

While not directly involved in the conflict, the Dominican Republic aligns with its western allies in demanding that the current administration steps down and provides humanitarian aid for the refugees who are caught in the crossfire. The D.R. through its alliance with the US in this conflict can help to support any actions of power made

by the US.

Portfolio powers: With 90,000 troops currently active, should the US decide to request military aid, the DR would be able to provide 2,000 troops.

### **Indonesia**

Very much central on this conflict, believing that the most important thing is peace and the halting of all violence in regards to this conflict. They would like to support the current government after peace is met but understand that the suffering of civilians must stop first via humanitarian aid.

Portfolio powers: One of the few nations in Southern Asia and with strong access to oceanic trade routes, they have some control over the flow of goods and can prevent the flow of goods from China to Syria if the need were to arise. Indonesia can slow down and stop trade from about 30 ships coming through the South China Sea.

### **Libya**

Libya is in the midst of its own internal conflict. Syria has even sent troops to Libya to help prop up its government. Libya is likely to side with the Syrian government during this conflict, as the governments are starting to form an alliance.

Portfolio powers: Libya can use its numerous natural resources and fuels to create incentives for the Syrian government. Libya can also provide 3,000 troops to the cause.

### **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines believes in territorial integrity stating that the current administration should stay in office. They call for a reduction in violence and more communication across party lines but condemn the terrorism that is occurring.

Portfolio powers: Although they do not have a military presence, they are located in the Carribean and therefore could potentially encourage many neighboring island nations to join the conflict through the same viewpoint.

### **South Africa**

South Africa believes that the Syrian government should be allowed to restore its own peace without humanitarian intervention and calls for a cease in aid of the terrorist groups. They also request that this conflict isn't used as a proxy for larger countries' political advancements instead desiring that the nation be left to its own devices.

Portfolio powers: As one of the wealthiest nations in Africa with a GDP of \$351 billion,

South Africa has a lot of political influence, especially over its neighboring African countries which can be used to provide aid, should the need arise. Additionally, South Africa's geography can provide a relatively direct trade route to the Arabian peninsula to supply goods to the regime should they decide that the need has arrived.

### **Tunisia**

Tunisia doesn't support any government in particular but instead demands a ceasefire from all parties.

Portfolio powers: With a border along the Mediterranean, Tunisia can stop 20 military ships traveling through the Mediterranean preventing an arms race from occurring in Syria in efforts to demilitarize the area.

### **Israel**

Israel doesn't desire to get too involved in the Syrian Civil War but has been opposed to the current government for a long time and supports the revolution. They have made small advancements against Russian aid in Syria but have not become deeply involved as of yet. Neighboring Syria, Israel is strategically very close and can provide its strong military support to the rebellion whenever they desire.

Portfolio powers: With an active military of 170,000 troops, 30,000 can be quickly stationed along the border of Syria or even march inside. The Israeli Defense Force, as the most powerful military in the Middle East, is uniquely powerful against the Assad Regime. Additionally, Israel has many natural resources and land features that they have used to their advantage for quick, small attacks.

### **Syria**

Syria supports their right to choose a government and believes that the current government should stay in office. They believe that aid should be provided against the uprisings caused by terrorist organizations and that the UN should not have the right to determine the authority in a country but should instead ensure peace across nations. As Syria is geographically close to its ally Russia, Syria can receive aid with relative ease.

Portfolio powers: Syria has a large supply of exportable oil, which can be sold to allies or even enemies as part of a peace deal. Syria has an active military of 140,000 personnel which can be expanded and deployed when the need arises.

## Turkey

Supporting the United States, Turkey believes in providing aid for the refugees and supporting the revolution in order to overthrow the current administration in Syria. They have placed sanctions on Syria and do not plan on lifting them. Very close to Israel, Turkey is also strategically located near Israel which can be used to help support Israel in their movements against Syria. Additionally, Turkey has followed the EU and placed several monetary restrictions against Syria.

Portfolio powers: Turkey can increase sanctions and provide 7,000 troops if the conflict demands it.

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