

Hofstra University Model United Nations Conference

Joint Forum to Resolve the Conflict in Syria

Kali McCauley

Chairperson

Dear Delegates,

As the chair of the Syrian Civil War Crisis, I want to welcome you to our Model United Nations Conference here at Hofstra University. I want to introduce myself and give you some information about myself and my history as both a delegate and chair in Model UN.

I am currently in my third and final year at Hofstra as a Chemistry major with a Music minor. I'm also in the Legal Education Accelerated Program (LEAP), which is a three-year BA plus three-year JD accelerated program for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Doctor of Law (JD) degree. On campus, I have been actively involved in the Hofstra University Model United Nations club as well as the Student Members of the American Chemical Society (SMACS). In my freshman year I was the Secretary of the Model UN club at Hofstra and last year, I spent the first semester as Treasurer for the club before being elected to the position of Vice President for the second semester. This year, I was elected to be President of the club on campus. I have participated in the last two conferences at Hofstra as both a dais and a chair. In my freshman year, I was the dais for the Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC), which was my first conference in college. Last year, I designed an African Union committee to discuss and debate the topics of Somalia and Gender and Sexual Based Violence in Armed Conflict.

Prior to my time at Hofstra, I was lucky enough to participate in my high school's Model UN program for all four years. During my high school Model UN career, I participated in approximately twenty conferences ranging from my own high school's conference to conferences at UC Berkeley, Rutgers University and the International Technical Institute in Geneva, Switzerland. I also chaired two other committees in high school, African Union and Security Council, as well as vice-chairing two DISEC committees in high school.

Through Model UN, I have researched a variety of projects ranging from Jammu and Kashmir, the drug war in Mexico and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This year, I wanted to design a crisis committee that is currently vital to the concerns of the international community. Therefore, we will address the conflict in Syria, which we will be simulating as a committee as representatives of various countries and organizations involved in this topic. This committee will be especially unique, as we will be working with the Council of the European Union committee for the second half of the conference to simulate real time reactions to refugee movements, as well as external or internal attacks by the members involved. This will not fundamentally change the timeline of the committee, but it means that during the second half of the committee, we will be getting real-time updates on decisions from the Council of the European Union committee that are reactions to what we do in our crisis. A committee like this has not been done yet at Hofstra, so I will be counting on all of you to do your research and to bring your "A-game" to the committee. I cannot wait to meet all of you and see where our committee takes us!

Your Chair,

Kali McCauley

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Introduction

Since May 2011, the Syrian Civil War has destroyed major financial and industrial cities within the country and has displaced over ten million Syrians both internally as internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and externally (as refugees).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria. Meanwhile about one million have requested asylum to Europe. Germany, with more than 300,000 cumulated applications, and Sweden with 100,000, are EU's top receiving countries.¹

Furthermore, the crisis has exacerbated tensions between foreign actors with differing views on foreign intervention, such as the US and Russia, while simultaneously showcasing the unlikely alliance between Iraq and Iran that emerged after the 2003 US-led war in Iraq.² However, this crisis has also provoked controversial issues already prominent in the area, such as that of the autonomy of the Kurdish people in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.

This crisis committee begins with the US attack on a Syrian military base in May 2017 that struck pro-Assad forces at al-Tanf.³ Meanwhile, the US continued to arm the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) to retake the city of Raqqa, located in northern Syria. The consequences of these actions could be disastrous to Syria and its neighbors such as Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as countries throughout the region and in Europe that have harbored refugees or have been attacked by the rebel groups born out of this conflict. The committee will pick up its simulation from May 9, 2017 and move into a real-time crisis from that point in time onward. Therefore, any real event that has actually happened beyond that point will not be included in the crisis committee's simulation.

Timeline¹

Here are some important events leading up to the present day of the Syrian crisis that are important to take note of for the purposes of the committee.

May 2010: The United States (US) renewed sanctions against Syria after accusing Syria of supplying Hezbollah “with increasingly sophisticated rockets and missiles” and for their “continuing support for terrorist organizations and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.”⁴

March 2011: Protestors in Dara’a and several other cities are attacked and shot by Syrian government forces.⁵

November 2011: The Arab League suspended Syria’s membership and imposed sanctions after Syria failed to implement the Arab Peace Plan.⁶

November 2012: The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a coalition of anti-Assad militant groups excluding Islamist militias, formed in Qatar.⁷

September 27, 2013: UN Security Council threatened to use force against Syria if it does not destroy its chemical weapons.⁸

Mid-October 2013: Syria signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which prohibits production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons.⁹

September 16, 2014: The US launched airstrikes on ISIL’s headquarters in Raqqa and along the Iraqi border, joined by Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁰

June 23, 2014: The Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced it had removed all of the Syrian government’s chemical weapons stockpiles.¹¹

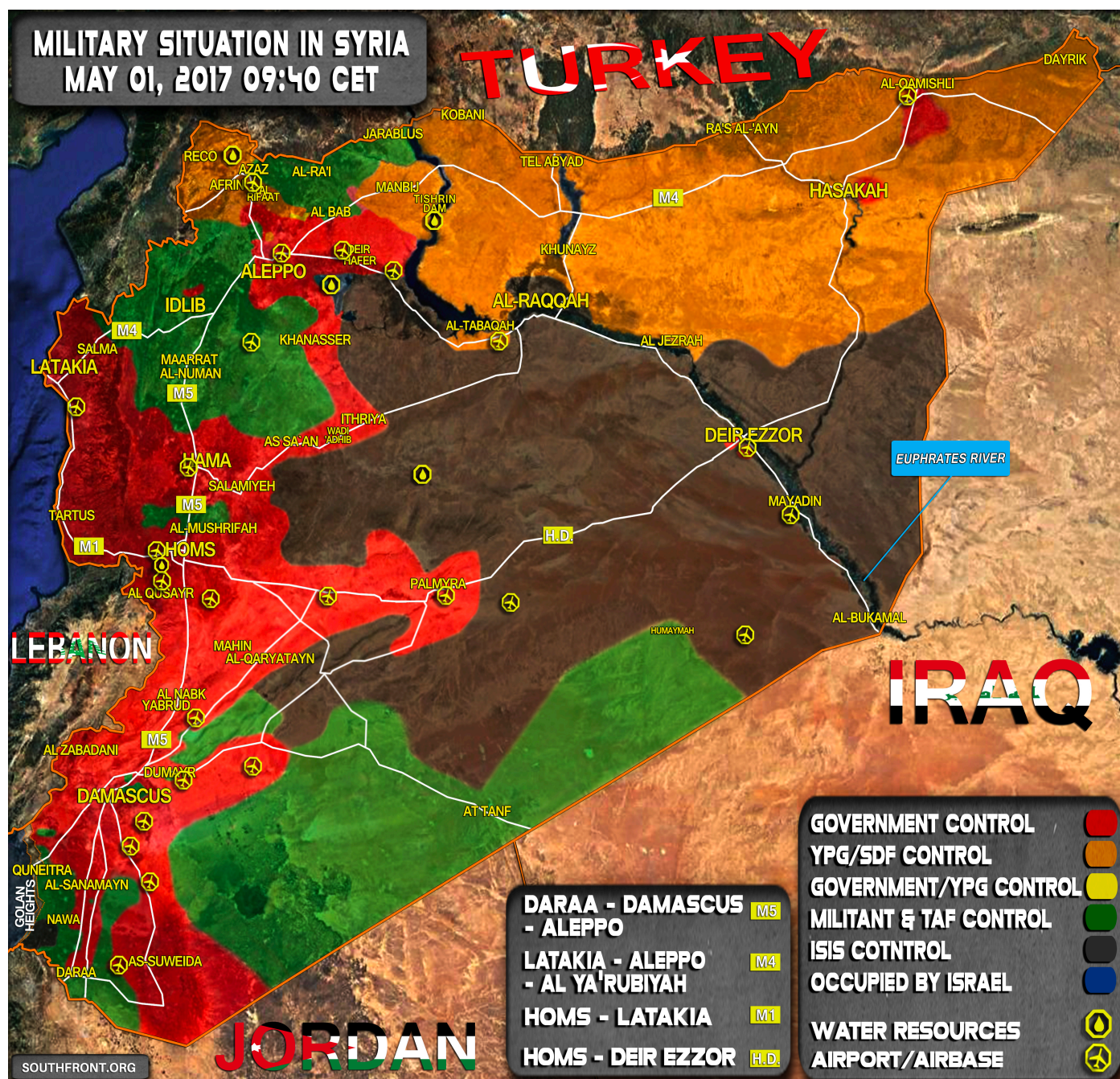
¹ This timeline was adapted from the BBC’s “Syria profile – Timeline”, Deutsche Welle’s “Syria civil war timeline: A summary of critical events”, and selected sources. Information was added to the original text, as needed, for clarification.

September 30, 2015: Russia launched airstrikes on Assad's opponents, shifting the civil war in favor of Assad.¹²

April 6, 2017: The US Syrian military base in al-Tanf, the suspected source of the April 4th chemical weapons attacks by Syrian forces against civilians in the city of Khan Sheikhoun in rebel-held Idlib province.¹³

*May 9, 2017**: The US armed Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) in order to retake Raqqa.¹⁴

*This will be the date considered the starting date of the committee's work.



Key Terms

Muslim Brotherhood: An organization that “calls for the establishment of a modern, democratic, and pluralistic civil state”¹⁶ for Syria; believes that foreign intervention in the Syrian crisis is the only solution; supported by Turkey; many members are in jail or in exile; seen as terrorist group by enemies in the Arab world.¹⁷

Sunni Muslims: support the rebel forces in Syria; hostile toward Shia Muslim-controlled government; makes up the majority of Syria’s population, approximately 70%; largest sect of Islam, globally; supported primarily by Saudi Arabia.¹⁸

Alawite/Shia Muslims: The second largest population in Syria, approximately 12%, which includes President Assad; support the Assad regime which has controlled the government for forty-six years, when Bashar Assad’s father took power supported primarily by Iran.¹⁹

Ceasefire: “An arrangement in which countries or groups of people that are fighting each other agree to stop fighting.”²⁰

Arab Spring: A movement that started in 2011 in Tunisia before spreading to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria, and featuring protests demanding reform and the removal of long-standing leaders from power. The movement resulted in some countries experiencing increased instability, leading to civil conflicts and wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria.²¹

Chemical Weapons: Weapons such as grenades and artillery shells that contain poisonous chemicals. Chemical weapons were introduced during World War I. The UN adopted the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in September 1992, “the first disarmament agreement negotiated within a multilateral framework that provides for the elimination of an entire category of weapons of mass destruction.”²²

Setting

On May 9, 2017, the United States decided to arm the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to fight the Islamic State's control of Raqqa, a city in northeastern Syria. By arming the Kurds, the US has effectively alienated Turkey, which fundamentally opposes Kurdish autonomy. The US, on the other hand, claims that the YPG, among other non-state actors, is a key asset in combatting ISIL in Syria. This decision came about a month after the United States launched an attack on the Assad regime-held military base that is alleged to have used nerve gas in an attack on a town in a rebel-controlled region. The tensions in the area, specifically regarding foreign aid and involvement, have increased exponentially in the last two years after Russia began an active role in the crisis through airstrikes on areas controlled by those opposed to the Assad regime. Up until September 2015, Russia had only been aiding the Assad regime inconspicuously. At this point, the "civil war that had been deadlocked for four-and-a-half years [began] to move steadily in favor of the Assad regime."²³

The effectiveness of intervention in this crisis by international organizations, such as the United Nations, has been often discussed and debated, with few documentable results. The inability of the Security Council to pass a resolution in the past year to sanction governments and actors for the use of chemical weapons in Syria and to enact a ceasefire in Aleppo have resulted from vetoes in the Security Council by Russia and China.²⁴ Russia has vetoed a total of eight draft resolutions regarding Syria, while China has vetoed a total of six draft resolutions.²⁵ Both countries have said that the vetoes are based on support for Syria's national sovereignty and hope for a diplomatic solution without using force. However, both countries' share a distaste for Western-led interventions in international disputes and are major trading partners with Syria.²⁶

In the first week of May 2017, the presidents of Russia and the US spoke over the phone about a potential cease-fire in Syria. However, tensions continued to rise as Russia and the US became more directly involved in the civil war through airstrikes and bombings rather than only

providing military aid to the sides they support.²⁷ The Assad-led Syrian government, for its part, has remained somewhat uncooperative, recently stating that the de-escalation zones negotiated by Russia, Iran and Turkey cannot be monitored by outside organizations like the United Nations or even the three countries that negotiated these zones.²⁸ These events, coupled with US airstrikes in response to the attacks on the rebel-held areas, are likely to have a direct impact not only on Syria, but on neighboring states, as more international players become involved and borders of the regions under the control of various organizations involved continue to shift.

Actors

France

France is one of the most outspoken European states to oppose President Assad, surpassing countries like the United Kingdom and Germany. On September 27, 2015, France became one of the first European countries, and certainly the first of the stronger European countries, to launch airstrikes on Syria. France is in complete opposition to President Assad participating in any part of a post-civil war transition process. France is motivated by several factors including, but not limited “to its ambitions as a great power, its international identity, and its desire to build reliable alliances with Sunni-majority states.”²⁹

Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Rojava)

Rojava is an autonomous, Kurdish majority region that has been effectively independent since the early stages of the Syrian Civil War. Rojava is led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose stated aim is to foster a harmonious multi-ethnic, and progressive society in northern Syria that will serve as a basis for a federalized Syria. The PYD’s armed wing is the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which in turn is the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).³⁰ The SDF is “an alliance of about 55,000 fighters, about half from Kurdish militias, fighting the Islamic State with US support,” it serves as the official army of Rojava.³¹ While the SDF has not publically stated their opposition to the Assad regime yet, it is generally accepted based on their swift advances on the areas controlled by the Islamic State. This will likely force them into a confrontation with the Assad regime, which could lead to a conflict with the regime.³²

Hezbollah

Hezbollah is an armed group that originated among Lebanon’s Shia population. Its support for the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War has been divisive for the Lebanese

people as it is an Iran-founded group that had previously fought for Lebanon in the 2006 war with Israel. Therefore, Hezbollah's involvement in this conflict stems primarily from the belief that Syrian opposition forces may destroy its alliance with the Assad regime against Israel. While some in Lebanon's Shia community support this group, there has been some dissatisfaction with the group's stance. Because of this group's discordance in Lebanon, Shia neighborhoods have been targeted by other sects in the country, increasing tension and destabilizing the country.³³

Iran

Often called Syria's closest ally, Iran has been a prominent supporter of both the Assad regime and the Lebanon-based group Hezbollah, providing military and economic aid to both. While the two countries represent different religious majority population—Syria representing a Sunni-Arab majority and Iran representing a Persian-Shia majority—their partnership is strategic. From the beginning of Syria's civil war, Iran has been the backbone of the Assad regime, helping it to maintain power. Should the Assad regime remain in power after the civil war ends, Syria would owe a significant debt to Iran, something that worries the international community.³⁴

Iraq

Because of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), operates across the borders of Syria and Iraq, the two countries are irrevocably connected, linking Iraq's stability to the course of the Syrian Civil War. Iraq and Syria have found a common enemy in ISIL and have both worked to eliminate it. However, Iraq has a vested interest in a stable Syria, publicly calling for peace talks between the Assad regime and the opposition, Iraq has been privately providing some military and economic support for the Syrian opposition. While Iraq and Iran both support Syria, they offer their support with different motivations. Iraq fears a post-Assad Syria

where the Sunni-led opposition wins, which might then encourage Iraqi Sunnis to revolt and destabilize the power of the current Iraqi regime.³⁵

Jordan

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Jordan has been an active player in the US plan for intervention in Syria. Jordan, like many other countries, is officially in favor of a “peaceful resolution.” However, Jordanian officials have said that Jordan will not intervene in Syria unless there is a “clear and present terrorist threat” to the security of the country, which is more specifically a reference to ISIL. Part of Jordan’s alliance with the US is based on their common fight against ISIL. Also, the Syrian Civil War has made neighboring Jordan one of the largest hosts of Syrian refugees in the region.³⁶

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

The Kurdistan Regional Government rules in the northern region of Iraq referred to as Iraqi-Kurdistan. It has taken in and given refuge to over 200,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq, or 97% of the total in the country, providing humanitarian aid and security with assistance from the international community.³⁷ The KRG has made statements condemning attacks within Syria on the Syria-Kurdish population supporting the United States attacks against the Assad regime as a result of the attacks against Iraqi Kurds by Saddam Hussein’s government.³⁸

Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)

Because of widespread instability created within Syria by the Syrian Civil War, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has been able to take control of areas in Syria with a high density of Syrian Kurds, making them some of the most relatively stable regions in the country. Some advocates see these stable regions as a potential building block to creating a stable, democratic Kurdish region along the Iraq-Iran border near Aleppo, in the future.³⁹

Lebanon

Lebanon remains the largest host of Syrian refugees with over 1.5 million refugees from Syria alone.⁴⁰ However, in the last two years, it has become increasingly more difficult for refugees from Syria to cross the border into Lebanon, as regulations have grown stricter. Lebanon has actively tried to distance itself from the civil war in Syria, other than providing aid to the refugees. However, because of Hezbollah's heavy activity in Syria, Lebanon's efforts to remain neutral could backfire. Lebanon never fully cut its ties with Syria, but should Lebanon be forced into the conflict by Hezbollah's involvement, it would illustrate the regional strength of the Assad regime and its ally Iran.⁴¹

Qatar

As of November 2016, Qatar has pledged to "arm Syrian rebels even if Donald Trump ends U.S. backing for the multinational effort," though "would not 'go solo' and supply shoulder-fired missiles to the rebels."⁴² Qatar has cited a desire to help build a more stable Syria as a rationale for supporting nationalist Sunni rebels and opposing the Assad regime.⁴³ Qatar's posturing has been in addition to that of Saudi Arabia and Turkey who also support the rebels, which the Assad regime has labeled as terrorist groups.⁴⁴ Relations between Turkey and Qatar have become particularly close, both countries have publically declared their support for the Syrian rebels seeking to overthrow Assad. The nature of their assistance in Syria is notably military based, and has not focused on the pressing humanitarian needs of the Syrian people.⁴⁵

Russia

Russia has been a constant supporter of the Assad regime, voting against Security Council resolutions condemning Assad or attempting to put sanctions on the regime. Russia has armed Assad, providing both military and economic assistance. Russia's statement regarding its support of Assad claims that the intervention by other foreign powers, even

in a humanitarian capacity, is violating Syria's sovereignty. However, Russia's distaste for foreign intervention likely points to a stronger underlying issue, namely that Russia consistently opposes American intervention in foreign affairs. In addition, the potential outcome of a radical Islamist regime provides motivation for Russia to support Assad.⁴⁶

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, a Sunni majority state, has been extremely outspoken about its disapproval of President Assad, stating "President Assad cannot be part of a solution to the conflict and must hand over power to a transitional administration or be removed by force." Several rebel groups in Syria have received military and economic aid from Saudi Arabia, who also is participating in the US-led campaign to fight the Islamic State.⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia's strong opposition to the Assad regime also likely stems from the long-time rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, who is a strong ally of the Assad regime in Syria.⁴⁸

Syria (Assad Government)

Since the July 2000 referendum that elected President Bashar al-Assad with a 97% affirmation, the policies of the government have shifted widely from the once-promised democratic reforms, initiatives against corruption and improvement of the economy. Unlike other countries in the Arab Spring, Assad ordered his security forces to "crush the dissent, rather than tolerate it, and he refused to meet protesters' demands," leading to a turn in the Assad regime's international and national image. The Assad regime is Alawite-led and therefore is in opposition with groups led by Sunnis, which is the major religion of the Syrian opposition.⁴⁹

Syrian National Coalition

Officially called the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, it is an alliance of various opposition forces that are committed to overthrowing the Assad regime, disbanding its security forces and "ensuring absolute national sovereignty and

independence for Syria.”⁵⁰⁵¹ It has been the principal opposition bloc at the peace talks in Geneva.⁵² The Syrian National Coalition supports the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which is one of the many-armed groups fighting on ground in Syria.⁵³ At the outbreak of the war the FSA often acted as a refuge for soldiers that had left the Assad regime, though reports have come out claiming that many ex-Syrian government officials have also taken refuge in neighboring countries, such as Qatar. Since 2011, the FSA has expanded quickly and exponentially throughout Syria, developing into several different factions: some factions have stayed true to the FSA’s original goals and some have become more violent, attacking civil infrastructure as opposed to that of the military or the government. Though Western media sources typically portray the FSA simply as an anti-authoritarian rebel group, these portrayals underplay the reality of the FSA committing multitudes of human rights violations for their cause, while maintaining support from powerful international players like the United States.⁵⁴

Turkey

Turkey has exponentially increased its presence in the civil war in Syria in the last seven years, and is now considered one of the larger non-organizational actors in the crisis.

Turkey’s initial connection to the Syrian crisis was to weaken PKK, who has long been considered in complete opposition to Turkey. Further involvement by Turkey in the Syrian conflict could ultimately bring the already tenuous relations between Turkey and the US to a boiling point.⁵⁵ These tensions have continuously risen since Turkish accusations of US involvement in the 2016 coup d’état attempt, as well as the country’s disagreement on the Kurdish question.⁵⁶

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has not been as directly involved as many of the regional actors, however, its parliament did vote to take a stand against Assad’s regime in Syria through

military action to deter Assad's use of chemical weapons. The United Kingdom has also been an active member of the coalition begun by the United States against ISIL potentially opening up future involvement for the United Kingdom.⁵⁷

United States

The United States has been an active participant in the Syrian Civil War, as early as August 2011 when it joined France, Germany, the United Kingdom and others in calling for President Assad's resignation. Throughout the last seven years, the US has varied its involvement from focusing on ridding Syria of chemical weapons, arming the Syrian rebels, and participating in coalition airstrikes to fight the ISIL. Most recently, the US has ordered airstrikes against the Assad regime and pledged to arm the Kurdish opposition forces in Syria.⁵⁸

Questions for Consideration

1. How involved should the international community be in the Syrian crisis and in what aspects: humanitarian, political, militarily and/or financially?
2. With Syria controlled by several different groups in addition to a government right now, how should unity be restored and order re-established within the region?
3. How can the problem of impunity among government officials and lack of transparency be fixed within the region and several external governments involved in the conflict?

Important Note: These questions should be answered from the point of view of your organization and/or country. This means that there is a possibility that your country/organization will not agree with the assumptions made in these questions. Please be sure to understand your specific policy on each of these questions based on your organization/country alone and not any personal opinions.

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