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Northwestern University Model United Nations

Balance of Powers: Syria

Committee Dossier

Chair: Hersh Agarwal

Moderator: Bharat Iyer

Vice Chair: Evan Fox

Crisis Staffer: Jake Hume

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Committee Dossier

Bashar al-Assad & History of the Syrian Regime

Born on September 11, 1965, Bashar al-Assad is the son of Hafez al-Assad, ruler of Syria from 1971 until his death in 2000. Instrumental in the 1963 coup d'état that unseated the independent Syrian Republic, established military rule and brought the Ba'ath Party to power in the country, Assad ultimately ascended to be the undisputed leader of Syria by 1970 after toppling General Salah Jadid's regime. When he took power, Assad instituted one-man rule and organized state services into sectarian lines (the Sunnis becoming the formal heads of political institutions, while the Alawites were given control over the military, intelligence and security apparatuses). The powers of collegial bodies were curtailed, and were transferred to the presidency. The Syrian regime transformed from being a single-party system into a single-party state with a strong, centralized presidency. To maintain this system, a massive cult of personality focused around the Assad family was developed. In some respects, however, Assad de-radicalized the Ba'ath regime when he took power, giving more space for private property and strengthening the country's foreign relations with countries that his predecessor had deemed reactionary. He also sided with the Soviet Union during the Cold War in order to garner support against Israel. While he had discarded the pan-Arab concept of unifying the Arab world into one Arab nation, Hafez al-Assad did seek to make Syria the defender of Arab interests against Israel. On the home front, his domestic policies led to a significant spike in corruption by the ruling class and increased subjugation of the poor to the political elite. As a result, in the late 1970s the Muslim Brotherhood orchestrated an Islamist uprising aimed at the government. Islamists attacked civilians and off-duty military personnel, in response to which security forces killed civilians in retaliatory strikes. The rebellion reached its



climax with the 1982 Hama massacre, in which 10,000 to 40,000 people were killed by regular Syrian Army troops. Later, by the end of the Cold War, not only did Syria aid the United States in its Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, but also took part in the multilateral Madrid Conference of 1991, and throughout the 1990s engaged in negotiations with Israel. However, these negotiations failed, and there have been no further direct Syrian-Israeli talks since Hafez al-Assad's March 2000 meeting with then President Bill Clinton in Geneva. Upon his death a few months later, his second son Bashar al-Assad was elected President in an unopposed election in which he officially received 97% of the vote. While his victory spawned the birth of the Damascus Spring and hopes of substantial reform, by fall 2001 authorities had suppressed the movement, imprisoning some of its leading intellectuals. In reality, national changes were limited to a few market reforms and the closing of the Mezzeh prison that housed a few hundred political prisoners. However, security crackdowns commenced within the same year, and citizens continued to be persecuted and detained for holding views against the regime. With few political, economic, or social changes since 2000, in the midst of the Arab Spring, Syrians took to the streets on March 15, 2011 in nonviolent protests, as Tunisians and Egyptians had done in the months prior. Assad immediately ordered a crackdown, spawning a civil war that to date has resulted in over 120,000 fatalities and internally displaced four to five million citizens.

Lakhdar Brahimi

Currently an Algerian United Nation envoy and advisor, and since August 2012, the UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi holds key influence in Syrian affairs particular to the civil war. He has extensive experience in international politics and peace negotiations, including tenure as Algeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to 1993. After



succeeding Kofi Anan as the peace envoy to Syria, Brahimi appealed to both the Syrian government and the armed opposition to curtail fighting during the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, (which fell on October 26, 2012) and the few days surrounding it. While the government and the majority of opposition groups agreed to this appeal, the lull in fighting lasted for a very short time. According to Brahimi, both parties then accused one another of not having stopped its own violence, and so ended the ceasefire attempt. Lastly, upon meeting with Brahimi regarding Syria on October 31, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi expressed his support for political transition in Syria and for the envoy's mediation efforts as a whole.

Riyad Farid Hijab

Serving in Assad's regime as the Syrian Prime Minister from June to August 2012, Riyad Farid Hijab resigned and defected to the rebel side in the civil war, and currently stands as the highest ranking defector from the national government. A member of the National Progressive Front (rather than the Ba'ath Party) before 2012, Hijab characterized the government as a "terrorist regime," and alleged that Assad's current government was collapsing "morally, financially and militarily". He then not only called on the opposition forces to unite, but also for the Syrian Arab Army and its officers to join the rebellion against President al-Assad and his Ba'ath party government. According to opposition sources, from his encouragement by early August two other ministers as well as three army generals defected to the rebels. While the U.S. government claimed that Hijab's defection was a sign of the "regime crumbling from within," Assad rated his departure as a positive sign, remarking it was "self-cleansing of the government firstly, and the country generally." In fact, according to *Der Spiegel*, Hijab and other prominent Syrian defectors were bribed by French secret services inside the country as well as by Qatar, a prominent supporter of the rebels.



Hijab's duties were ultimately transferred (after an interim period) to incumbent Prime Minister Dr. Wael Nader Al-Halqi.

Assad's Peace Plan

Aside from limited reforms granted to the people since the onset of the civil war, President Bashar al-Assad has done little to form a comprehensive peace plan to bring an end to the Syrian Civil War. Early into the civil war, in June 2011, al-Assad promised a national dialogue involving movement toward reform, new parliamentary elections, and greater freedoms. He also urged refugees to return home from Turkey, assuring them amnesty with blame only being placed on a small number of saboteurs. In reality, other than emergency law being lifted towards the end of 2011, and a constitutional referendum that imposed a fourteen-year cumulative term limit for the President of Syria, the regime has taken no steps to bring peace to the region. As currently only removal of Assad would satisfy the opposition, any potential peace plan of his would clearly be inadequate.

Major Players Within the Syrian Civil War

In order to work towards Syrian peace, diplomats need to try to make sense of the cluster of militarized interests competing against the government and one another. Only through understanding the goals of each of the important factions can negotiations be successfully completed.

The main opposition group, known as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, is the organization most likely to agree to compromise for a peaceful resolution. Recognized by over twenty nations – including France, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and



Germany – as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, the SNC has engaged in moderate discourse to gain international favor. The SNC was also granted representation in the Arab League in March 2013, taking the seat formerly held by the Assad regime. The coalition's general assembly is made up of a total of 114 members representing the different member groups including the Free Syrian Army. While former moderate Umayyad Imam Moaz al-Khatib initially led the SNC, he resigned in April 2013 due mainly to continued frustrations over the general inaction of the international community in resolving the Syrian crisis. In his words, he chose to resign “so that [he could] work with a freedom that cannot possibly be had in an official institution.” After months of deliberation the SNC appointed Ahmad Tumeh, another moderate, as prime minister in September 2013. “The priority of my government”, Tumeh explained to reporters, “will be to restore stability in the liberated areas, improve their living conditions and provide security.” While he initially told the coalition that there would be no compromise if it meant keeping Assad in power, a 24-point plan detailed on February 12, 2014 included no mentions of Assad or his supposedly required removal. The SNC instead placed emphasis on strong human rights guarantees and a justice process to “hold accountable” those accused of harming Syrians.

While the SNC represents the diplomatic side of the opposition, the Free Syrian Army serves as the militarized wing. With 15 seats in the SNC, the two groups (while initially separate) are now very much complementary. The soldiers fighting within the FSA are diverse, with over 100,000 of them defectors from the Syrian army and an unconfirmed number of militants originating from Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. Their weapons stockpiles are funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf nations while command-and-control infrastructure has been supported by the United States. A report released by the Times of Israel detailed the delivery of 250 sophisticated anti-tank missiles to the FSA from an unnamed Middle Eastern state;



with a hit probability of 90%, the arrival of the weapons puts considerable strength into the militants' hands. Initially, the sole goal of the Free Syrian Army was the deposition of Assad; no political motivations besides his removal officially existed within the organization. However, in February 2014 the FSA fired Salim Idriss as its military chief following failed Geneva talks and Idriss' ineffective demonstrations of leadership. This, combined with the FSA's incorporation into the SNC, will likely lead to an eventual change in its political involvement.

While the FSA and SNC are characterized as religiously diverse moderates, there exist factions within Syria that fight for religious motivations. Jabhat al-Nusra, one such group, has been labeled a terrorist group by the Obama administration and was blacklisted by the UN Security Council as an alias of al-Qaeda. Despite international condemnation, the FSA continues to support al-Nusra. Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi, head of the FSA in Aleppo, was reported as saying "Al-Nusra Front has never done anything illegal or worth condemning...They are fighting side by side with us." When engaged, one Syrian rebel described the overwhelmingly foreign fighters as ones who "know what they are doing and are very disciplined. They are like the special forces of Aleppo". Al-Nusra keeps a low profile when not directly in combat; the government building in the city of Aleppo they have repurposed as a headquarters is undecorated with al-Nusra symbols. While al-Nusra has proven useful to the rebel forces time and time again, they may prove problematic when peace talks are offered. The organization has called any truce a "filthy game", believing that Assad would disrespect the terms.

Al-Nusra is not the only religiously oriented militant group fighting over Syria. The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, or ISIS, has pursued more morally questionable methods in its struggle to bring al-Qaeda style Islamic law to the nation. Opening a second front against Assad, ISIS has done much to change the face of the war. Establishing Shari'a courts and beheading those



in violation of their beliefs, ISIS – estimated to have around 7,000 fighters within Syria – is potentially the most dangerous of the rebel forces. Torture, floggings, and summary killings of children and adults alike are frequent in ISIS-controlled secret prisons, and they have been known to abduct foreign nationals. The SNC has publicly condemned their actions, and the FSA has engaged with the group on multiple occasions. While ISIS' leader, al-Baghdadi, claimed that the organization had merged with al-Nusra, both al-Nusra's leader Mohammad al-Jolani and al-Qaeda's global chief Ayman al-Zawahiri rejected the proposition. ISIS exists as a wild-card that diplomats on either side of the crisis should prepare for.

While the conditions on the ground are brutal, there have been proposed solutions. Kofi Annan, Ghanian diplomat and joint UN and Arab League envoy to Syria, has put forth a six-point plan for the war-torn nation. The plan calls for cooperation with the envoy in a Syrian-led process to organize a United Nations supervised cease-fire. The Syrian government would be expected to withdraw its troops from and end its use of heavy weapons on population centers, and both the government and opposition would be expected to allow for humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the war (including a daily two-hour humanitarian pause for greater coordination). The release of certain POWs would be accelerated and freedom of movement for journalists would be implemented. Lastly, Annan's plan includes the condition of the freedom of association and peaceful demonstration. It remains to be seen if the Syrian peace process will use Annan's propositions to any certain extent.

Terrorist Groups In Syria

The fall of the caliphate in 1918 marked the beginning of radical Islamist groups throughout the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire protected the roots of Islam and acted as the last Caliphate



of Islam, and with its demise in World War I, the whole Islamic community wanted to restore Islam to its former glory. This defeat tarnished the prestige of Islam, and in order to restore this prestige, a return to fundamentalist Islam was called. Multiple radical Islamist groups came about after the fall, and believed that only a return to Islam would save the Islamic civilization.

One of the first terrorist organizations to be formed was the Muslim Brotherhood. Created by Hassan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood preached a return to Islam in order to remove the imperialist and colonial West from the Middle East. The British and French arbitrarily divided up the countries based on unknown ethnic lines, sparking this controversial movement. It acted as a reaction to the British occupation of the Levant after the First World War. Hassan al-Banna had his group outlawed by the interwar Egyptian government, so he moved his operations to Gaza, under the British Mandate. The Muslim Brotherhood was supported and cultivated by the government in power, the Supreme Muslim Council (SMC), who also supported 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam. Al-Qassam created the basis for the Palestinian national movement, supported by the Grand Mufti, Haj Amin al-Husseyni. He helped Islamicize the political groups and the Palestinian cause, creating the roots of terrorism in the Middle East.

The next stage of terrorism began in 1967, with the Six Day War against Israel. Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq decided to take up a holy war against Israel to liberate Palestine. Israel defeated all these countries in six days, while capturing the Golan Heights, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Old City of Jerusalem, and occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This was a devastating blow to the entire Islamic World, showing its inferiority to the west and the Jewish people. Islam needed to once again be restored to its former glory. The people now had a new goal in their return to fundamentalism: liberate the Palestinian state from the hands of the occupying Israelis. This movement gained most traction in the Gaza Strip, where Hamas would be founded in



1987.

Hamas, in Arabic, means Islamic Resistance Movement. Hamas gained traction in the West Bank and Gaza following the First Intifada. The movement was born from the First Intifada and helped coordinate the Second Intifada. They seek to rid the Israeli occupation of Palestine as a whole, not only from the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas believes in a militant operation against Israel, setting up the al-Qassam brigades to fight Israeli forces. Also, they believe all of Palestine to be *waqf* (inalienable right) for the Muslims, and are unwilling to give up any portion of the land to the Jews. They take military action to ensure this. Hamas does not only operate solely as a military organization, it also wins the appeal of the people through social means. They fund the construction of mosques, schools, and hospitals to further their agenda. Hamas builds libraries, but only stocks it with pro-Islamic and anti-Zionist materials. Hamas also has a great presence in universities, especially in the University of Gaza, an offshoot of al-Azhar University in Cairo.

It is important to make the distinction between political Islamist movements and a Jihadist movements. Political Islamist movements look to find a return to Islam to provide solutions to societal problems. Jihadists look to wage a holy war against the “infidels”, through military or other means. The two, while similar, are not the same.

Other terrorist groups, like Hezbollah, operate differently than Hamas and Jihadists. Hezbollah is funded by Iran and Saudi Arabia, and seeks to destroy Israel as its sole goal. It operates out of Lebanon, and is currently in power there. It suppresses the Christian minorities in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon, consolidating its power.

Terrorist groups at first glance seek to only destroy people and create havoc amongst the population. However, the movements have supporters that truly feel they are leading them down the correct path and today, through a variety of social programs they continue to wield considerable



influence over a broad range of people.



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