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UNSC

MITIGATING THE IMPACTS
OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

TSINGHUA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

UNSC BACKGROUND GUIDE

Topic: Mitigating the Impacts of the Syrian Civil War

Statement of Problem

The Syrian Civil War reveals the cascading consequences of unmet aspirations and the fragility of systemic structures. What began as peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations quickly escalated into a devastating conflict fueled by oppressive governance, sectarian tensions, and international interventions. The war has not only displaced millions, fracturing families and communities, but has also left a trail of broken promises for peace and stability, as ceasefires and negotiations falter. This year's conference theme, "Displacements and Discontents: Revisiting Broken Promises," seeks to confront this erosion of security and explore pathways to rebuilding global stability. As delegates, you are tasked with examining the intricate web of internal and external factors driving this crisis, exploring the profound economic, political, and humanitarian ramifications. In the conferencing phase, delegates are expected to propose actionable solutions that address the root causes of civil wars while confronting the multifaceted limitations hindering sustainable resolutions.

Civil War

A civil war is an armed conflict fought between different organized faculties within a single state, territory, or regime. Comparably with interstate wars, civil wars tend to exhibit less severe immediate effects on the parties or victims of their occurrence but establish profound long-term effects such as economic collapse and residential displacement. Moreover, civil wars are often resolved informally, leading to frequent re-occurrences. A civil war may be caused by multifaceted reasons, and the modern theory of analysis takes two broad lenses for consideration: inside-out and outside-in. The first examines the interior social structures of a state, territory, or regime and its relation to the initiation of a civil conflict. The latter examines interstate influences on the state during civil conflict and how that participation, collaboration, or interference would deteriorate the issue. Inside-out causes of civil wars mainly include belief divergence, class conflicts, government oppression (tyranny), or economic crisis. In the 1960s to the 1970s, an ethnic revolt against human rights abuse (large-scale deployment) erupted in eastern Zaire (now referred to as the Democratic Republic of Congo) to overthrow the Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko. The rebels also received support from communist states such as China and the Soviet Union to eventually crush the government.

Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 when the democratic demonstrations against the Ba'ath party broke out. Pro-democracy demonstrators charged the streets and called for an end to the authoritarian practices of the Assad regime, the governing party of the country since 1971 when Hafiz al-Assad became president. The Syrian government suppressed protests with violence, including but not limited to extensive use of police, military, and paramilitary measures. In 2012, the conflict between the democratic protestors and the government opposition escalated to a full-scale civil war.

The cause of the demonstration can be analyzed from multiple lenses, which will be discussed extensively in this section. The inside-out theory on the Syrian Civil War claimed that the conflict was caused by the imbalance of power within the state of Syria. The Syrian regime, characterized by the over-concentration of power towards a single family, has long raised frustration among democratic proponents in the country. While Syria's religious diversity is not considered to be the cause of the civil war—Syria is home to over seven religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Alawites, Ismailis, Twelver Imamis, Druze, Jews, and Christians—it is important to note that the Ba'ath party consist mostly of Alawi and underrepresented the large portion of Sunnis Muslims. The concentration of power by the al-Assad family monopolized significant national decision powers. The youngest brother of Bashar al-Assad holds strong financial influence over the country's military forces, and the first cousin of Bashar al-Assad, accused as one of the “primary centers of corruption” (U.S. Treasury, 2008), controls over 60% of the country's economy.

Political Impacts

Since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, its political impacts have been far-reaching and complex. First, the Syrian government, in the face of initially peaceful protests demanding reform, opted for violent repression, leading to the formation of opposition forces and eventually to a full-scale civil war. This response by the Syrian government, in part due to its leadership's steadfastness and desire to cling to power, and with strong support from its allies Iran and Russia, has allowed the Assad regime to remain militarily strong and gradually regain lost ground.

Regional geopolitics have also played a major role in Syria's civil war. Iran and Russia's support for the Assad regime has been countered by support for the opposition from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. The intervention of such external forces not only intensifies the conflict within Syria but also makes Syria the focal point in the regional power struggle. For example, the initial strong criticism and sanctions by the United States and

Western countries against the Assad regime, and the later strikes against ISIS, have affected the course of the Syrian civil war to varying degrees.

The political impact of the Syrian civil war can also be seen in its effect on neighboring countries. For example, neighboring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon have faced an influx of refugees from Syria, which has put socio-economic pressure on these countries. Meanwhile, the Syrian civil war has exacerbated sectarian tensions in the region, especially between the Sunnis and the Shiites.

Economic Effects

Since 2011, the war has resulted in a large number of casualties and property damage, and it is estimated that by the end of 2016, the war in Syria had caused up to \$226 billion in economic damage to the country in a variety of sectors (World Bank Open Data, 2017), including agriculture, energy, real estate, transportation, water supply, healthcare, and education. In addition, Syria's infrastructure has suffered severe damage, with direct losses amounting to \$75 billion, especially in the war's core areas such as Aleppo, Daraa, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Latakia.

The Syrian currency has been severely devalued, unemployment has surged, inflation has soared and the standard of living of the population has fallen severely. Poverty in Syria accounts for 85.2% of the total population, with many living in extreme poverty, and the school dropout rate for minors is over 50%. The Syrian Government's fiscal deficit is huge, the size of its external debt is expanding year by year, and its foreign exchange reserves are decreasing sharply, resulting in a serious shortage of funds for reconstruction. It is estimated that the reconstruction of Syria will require as much as 1 trillion dollars (World Bank Open Data, 2017), which is undoubtedly an astronomical figure for Syria at the beginning of the war and is in urgent need of external international investment and assistance.

Syria has a huge refugee population, with about 11 million Syrians fleeing their homes, with 6 million who have become international refugees. This not only puts enormous socio-economic and security pressures on Syria domestically but also on neighboring countries and European countries who are hosting Syrian refugees. Although the Syrian government has repeatedly emphasized that “allies” such as Iran, Russia, and China will enjoy “priority” in post-war economic reconstruction, the huge gap in reconstruction funds makes it difficult to carry out large-scale economic reconstruction in a short time.

The Syrian civil war has had profound political and economic repercussions, reshaping the nation's governance and infrastructure. Politically, it has led to a protracted conflict with global geopolitical implications, involving major powers and regional actors. Economically, the war has devastated Syria's economy, causing widespread destruction of infrastructure, skyrocketing unemployment, and severe poverty. Delegates of the United Nations Security Council are expected to help facilitate peace talks, provide humanitarian aid, and support Syria's reconstruction efforts during the conference. Delegates are also encouraged to dive into the deep, complex causes of the Syrian Civil War.

History of the Problem

The Rise of the Syrian Civil War

In the year 2011, Europe saw the “Arab Springs”, a series of anti-government protests that spread through many parts of the Arab. Syria was no different. In February of 2011, several small demonstrations were held to call for reform of democracy and to show agreements with pro-democracy protesters in other European countries.

At the time, Syria was a non-democratic country, and their president Basha al-Assad (2000-) was the successor after his father and former president, Hafez al-Assad, died. The al-Assad family had been ruling Syria for more than 50 years, and problems were arising. High unemployment rates, widespread corruption and a lack of political freedom (ShelterBox) were all pressing issues, and its citizens were dissatisfied. In March of 2011, peaceful demonstrations began in the streets of Syria, which were met with military shootings. 15 children were arrested for graffiti in support of the Arab Springs and amongst them, a 13-year-old was killed after being brutally tortured (Al Jazeera). This marked the beginning of the conflict, and the land of Syria has been in crisis ever since.

Political Factions

The Syrian civil war was split among four major parties with different backers: Al-Assad’s regime, the Kurdish troops, Syrian civilians as the rebels, and ISIS the terrorist organization. These four parties are then backed up by a series of different countries and political figures, each with their own goals and intention. ISIS introduced themselves into the war in 2013 by establishing the “Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham”, prompting the United States to ally with the rebels. Meanwhile, Iran, Russia, and gulf countries funded and backed up Al-Assad with military weapons.

In the early stages of the war, the United States, under former president Barack Obama's leadership, launched a secret order to the CIA to train and equip the rebels with arms in attempt to decline the death toll of the conflict. However, this move was ultimately stalled and unsuccessful. In August of 2013, Al-Assad launched a series of chemical weapons against his own civilians for the first time, leading to thousands of people dying from poisonous gas. Barack Obama and the United States immediately reacted to the incident, announcing that the country "will react to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government". This forced the Syrian government to surrender its chemical weapons to the international community just three days later to avoid a military strike by the United States, causing the United States to later back down.

The United States was not the only key player in this conflict amongst the Big Five of the UNSC. In 2015, Russia began to take a much more active role in the Syrian Civil War. Not only did it start deploying troops and military equipment to the Syrian airbase located near Latakia, but in September 2015, Russia launched its first airstrikes to Syria. Although the country later claims to have been targeting ISIS, the aftermath of the airstrikes proves that they have been targeting the rebels which were fighting against Al-Assad. Then, in 2016, the Russian and Syrian Government launched another series of bombing campaign to the rebels in the eastern side of Aleppo, and in this incident, the two countries made no attempt in avoiding any civilian casualties, resulting in a great loss of the medical facilities and search and rescue teams there, and the lives of more than 100 civilians. Despite the international human rights organization's harsh condemnations on their actions, both Russia and Syria had no response until the rebel groups in Aleppo collapsed in December 2016, a near 4 months since the first bombing campaign started.

In April 2017, the Syrian government launched another series of chemical weapon attacks in Khan Shaykhun. This attack resulted in roughly 80 deaths and hundreds of injuries, including many children and women. While Al-Assad denied responsibility for the attack, the government was still put under thorough investigation, and evidence has shown that Al-Assad was likely the perpetrator. Former United States president Donald Trump at the time also responded to the attack with a targeted military strike on the Shayrat Airbase in Syria on April 7, 2017, which was carried out as a measure against the Syrian government for its acts of using chemical weapons against civilians. In addition, countries like Turkey and Iran have also participated in the war in these periods, with Turkey supporting the anti-Al-Assad regime forces along with American allies, while Iran supported the pro-Assad Syrian forces alongside with Russia.

Peace Talk Attempts

Several active negotiations and tentative ceasefire periods have been established throughout the on-going conflict, yet no substantive promises were made. The long-held peace talk period, starting as early 2012, was initiated by Kofi Annan, previous United Nations Secretary General as part of his six-point peace plan. A ceasefire was initially accepted by President Al-Assad, but it failed to last, and peace talks around the conflict soon continued. Over the past decade, multiple peace talks have been initiated, with the Geneva talks being the most influential. Initiated in 2015, it led to the adoption of resolution 2254 in the security council which looked into changing the government system and starting democratic election systems. (GenevaSolutions.news) However, the peace talk hosted in 2017 failed to bring the two sides together, and Syria ultimately backed out of the Geneva constitution talks. Since then, the United Nations has seen difficulties in ushering Syria into peaceful negotiations despite its urgency to the country and its leaders.

Over the past 13 years, the war has taken over half a million lives, including over 250 thousand civilians, and has displaced more than 7 million civilians. The devastating conflict reached a turning point in late 2024 when rebel forces led by Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), marking the end of Assad's 54-year rule. Yet, the conflict is hardly over. While Assad has been driven out, Syria remains deeply fractured as large parts of its territory remain controlled by foreign powers. Additionally, the transitional government, led by HTS, still faces the immense challenges of the country's economic instability and poverty.

Past Actions

During the Syrian civil war, numerous groups have taken significant actions to address the humanitarian crisis and support affected populations. The United Nations (UN) has been a key player, alongside various other organizations, including international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), PAX, human rights organizations, and interfaith and religious organizations. These groups have collectively contributed to alleviating the suffering caused by the conflict.

UN Past Actions

The United Nations, through its specialized agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR, and the World Food Program, has played a crucial role in providing humanitarian aid to millions of Syrians affected by the conflict. This aid includes essential supplies like food, clean water, and medical care. Additionally, the UN has been at the forefront of coordinating international efforts to support Syrian refugees, ensuring they receive protection, assistance, and resettlement opportunities. The UNHCR has been instrumental in working with host countries in the region to manage the influx of refugees and provide them with the necessary support to rebuild their lives. UNICEF and its partners persist in their efforts to safeguard children and assist them in dealing with the consequences of conflict. This encompasses enhancing psychosocial support to aid children and caregivers in recovering from trauma, while also providing vital assistance and services to address the physical and psychological challenges faced by children. In July 2023, the WFP (World Food Program) reduced its caseload from 5.5 million due to funding shortfalls and has predicted that the end of its food-assistance program would significantly affect the 3.2 who continued to receive aid.

Past Actions of other International Organizations

Various other organizations have also been actively involved in addressing the crisis. International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have provided on-the-ground assistance, ranging from medical aid to educational programs for displaced children. PAX, a peace organization, has been involved in advocating for peace and justice, documenting human rights violations, and promoting dialogue among conflicting parties, work on redeveloping the social contract locally. Human Rights Organizations have focused on monitoring and reporting abuses and advocating for accountability and justice for victims. Interfaith and Religious Organizations have contributed by promoting peace and reconciliation, providing humanitarian aid, and supporting the spiritual and psychological needs of those affected by the war. These collective efforts have been crucial in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by the Syrian Civil War.

Potential Solutions

The Syrian Civil War has cast long lasting shadows over its citizens, and various solutions must be considered to bring an end to the violence. Not only is the war disintegrating the country, but the earthquakes had also led to massive destructions. The huge numbers of

deaths and injuries can lead to the fall of society. Given more time, the UNSC can endow the citizens with medical aid. These are immediate solutions to protect the citizens from all the chaos. Furthermore, expanded communication among different nations is crucial in helping the civilians and the country. According to UN, there is long term solutions to solve the problem, “All stakeholders must show the determination to continue pursuing lasting peace for the Syrian people to rebuild their devastated lives.”

Moreover, earthquakes are inevitable. However, there are possible solutions to tackle this drawback. As one may know, earthquakes has dropped the economy of Syria and created devastating situations for the country. Citizens had suffered. It has continuously remained a severe problem in society. Therefore, there needs to be solutions targeted on this problem. For instance, providing citizens with earthquake warnings and free aid after every massive earthquake. There can be professionals to study effective earthquake warnings and refuge during and after earthquakes. UNSC would provide every district/block with an “assisting team” with experts and trained security officers to help civilians after earthquakes.

Additionally, enhancing education and healthcare for children is essential. Lack of education for the children has proved to be a serious problem (concern) lurking within the nation. “It is our collective responsibility to reaffirm to children that their future is our priority too.” -- UN. There are feasible solutions to solve this problem. Investing in rebuilding schools and universities is crucial for Syria’s long-term recovery. This includes providing resources and training for teachers and ensuring access to education for all children and young adults.

Finally, strengthening local governance structures and supporting civil society organizations can help rebuild trust. Local councils and community leaders can play a vital role in delivering services.

Possible Stances

United States of America

The United States of America is vehemently against President Assad's ideologies and reign, open about the fact that they want him out of the government. The United States of America supports non-extremist rebels in their rebellion campaigns. In contrast to other countries, the United States of America's approach to providing aid is much neutralized and moderate despite their clearly stated stance. In the early stages of engaging in the war, the United States of America focused on supporting the political transition from Assad to a democratic government, assisting groups of non-extreme rebels with resources and training programs. Later, the United States of America's focus shifted to battling terrorism, participating in certain air strikes that target terrorist groups. Therefore, when it comes to the discussion of the Syrian civil war, the United States of America should discuss ways to effectively aid the Syrian refugees and rebels as well as ways to address the current governing body of Syria.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf Allies

These countries are extremely against President Assad's stance and key supporters of the Syrian opposition. These countries are major providers of military and financial assistance to several rebel groups, with Turkey hosting over two million displaced Syrian refugees in its own country and Saudi Arabia has called for no-conflict zones to protect civilians. Therefore, when it comes to the discussion of the Syrian civil war, these countries should discuss effective strategies to assist the Syrian rebels in overturning the current Syrian government and to offer military and financial assistance and resources to the rebels and refugees.

Iran, Russia

These countries are major supports of the Syrian government and President Assad. Russia is a long-time ally of Syria's president and supplies weapons and military forces to the Syrian government. Furthermore, Russia took part in participating in numerous air strikes that targeted the rebels. Iran is believed to be spending billions of dollars each year to provide resources to Assad, including military advisers and weapons, serving as a critical transit point for Iranian weapon shipments to Syria. Therefore, when it comes to the discussion of the Syrian civil war, these countries should discuss effective strategies to assist the Syrian government and President Assad stabilizing the government and battling the rebels, as well as offering assistance and aid to the Syrian government.

Key Terms

Internally Displaced Person (IDP): persons or groups that had been forced to leave and move from their homes because of war or natural disasters. War had led to the increase of internally displaced persons in Syria.

Civil War: war between different peoples and groups in the same country.

Chemical Weapons: a poisonous gas type weapon used in wars. Chemical weapons attacked during the Syrian Civil War, leading to thousands of deaths.

Protests: to strongly disagree with an action or opposition to something. Protests had rocked south Syria during the Syrian Civil War.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS): is an anti-Western militant and extremist group active in the Middle East, evoking numerous violence against civilians and cultural monuments. They became active militants in the Syria's Civil War.

Al-Qaeda (terrorist group): it's an Islamic fundamentalist group. al-Qaeda in Syria has offensive operations against the Syrian regime in northern Syria.

Sectism: the practice of mistreating people based on their religious or sectarian affiliation. Syria's sectism was created after the war began.

Depoliticization: To remove a political activity or is the action of cause someone to have no political connections and activities.

Local Coordination Committees (LCCs): These committees were formed during the Syrian uprising to improve the effectiveness and visibility of on-the-ground activism and coordinate peaceful resistance nationwide.

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