

Anne Arundel County Public Schools
Model United Nations IX
General Assembly Meeting



December 14, 2012
South River High School
Background Guide:
Human Rights Violations in Syria

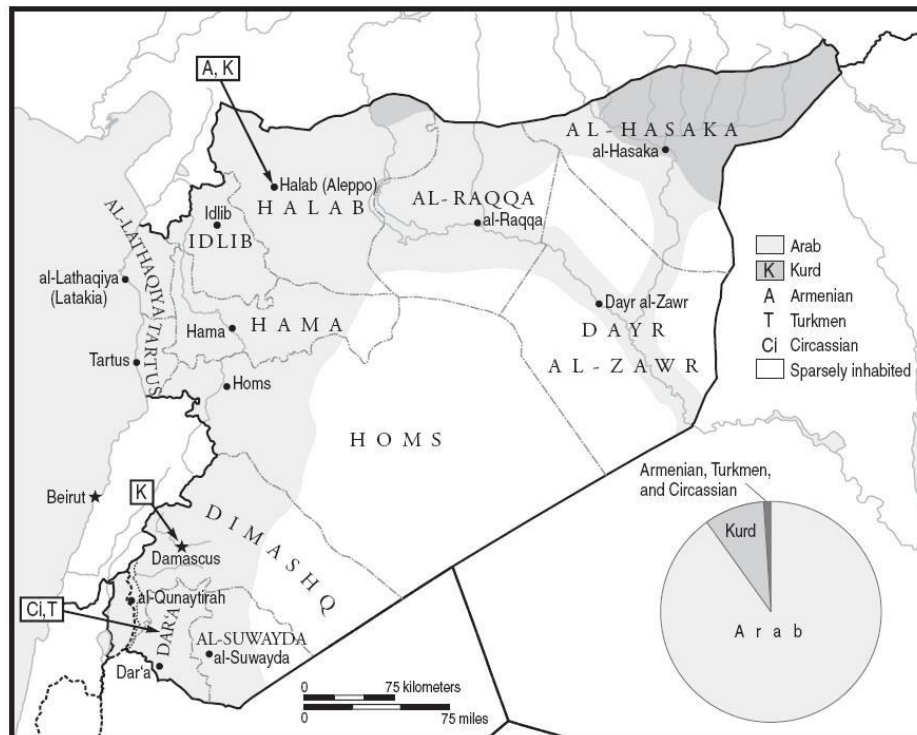
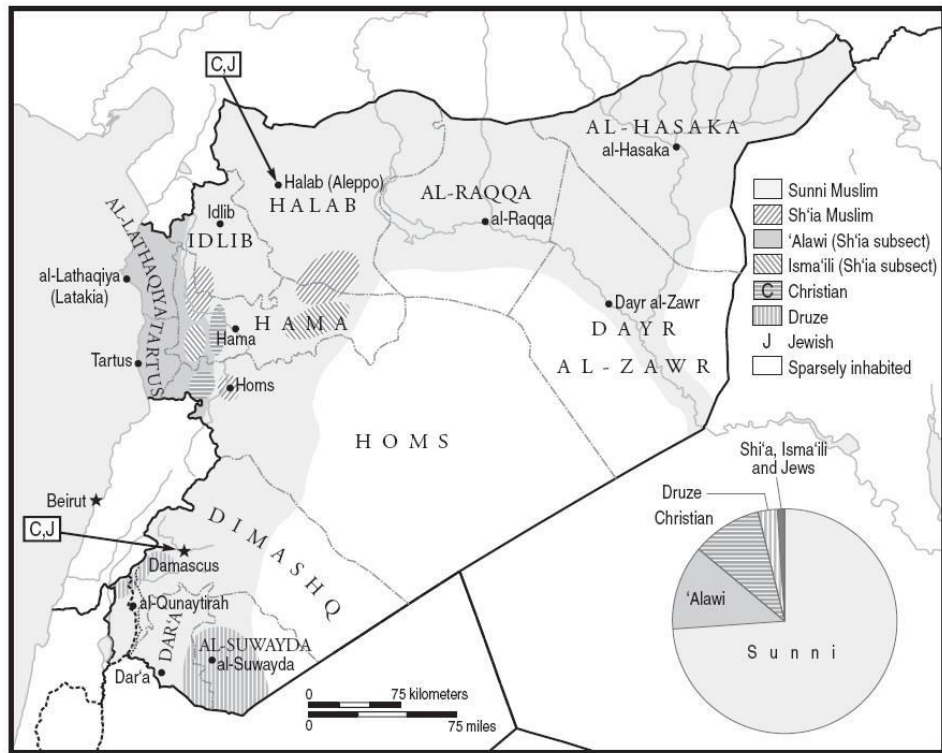
Originally Written By:
Renee Underhill
Boulder High School

Edited By:
South River H.S. MUN Club

Pertinent Data

- December, 2011 - UN High Commissioner for Human Rights told the U.N. Humans Rights Council that more than 5,000 people have died since the start of the public uprising in Syria in March, 2011, including at least 300 children.
- There are an estimated 14,000 political prisoners in Syria who have been detained illegally since 2000 and may be alive or dead.
- Syria's population of 22 million is divided into approximately 74% Sunni Muslims, 10% Alawites (Shia Islam sect/subgroup and ruling political group), 10% Christians, and 5% Kurds.
- Iran, a Shia Muslim majority country, is Syria's most important ally in the Middle East. Iraq, with a Shiite president, is another important ally.
- Syria is the first state to be expelled from the Arab League, as a result of the Syrian Government ordered killing of nonviolent, civilian protesters and dissidents.
- An Arab League group of observers/monitors are currently in Syria, but the deaths of Protesters continues at 30-40 per day. The monitors observe and report, but have no authority, procedures, or mechanisms to punish Syria.
- The Syrian National Council, the main nonviolent opposition group, has called for the international community to carve out safe zones in the country.
- Al Qaeda affiliates and other violent extremists, including foreign fighters, have assertively demonstrated their presence in Syria
- As of early June 2013, United Nations officials have cited estimates that as many as 4.25 million Syrians have been displaced inside the country; As of mid-June 2013, there are more than 1.6 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries
- Recent developments in the conflict, including the U.S. intelligence community's conclusion that Syrian government forces have used sarin nerve gas in limited attacks
- In September, 2013, the UN confirmed chemicals weapons were used in August

Syria: Ethnic and Religious Demography



History

Syria was established as a state after World War I when France and the Great Britain divided up the southern sections of the Ottoman Empire to benefit their imperial goals. The European drawn political boundaries in the Middle East did not recognize the locations of various ethnic or religious groups. The new French Mandate (colony) Syria included Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawites, and Christians. Syria gained its independence from France in 1946. After gaining independence, Syrian politics were extremely turbulent, with numbers of military coups between 1949 and 1971. One result of these was that the state was put under a permanent state of emergency in 1963, which was not lifted until 2011, and essentially deprived Syrians of all civil rights. In 1971 Hafez al-Assad took power, beginning authoritarian rule of a supposed republic. During his rule, the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist Muslim group led an insurgency against the government which he suppressed violently, killing between 10,000 and 25,000 people (including many civilians). This event was called the Hama Massacre because it occurred in the city of Hama. Until recently, anti-government demonstrations had been rare since that incident. Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, and his son Bashar al-Assad succeeded him.

Current Syrian President al Assad is a member of the Alawite religious subgroup or sect. The Alawites' religious sect and ethnic/political minority group in Syria makes up about 10% of the Syrian population. They have ruled Syria since 1971, under the authoritarian rule of presidents Hasef Al Assad and since 2000, his son Bashar Al Assad. Alawites currently dominate the leadership positions in the military, security police, and government bureaucracy – ruling over the 74% Sunni Muslim majority, along w/ smaller minorities of Christians and Kurds.

Historically an isolated and secretive people from a mountain region in NW Syria, Alawites typically call themselves Shia Muslims. They venerate and worship Ali as a deity, hence their name. Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, the prophet of Islam. They study the Quran, recognize the five pillars of Islam, and pray five times a day, but have an additional holy text/prayer book, the Kitaab al Majmu. Alawite political leaders in particular take care to observe feasts, participate in public prayers, and behave, outwardly at least, like Muslims. However, the Alawite religion is really a syncretism or combination of the religions that passed through their region through the centuries.

Alawites do not discuss their additional and differing religious beliefs with outsiders, partly due to persecution for centuries as a religious minority by both Sunni and Shia Muslims. They believe they have the right to hide their true religious beliefs from outsiders to avoid persecution. Some Muslims consider Alawites to be non-Muslims or infidels, but most Syrians consider them a sect or subgroup of Shia Islam.

Shortly after Bashar al Assad's election in 2000, there was a brief "Damascus Spring" in which Syrians were encouraged to discuss and debate political and social issues in private residences called salons. This movement was suppressed in September 2001, including the arrests of many activists that had spoken in support of increased democracy in Syria. In March 2011 protests began in Syria as part of the Arab Spring in the region. Thousands of protesters gathered in Syrian cities, with around 3,000 arrests within the first day of the protest. This led to a huge emigration of Syrians to surrounding countries, especially Turkey.

Present Situation

The Syrian government has continued to arrest thousands of protesters and has killed over 5,000 civilians. Part of the crackdown by the current government has included stricter censorship on the Internet, requiring Internet cafes to record any comments posted by their patrons and blocking sites such as Facebook, Wikipedia Arabic and YouTube. Security forces have been ordered to suppress the protests “by any means necessary”, and have been forced to shoot indiscriminately into crowds of civilians. Multiple crimes against humanity have been reported, including illegal detainment of protestors. Torture of prisoners has been reported, as well as rapes of women and children by security forces given unlimited license.

Official Syrian government statements portray the opposition as terrorists and Islamist fanatics bent on punishing secular (non-religious) Syrians and religious minorities. According to the government, this dissident terrorism is aimed especially at Alawites and Christians, groups that each make up around 10% of Syria’s 22m people. The United States imposed sanctions on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and six other Syrian officials on May 18, 2011, which were followed shortly after by similar European Union sanctions. For the first time in its history, the Arab League suspended membership of one of its members – Syria. The Arab League has also agreed to economic sanctions and has sent official observers to monitor and report on the demonstrations, government reactions, and government promises to move tanks out of civilian neighborhoods.

It has also made an agreement with the Syrian government that Syrian security forces will be removed from cities in order to stop the targeting of civilians. Unfortunately, Syria has not satisfactorily upheld this bargain, simply creating police IDs for heavily armed military forces to allow them to stay in cities.

Many in the West have called for referral of Bashar al-Assad and his top political and military allies to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to be tried for human rights violations. Internet censorship is still very prevalent, and journalists are not allowed into the country. With the Asad regime still entrenched in a number of strongholds and able to use limited but indiscriminate air, artillery, and missile power against rebel-held areas, the death toll, which may now exceed 90,000, continues to climb. Recent sectarian atrocities and Hezbollah’s intervention on the side of the Asad regime are amplifying the risks of broader civil and regional conflict. If continued, these trends could produce greater regional intervention or result in greater displacement of Syrian civilians as communities seek to relocate and consolidate for protection.

As of June 2013, the armed conflict in Syria shows no signs of abating. In fact, recent gains by government forces appear to have bolstered the regime’s confidence. As death tolls have spiraled, both sides have adopted brutal tactics. In many areas, the regime has resorted to the use of air power, Scud missile strikes, and indiscriminate shelling of entire population centers, as part of a strategy to leave rebels with damaged physical infrastructure and a resentful population. A June 2013 report by a United Nations Human Rights Council Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that government forces and regime-affiliated militia have committed “War crimes and gross violations of international human rights law - including summary execution, arbitrary arrest and detention, unlawful attack, attacking protected objects, and pillaging and destruction of property.” The report also documents human rights violations by the opposition, though it notes that “the violations and abuses committed by anti-Government armed groups did not, however, reach the intensity and scale of those committed by Government forces and affiliated militia.”

UN History

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is an important, but recent U.N. principle enacted by the heads of governments at the 2005 World Summit. It is important to note that R2P is not a legal, binding obligations by states. R2P implies that governments should protect their populations from genocide (the effort by a central state government to eliminate an ethnic group by various means), war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

When governments cannot – or will not – meet their R2P obligations, the international community can use military force to protect that government's population and potentially overthrow offending regimes, as witnessed recently in both the Ivory Coast and Libya.

2 December 2011 – The United Nations Human Rights Council strongly condemned the continued abuses by the Syrian authorities as part of its violent crackdown against protesters. The 47-member body also urged the Syrian Government to meet its responsibility to protect its people, in a resolution adopted during a special session in Geneva to discuss the report of the independent international commission of inquiry into the crackdown that was released this week.

The Human Rights Council (HRC) statement, which received 37 votes in favor to four against (China, Cuba, Ecuador and Russia), while six countries abstained – also established a mandate of a Special Rapporteur, or investigator, on the situation of human rights in Syria.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, urged immediate action by the international community to protect the people of Syria from the Government's "ruthless" repression. "In light of the manifest failure of the Syrian authorities to protect their citizens, the international community needs to take urgent and effective measures to protect the Syrian people."

Pillay also called for Syrian leaders to be referred to the International Criminal Court – an international judicial body associated with the United Nations. The HRC may make the above recommendations to the U.N. Security Council, but only the Security Council has the authority to act on those recommendations and its own investigations.

The U.N. Security Council has considered a resolution to condemn the Syrian government for its human rights violations, which has not been passed due to blocks by Russia and China. However, it did pass Resolution 1973 this year, which authorized a no-fly zone over Libya, although the circumstances under which that resolution was passed are somewhat different from those in Syria at the moment. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has condemned the violence in Syria on both sides of the conflict, and has urged the Syrian government to implement a peace plan set out by the Arab League.

Key Concerns

- How can the international community (through the Security Council) create stability in Syria after economic sanctions seem slow to bring about change?
- What role should the Security Council play in the mission to protect human rights and lives in Syria, considering the generally negative view that many Arabs have of the United Nations as a tool of the West? Should the Security Council follow the lead of the Arab League, respond to the U.N. Human Rights Council's concerns, or act independently?
- Are the actions of the Syrian government severe enough to justify the international community acting to impose the Responsibility to Protect doctrine?

- How can the Security Council ensure that the regime that replaces that of Bashar al-Assad is no more cruel and corrupt than the current one? How can the Alawites and Christians who supported the Assad regimes be protected and guaranteed their rights in Syria?
- Should the Security Council condemn the actions of Free Syrian Army's violent actions against the government?
- To what degree should the Responsibility to Protect be respected over national sovereignty?

The Council

The United Nations Security Council deals with issues related to maintaining the security and safety of the international community. The Security Council is the only U.N. council or committee that may initiate economic sanctions, peacekeeping operations, military actions, or any other direct intervention in a state. When states join the United Nations, they agree to abide by the resolutions passed in the Security Council.

The Security Council's has a wide range of options to insure international security. They include:

- Acquire additional information about a conflict or potential conflict
- Request information from other U.N. related agencies (ie. IAEA, Human Rights Council)
- Investigate the presence of banned weapons or weapons of mass destruction
- Request states or parties provide information about war crimes or attempts at genocide in disputed territories or states
- Investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law
- Call for an immediate cease-fire between combatants in a conflict (civil war or war between countries)
- Call for negotiations, suggest a peace plan, and/or provide a trained peace negotiator/diplomat
- Invite the logical, regional transnational organization (ie., African Union, Arab League, European Union, NATO, ASEAN, OAS) to provide expertise, negotiators, peace keepers, aid workers, financial or military assistance
- Impose a no fly zone patrolled by a regional military alliance
- Impose a trade embargo on one or several states or parties in the dispute
- Authorize a naval blockade by a regional military alliance
- Establish a U.N. peacekeeping force – lightly armed to preserve a peace agreement
- Establish "safe areas" for refugees and provide relief services to refugees fleeing the conflict, with the assistance of various international aid organizations
- Authorize military force against one or both parties in the dispute or conflict, reflecting the U.N. "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine

- Establish an international criminal tribunal to try persons responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the disputed area
- Establish a compensation commission to give money to the victims of the conflict
- Call upon the U.N. Peacebuilding Commission to work with international non-government organizations to help rebuild war torn states and territories

The U.N. Security Council is composed of fifteen members. China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the five permanent members of the UNSC, and have veto power on resolutions (but not amendments or procedural votes). The UNSC may also invite countries involved in the issue at hand to participate in the discussion, however these countries do not have voting rights on resolutions or amendments to resolutions.

Sources

- "Syria's Ruling Alawite Sect", New York Times, Robert Mackey, 14 June 2011
- Sanctions on Syria. The Economist, 28 November 2011
- Violence in Syria: Mission Failure. The Economist, 3 January 2012
- Syria's Religious Minorities: Jangling Sectarian Nerves. The Economist, 7 January 2012
- Global Insights: Turkey Turns on Syria's Assad,
<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/authors/102/richard-weitz> Richard Weitz, World Politics Review website, 06 Dec 2011
<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40797&Cr=syria&Cr1=>
- www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40797&Cr=syria&Cr1=
- "The Realist Prism." World Politics Review, 7 October 2011
- "Turkey Turns on Syria's Assad", World Politics Review, 6 December 2011
- "Rights & Wrongs: China, Syria, Liberia" World Politics Review, 31 March 2011
- "Syria's guilty men", Human Rights Watch online, 22 December 2011
- "Syria's opposition: Gaining ground", The Economist online, 17 December 2011
- "Sanctions against Syria: As effective as bullets, maybe", The Economist online, 3 December 2011