

Topic 2: The Issue of Proxy Wars in the Middle East: Iraq-Syria Border Region and ISIS



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Kuwait International Model United Nations

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Background:

On March 15, 2011, the Syrian Civil War began as a result of the Arab Spring. This war is a conflict between the Assad regime and Syrian army defectors who formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on July 29, 2011. This conflict brought in extensive external interference from The United States of America, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. The FSA's goal is to topple the Assad regime, however it has proven exceedingly difficult with Assad being supported by Iraq and Iran. Furthermore, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has created a third side in the conflict, with its goal being to expand its borders and establish a caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. Due to the actions of ISIS, they have claimed a significant part of the Iraq-Syria border, which has caused extreme loss of life due to fighting between ISIS, and the US backed FSA trying to claim that land for themselves. Another main cause of fighting at the border is Turkey's campaign of targeted violence against the Kurdish people in the area they inhabit due to the belief that the Kurdish militias in Syria (the YPG and the Kurdish Peshmerga) are allied with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), who are currently designated as a terrorist group by Turkey.



(Kurdish land for reference)

1-2 years after the start of the Civil war, the Obama Administration authorized Project Timber Sycamore, which inadvertently allowed ISIS to claim powerful US weapons such as AK rifles, RPGs, mortars, TOW anti-tank guided missiles, and more. This allowed them to greatly increase the scale of their attacks.

Topics of Discussion:

- Address the possible resurgence of ISIS or other terrorist groups
- Address the unstable Syrian Government
- Propose a solution to the border fights
- Address the humanitarian concern and needs of the Syrian people
- Address the issue of the Turkish forces fighting the Kurdish Forces

Key Terms:

- **Assad Regime:** The Government of Syria. It is controlled by Bashar Al-Assad
- **Bashar Al-Assad:** The current president of Syria. He has been accused of many war crimes, and has been in power since July 17, 2000.
- **Project Timber Sycamore:** The Operation led by the United States and carried out in Jordan, trained Soldiers of the Free Syrian Army with military equipment. Originally, this operation forbade military equipment to be distributed to the FSA soldiers, however, this restriction was amended out at a later time. Because the FSA often fought ISIS, inevitably, ISIS would also get their hands on the powerful military weaponry through direct confrontation and through the Middle Eastern black market. The Trump Administration ended the operation in July 2017.
- **Civil War:** A war between organized groups within the same state
- **The Arab Spring:** A series of protests across the Arab world that were sparked by the self immolation (death by burning) of Mohamed Bouazizi in response to the confiscation of his wares and his humiliation at the hands of municipal officials. These protests led to many reforms across many countries, and it sparked the Syrian Civil War by inspiring soldiers of the Syrian Army to defect and form the Free Syrian Army to fight the president Bashar Al-Assad and his regime.
- **Proxy War:** A conflict in which third parties directly or indirectly support state or non-state combatants to influence the outcome of the conflict. (In simple terms, it's when a third party like the US, supports other fighters like the Kurds to fight against the Assad regime. The US is not fighting using their own soldiers. Rather, by assisting soldiers from other groups.)
- **The YPG:** The Kurdish People's Defense Units. It is a mostly Kurdish militant group in Syria.

- **The PKK:** A Kurdish militant political organization mainly situated in Turkey and Northern Iraq. Founded by Abdullah Öcalan, it has fought on and off with Turkey, being designated as terrorists by it and other nations on and off. As of January 26, 2024, they are known to be terrorists by the EU, the USA, Turkey, and more. The PKK aims to create a completely independent Kurdish State.
- **The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS):** A terrorist organization formed by people that broke off from Al-Qaeda. They are based mainly in Iraq and Syria, and their main goal is to create a caliphate in the two countries, and spread to the rest of the world.

Key Actors:

- **United States of America:** The US is a key actor in the conflict and fighting, they have supported Kurdish militias and the FSA. They launched Operation Timber Sycamore which armed and trained members of the FSA. However, even before Timber Sycamore was amended to allow the distribution of weaponry, they gave the FSA non lethal aid like food rations and pickup trucks.
- **Turkey:** Turkey is a major contributor to fighting across the area. They have created a safe-zone for Arabs across a part of the Syria-Turkey border. However in doing so, they have displaced many Kurds from their villages to other areas. Furthermore, in trying to expand the safe zone, they are moving slightly into the Iraq-Syria border, and committing more acts of violence there. They support the FSA, but they do not approve of the Kurds aiding and serving in it.
- **Iran:** Iran is a supporter of the Syrian Government. At first, they sent military advisors to Syria, but when they capped the sending of them, they began to rely on a proxy warfare strategy by supporting Hizballah, and other Shi'a militias in the fight against the FSA.
- **ISIS:** ISIS is not interested in the objective of the Syrian Civil War. However, because of the instability it has caused, the terrorist organization is using it to try and expand its borders by causing more instability and violence across the Iraq-Syria border region. Ways they do this are by kidnappings, targeted killings, IED attacks, ambushes, military style assaults, and suicide attacks. ISIS is not allied with anyone in the conflict, as their main goal is to cause terror and gain more land.
- **The YPG:** The YPG is an extremely significant force in the fight against ISIS in the region. They have fought against the terrorist organization, as well as Syrian rebel groups, and the Syrian Government.

- **The Kurdish Peshmerga:** This group was actively involved in the fight against ISIS in Northern Iraq. When ISIS started gaining large parts of land in the area, they were one of the key forces in pushing ISIS back.
- **Russia:** Russia is a supporter of the Syrian Government. In their efforts to support them, they have launched airstrikes against the FSA in response to their advances. Some of the strikes landed across the Iraq-Syria border. They also support private military companies that support the Assad Regime, and the regime itself.

Timeline:

- **December 17, 2010:** Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, sparking the Arab Spring.
- **March 15, 2011:** Major protests begin in Syria. The Syrian Civil War also begins on this day.
- **July 19, 2011:** The Free Syrian Army is formed.
- **2012-2013 (unclear):** Operation Timber Sycamore is put into place.
- **2013-2014:** ISIS claims vast amounts of land in Iraq and Syria, and declares a caliphate.
- **September 22, 2014:** The US officially intervenes in the Syrian Civil war by launching an air campaign, bombing ISIS and the Al-Nusra front.
- **2015-2016:** Russia intervenes in the war by launching airstrikes against the FSA and ISIS.
- **2016-2017:** Operation Euphrates Shield is launched. It was a Turkish military operation that led to the Turkish occupation of Northern Syria. From the Euphrates river to the city of Azaz, Turkish forces fought ISIS and the SDF (a group of militias, mainly led by the YPG) to create a safe zone. The operation was declared “successfully completed” on March 29, 2017.
- **2023:** The conflict has reached a stalemate. ISIS is not as prominent, however now, fighting has shifted from the Syrian Government and the FSA to Turkish forces and Kurdish forces across the Rojava region, which reaches about half of the Iraq-Syria border.

Previous Attempts at Solutions:

Due to there being many sides in the conflict, with the FSA, the Syrian Government, and ISIS, and the complicated nature of the war, there have been no real attempts to stop fighting across the Iraq-Syria border.

Possible Solutions:

- Give Rojava back to the Syrian Government, but allow the different groups in the region to have autonomy. A single government is essential for lasting peace. Although some may not agree with this, a possible solution is to give Rojava back to Syria so that they can enforce laws that go against human rights abuses and against those who commit human rights abuses. Furthermore, with Syria being mostly unified, they can have a stronger army that can defend the country from any new attempts by terrorist organizations like ISIS to claim its land. Allowing other groups to retain autonomy is an effort to quell any future uprisings or periods of civil unrest.
- Turn Rojava into Kurdistan as its own independent nation. If Kurdistan were to become independent and be situated in Rojava, the central government could be supported. With a strong central government and a more concentrated military, measures to enforce safety across the Iraq-Syria border would become easier.

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