

**Bratislava Model United Nations 2011**

**UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE**



**THE 2011 SYRIAN UPRISING**

**Study Guide**

**Chair: Branislav Skoček**

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## Letter from the chair

Honorable Delegates,

My name is Branislav Skoček and it is my pleasure to welcome you to this year's Bratislava Model United Nations. I will be chairing the Human Rights Committee, and the topic that we will be dealing with is The 2011 Syrian uprising.

I am a student of the 4IB class at the Gymnázium Jura Hronca in Bratislava and I experienced the role of a delegate myself at the MUN conference in Wrocław, Poland. I also participated in last year's BratMUN, where I performed the role of an underchair. This and the fact that I have a keen interest in the events and occurrences of today's world persuaded me to become a chair at this year's BratMUN.

So I am looking forward to your time here in Bratislava, at the conference, but of course also outside the conference. See you soon. If you need help, feel free to contact me.

Branislav Skoček, Chair of the UN Human rights Committee



## Introduction

The date is 19 September 2011. The strategic research and communication centre states in its revolutions statistics, which can be found in its daily round up of news from the Syrian revolution, that approximately 3400 Syrians have already been killed since the revolution started. Furthermore, it states that the Human rights office of the UN repeatedly called Syria to stop the bloodbath. And, of course, even more information can be found on this website. Now, it may sound obvious, but the website, which can be accessed through the official Syrian Revolution News Round-ups page on Facebook, is very important, as it updates people about the situation in Syria. People who are kilometers away from Syria might know more about what is going on, than people, who are actually there right now. Or?

To avoid any misinterpretations, I would like to make it clear that I cannot guarantee that every single sentence that I am about to write must be unequivocally and unambiguously true right at the beginning of this study guide. As you might have heard, the Syrian government dementis all news and any type of information that refers about or points to the killing of innocent people by the Syrian army or police. Thus in this study guide I will concentrate on the international view of the current events in Syria and this view takes for granted that all these events are real, instant and true.

First of all, this conflict, which on September 19 is on its 189<sup>th</sup> day, is far from settled. Isn't it worrying to realize that after more than a half year, on this exact day, the daily round-up reported that Assad's regime used rape as a tactic to scare activists? And isn't it even more worrying to realize that people in Syria starve and fear, just because they wanted a change? Of course, Syria isn't the only place on Earth where it's like that, but if Libya got its help, shouldn't Syria get it too? Well there are many opinions, but it is important to realize the people in Syria haven't had the right to express their opinion for 48 long years. They wanted a change and many had to pay hard for this desire. And so the question that many ask now is: Shouldn't it be high time for the United Nations to make a change; a change to the current and still awful ongoing situation in Syria?

Well, like I said, there are more opinions about how to deal and progress with this alarming situation that persists in Syria right now. And no wonder. Logically, if it were otherwise, we wouldn't be sitting here and thinking about possible solutions to this problem. But since we are, I suggest it won't be a bad idea to get a strong hold on this topic and thus learn all the important details, facts and other information about this serious topic.

My role in this study guide will be to elucidate and identify the problem for you, how it started, its possible outcomes, the different perspectives that it can be looked at from and some more, so you will really know how urgent the situation in Syria is. Let us get started.

## **A short summary of Syria's history**

What is important to notice in Syria's history when dealing with the 2011 Syrian uprising is its permanent participation in different kinds of conflict throughout its history. Whether it was different kinds of tribes or nations that fought on the land where Syria can now be found, or later it was Syria itself who started a conflict every once in a while with some of its neighbors, during the 4500 years that people have been occupying the land that lies on the eastern end of the Mediterranean sea, Syria has been constantly pulled into various conflicts.

Another piece of information that cannot be ignored in Syria's history, when dealing with the 2011 Syrian uprising, is the organization of country since 1944, when it became independent, respectively, since 1946 when it became a sovereign republic. The specific date that interests us is March 8<sup>th</sup> 1963, when a group of military and civilian officials called NCRC (The National Council of the Revolutionary Command) assumed control of all executive and legislative authority. The takeover was engineered by members of the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party (Ba'ath Party), which is active in Syria and other Arab countries since the late 1940s. The new cabinet was dominated by Ba'ath members. Moreover in 1970, General Hafez Assad, Supreme Commander of Air Force and a follower of the pragmatic wing of the Ba'ath Party, deposed President Atasi. In 1973, the People's Council approved a referendum to adopt a constitution. Syria became a democratic, socialist People's Republic, in which Islam is the basis of legislation.

What might appear striking to some is that the Ba'ath Party is still the leading party in Syria and that the current president is Bashar al-Assad. The reason why the latter might appear striking to some is because Bashar is the son of Hafez Assad, which means the Assad family has been ruling in Syria for nearly 50 years. In 1982, Hafez al-Assad sent paramilitary troops to the city of Hama to respond to an insurrection there, killing 10,000-20,000 people indiscriminately.

From 1958 till 1961 Syria united with Egypt under Nasser to form the United Arab Republic. In 1967 Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel but extended its influence on Lebanon due to the civil war there. After almost 30 years of military presence, Syria pulled back its troops from Lebanon in 2005 due to growing international pressure after the assassination of Rafik Hariri in which Syrian official were believed to be involved in by the UN. Nowadays, Syria has bad relations with Lebanon, Iraq, Israel, The United States and the EU; however the relations with Lebanon improved. This should be a good sign, since during the last 50 years Syria was several times in war with Lebanon and, as mentioned, actually military present there for almost 30 years!

Finally, what might interest us the most is Syria's repression of dissent. Syria remained under a national state of emergency in force continuously since 1963 and which, over many years, has been used to suppress and punish even peaceful dissent. This pattern continued throughout 2009 and 2010. Political activists, human right defenders, bloggers, Kurdish minority activists and other who criticized the government or exposed human rights violations were subject to arbitrary arrest and often prolonged detention or were sentenced

to prison terms after unfair trials before the grossly deficient Supreme State Court (SSSC) or Military and Criminal Courts. They included prisoners of conscience. Others, including former detainees were subject to travel bans.

Moreover, as claimed by Amnesty international's 2010 report of "The State of the World's human rights", torture and ill-treatment were reported to be common in police stations, security agencies' detention centers, and prisons. These abuses were committed with impunity. The SSSC and other courts continued to convict defendants on the basis of "confessions" that the defendants alleged were extracted under torture while they were held incommunicado in pre-trial detention. There were also several suspicious deaths in custody.

To add and conclude, the Syrian government failed to clarify the circumstances in which prisoners were killed at Sednaya Military Prison in 2008 and, again took no steps to account for thousands of victims of enforced disappearances in previous years. Women faced legal and other discrimination and violence. The Kurdish minority remained subject to discrimination, and thousands of Syrian Kurds were effectively stateless. At last eight prisoners were executed.



## **Internal politics**

The executive consists of the president, two vice presidents, the prime minister and the council of ministers (cabinet). According to the constitution from 1973 the president has to be a Muslim. The constitution gives the president a powerful position. He appoints ministers, can declare war and the state of emergency, issue laws (which, except in the case of emergency, require ratification by the People's Council), declare amnesty, amend the constitution, and appoint military personnel. Every 7 years a referendum takes place to approve the president.

The legislative branch consists of a unicameral People's Council. Two third of the seats are automatically allocated to the ruling party.

Judiciary consists of three state courts and religious courts that handle questions of personal and family law. On 21 April 2011 the Supreme State Security Court was abolished by president al-Assad.

Syrian's opposition is very diverse and not well organized. In the moment they are united by the will to banish Bashar al-Assad but what comes afterwards is unclear. Many of the minorities fear a worsening of their rights in a new system, maybe dominated by the Sunni majority.

## **Society**

Syria has a very inhomogeneous population with 74% Sunni Muslims (including Kurds, Turkomans and Palestinians), 13% Shia (Alawite, Twelvers and Ismailis) Muslims, 10% Christians and 3% Druze. Sunni: are spread all over the country, are part of each social group and nearly all political party and provide the country's basic values, secularization is spreading among Sunnis; Shia: oriented towards the Iran and Iraq, the Alawites constitute the biggest religious minority and were exploited by the Sunni majority for centuries. However the ruling al-Assads are Alawites but view the Shia Islamic fervor with caution and try to dampen it; Christians: divided into several groups, often belong to the high social-economic class; Druze: Although only a small portion of the total inhabitants the Druze always played an important role in Syrian politics. They provided much of the militant forces in the Syrian revolution 1925-28 and participated successfully in the revolt against the French in 1945.

## **How did the Syrian uprising start?**

According to CBS News and Global Post it was the small act of defiance that catapulted Syria to the frontline of the Arab Revolution. Moreover, it is said to have come not from the organized opposition in Damascus or Aleppo or any other major Syrian City, but from the graffiti cans of school boys in a run-down border town half way to the desert. Here on March 6 the slogan of the revolutions in Cairo and Tunis, which the boys had seen played out on their TVs, came flying from their paint cans onto a wall and grain silo in Daraa, the ancient and increasingly arid farming town on Syria's southern border with Jordan.

The local secret police soon arrested 15 boys between the ages of 10 and 15, detaining them under the control of Gen. Atef Najeeb, a cousin of President Bashar al-Assad. In a gloomy interrogation room the children were beaten and bloodied, burned and had their fingernails pulled out by grown men working for a regime whose unchecked brutality appears increasingly to be sowing the seeds of its undoing. On Friday, Syria saw the bloodiest day of its 5-week-old uprising, as security forces gunned down close to 100 protesters across the country. Security forces fired on mourners the following day, killing at least nine at funerals for those who died in Friday's massacre. On Monday, the violence continued. This time, security forces stormed the city of Daraa, where it all began. The ever increasing numbers of people killed by security forces have fuelled the growing protest movement, the demands of which have intensified from simple requests for reform to the all-out ouster of Assad.

The Syrian uprising is a popular uprising. It is an unorganized and has no specific leadership or ideology. It is more akin to the Tunisian situations rather than that of the Egyptian situation. The Syrian situation and its tight security does not allow for a specific organization to organize the protests, not even in secrecy. For this reason, the protests are very random and disorganized in the manner the people took to the streets and the banners that were displayed, even though the majority of them related to the demand for freedom and dignity. As mentioned, over the weeks, the protests grew in numbers and the demands and slogans grew bold, until they demanded for the ouster of the regime.



## **What has happened to date?**

On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2011, the Syrians started a peaceful revolution against the current regime (ruled by Bashar Al-Assad) to end oppression and poverty in Syria that has lasted for more than 40 years. To date the regime killed 3,000+ unarmed civilians and detained 13,000 of those who participated in the peaceful demonstrations all over Syria. Currently more than 7,000 Syrians are refugees in Turkey.

On March 18<sup>th</sup> The Secretary-General of the United Nations declared for the first time that he is concerned about the reported killing of demonstrators in Daraa, Syria. He indicted the Syrian authorities for the use of lethal force against peaceful demonstrators and their arbitrary arrests and described them as unacceptable. The Secretary-General also urged the Syrian authorities to refrain from violence and to abide by their international commitments regarding human rights which guarantee the freedom of opinion and expression, including the freedom of the press and the right to peaceful assembly. The Secretary-General concluded his statement by saying that he believes that, as elsewhere, it is the responsibility of the Government in Syria to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people and address them through inclusive political dialogue and genuine reforms, not repression.

On April 29<sup>th</sup> The United Nations Human Rights Council voted for a mission to be sent to Syria to investigate alleged violations of international human rights law and crimes committed against civilians in the Middle East country, where hundreds of people have been killed during weeks of unrest. Condemning the use of deadly violence against peaceful demonstrators and the “hindrance of access to medical treatment,” the Council urged the Syrian Government to protect civilians and respect fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of expression and assembly.

It also called for the restoration of access to the Internet and other communication networks, the lifting of media censorship and to allow foreign journalists into the country.

In a resolution supported by 26 of the Council’s 47 Member States, the Geneva-based panel requested that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights dispatch a mission to Syria to investigate alleged violations. Nine Member States voted against the resolution, seven abstained and four were absent.

The Council “called upon the Syrian Government to cooperate fully with and grant access to personnel from the mission dispatched by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,” the text said. It deeply regretted the deaths of hundreds of people in the ongoing political protests and voiced grave concern over the alleged deliberate killings, arrests and incidents of torture of demonstrators by the Syrian authorities.

It also called upon authorities to immediately free all prisoners of conscience and people arbitrarily detained, including those held before the recent events, and called for an end to intimidation, persecution and arbitrary arrests of lawyers, human rights defenders and journalists.

Additionally, the Council urged the Syrian authorities to refrain from reprisals against people who have taken part in peaceful demonstrations, and stressed the need for credible

and impartial investigation and prosecution of those responsible for attacks on the protesters. It appealed to authorities to enlarge the scope of political participation to strengthen social justice and ensure civil liberties.

It also requested the High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide a preliminary report and an oral update of the human rights situation in Syria to its 17th session and to submit a follow-up report to the 18th session.

Finally, The Council took note of the stated intention by Syrian authorities to take steps towards reform and called for concrete measures to meet the legitimate demands of the people. Ms. Kang noted that Syria is a State party to nearly all of the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. "Thus, Syria must ensure that the rights to life, liberty and security of person are protected in all circumstances, including in the context of efforts to maintain law and order," she said.

Since then there have been plenty of calls from the UN or The United States urging the Syrian government to end the violations and infringements of human rights, however, they are still going on and no changes seem to be visible. Nonetheless, on September 21<sup>st</sup> The European Union issued its eighth round of sanctions on the Assad regime, banning investments in the Syrian oil sector and any transactions with the central bank of Syria. At the same time, US President Obama called on the UNSC to sanction the regime. Furthermore, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan announced that Turkey has suspended all talks with the Assad regime and is considering sanctions. Erdogan added that Turkey will officially declare its stance on Syria soon.

Finally, what considers the last official statement of The UN human rights Office- it was released on September 23<sup>rd</sup> and urged once again the Syrian authorities to end their brutal crackdown against peaceful protesters and allow for an independent and impartial investigation of the situation in the country. Ms. Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) told reporters in Geneva that prominent human rights defenders, inside and outside the country, are reported to have been targeted. The Office is also concerned by reports of the targeting and attacking of families and sympathizers of the protestors by security forces.

The Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council has ordered a commission of inquiry into the violence after an OHCHR fact-finding mission outlined a litany of Government abuses ranging from murder, enforced disappearances, deprivation of liberty and the torture even of children to an apparent "shoot-to-kill" policy against protesters with snipers posted on rooftops. The Office concluded that it is critical that the Security Council consider referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), the independent, permanent tribunal set up to prosecute individuals accused of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

To sum it up, the foreign involvement is still minimal. But the prospect of it is being more hotly debated, both inside Syria and beyond. A growing number of governments, including many in the region, have called on President Bashar Assad to make concessions. Turkey has turned against him, while keeping diplomatic avenues open. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have sharpened their criticism. Even Iran, Mr. Assad's main regional ally, has been making more nuanced noises. As already mentioned, The United States and the

European Union have imposed economic sanctions, banning imports of Syrian oil (a full embargo is to start on November 15th), thus denying Syria 95% of its oil-export market. They are also looking to extend sanctions against people and companies, and will try to stop banknotes printed in Europe being sent back into Syrian circulation.

Further measures are being floated in Washington and Brussels. Private banks that deal with Syria's regime, most of them Lebanese subsidiaries, may be targeted if the killing persists. Byblos Bank, in whose Syrian subsidiary Rami Makhlouf, the president's cousin, has a big share, may be hit. Syria's central bank may also be a target. On September 14th the UN's High Commissioner on Human Rights appointed a panel to investigate Syria. Some say Mr Assad and his closest allies should be referred to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Visiting dignitaries have sought in vain to persuade Mr. Assad to give ground, if not to resign immediately. On September 10th the Arab League's new head, Nabil al-Arabi, who was briefly Egypt's foreign minister under the new order, proposed a timetable for open elections. But the Arabs still lack a consensus. In any event, this falls far short of foreign intervention on the side of the protesters.

Moreover, Mr. Assad still has useful foreign friends. Russia, China, India and Brazil continue to oppose a UN Security Council resolution and UN-imposed sanctions. Russia supplies arms and is building a naval base on Syria's coast. China and India may buy oil to make up for the export shortfall. It is inconceivable that the UN Security Council would now impose a no-fly zone over Syria as it did in March over Libya: Russia and China would veto it. Nor would NATO governments support such a course.

Instead, some governments are ramping up efforts to help Syria's fragmented opposition. Turkey and Qatar have hosted gatherings to forge opposition fronts. France is building up links. Many protesters look eagerly to Turkey, which shares a border of nearly 900km with Syria. Some say that, especially if the pace of killing rises, the Turks may be persuaded to create a buffer zone to protect refugees in a "safe haven" along the border. Others air the idea of other havens, for defecting soldiers as well as civilian refugees, in the south and north-east of the country, along the borders with Jordan and Iraq.

Lastly, another step in the campaign against Mr. Assad should be the increase in funds for the opposition. More of the protesters, who have generally been determinedly non-violent, are talking of taking up arms, many of which are already being smuggled across porous borders. So the unrest could turn into a civil conflict. Governments in neighboring countries might then have to decide which side they are on. Rich people from the Gulf, among other places, are said to be involved. Syria's turmoil may yet take on a wider regional dimension. Ordinary Syrians are getting ever more fearful.

## Possible outcomes

Political scientist Georgy Mirsky from the Institute of World Economics and International Relations at the Russian Academy of Sciences does not think that the response of the Arab world and the West to the Syrian president's actions will be just as drastic as towards the Libyan leader.

"The Libyan scenario in Syria is impossible for a number of reasons. Firstly, western countries started to implement the Libyan plan only when the LAS agreed, after all Arab countries voted for introducing a no-fly zone over Libya. Next, a UN Security Council resolution was adopted. As for Syria, this will not happen there because Syria is much more loved, respected and appreciated in the Arab world. Arabs say: "Egypt is the head of the Arab world and Syria is its heart". One should not maltreat one's heart, so there will be no LAS anti-Syrian resolution, which means that there will be no legal grounds for a military intervention of the West. But the main argument is that the West does not want to be involved in another war. The Iraqi operation is not completely over yet. The situation in Afghanistan is so complicated that no one knows when the Afghan knot will be untied. The current war in Libya, to all appearances, is a burden on the West as it is not taking it anywhere. Starting a war against the fourth Muslim state would be too much, the public would never support this. Despite this suggestion and view point, we should take into consideration every possible outcome. Others believe The West might get involved after all. Then there is the possibility of a civil war. For now the situation in Syria indicates no changes. It appears that the protesters will continue to run the streets in spite of the risk of being shot and killed. The Syrian government, on the other hand, describes all the allegations as illegitimate, unjustified and fabricated. Logically, the Syrian government has no plans to do further concessions, but just the opposite, it hopes to overcome the crisis: the possibility of the Syrian regime repressing the peaceful protests and fully ending them. According to Dr. Radwan Ziadeh, director of the Damascus Centre for Human Rights Studies and Executive Director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies (SCPSS) in Washington this could happen within a year or less, just like what happened in Iran in 2009 and in Burma in 2007. At least, there are of course also people who still believe this conflict will be solved peacefully and democratically nevertheless.

## **Conclusion and questions a resolution should answer:**

I believe that now you know at least a little more about the urgency of the situation in Syria. Now it's up to you to present your country's position on this problem and to possibly come up with some reasonable resolutions. In conclusion I'm giving you some questions a resolution should answer:

- In which way does the current situation in Syria mean a threat to global peace?
- How should the UN react to the recent events in Syria?
- What can the UN do in order to stop the killing of civilians in Syria?
- Which economical, military and humanitarian means can the UN apply in order to promote peace in Syria, prevent a civil war and foster the respect of human rights by the authorities?



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