Forum: Special Committee 1
Issue: Protecting refugees in Syria from extremist militant groups
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Position: Student Officer

Introduction

Since 2011, more than 10 million people have been displaced as a result of the ongoing Syrian Civil War. According to the UNHCR, 7.6 million (50% more than 2013) people are internally displaced within Syria, and 3.8 million have fled to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Many of them lack access to basic needs such as clean water, food, and medical care. To date, over half of the country’s population of 23 million have been detrimentally affected by the war and are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance.

The Syrian Civil War was the result of peaceful anti-government demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, which quickly escalated into a full-scale conflict between government forces and civilian opposition. However, the situation soon became complicated after various secular, extremist, and ethnic groups joined the conflict, leading to the rise of several jihadist terrorist militias, including Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also commonly known as ISIS) and Jabhat Al-Nusra (Al-Nusra). Now, groups such as ISIL control up to 35% of Syria, including areas in and surrounding the cities of Kobani, Raqqa, and Aleppo, as a part of their ultimate plan to establish a global Islamic Caliphate.

With these groups expanding their control across Syria, the fates of refugees in Syria, specifically those of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), are unclear. Jihadist organizations are notorious for their powerful methods of propaganda and punishment that have already caused many to die or flee. Moreover, as they continue to seize areas of Syria, civilians are becoming more and more at risk of being recruited into the organizations themselves, allowing them to gain even more power and influence in Syria and beyond.

Definition of Key Terms

Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs)

IDPs are refugees who have been forced to flee their homes but never cross an international border. They include people who are affected by “internal strife and natural disaster”. Unlike refugees, however, IDPs are not protected by international law or eligible to receive aid because they are legally under the protection of their own government.
Terrorist Group or Organization

According to the UN, a terrorist group or organization is a group that perpetuates criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the public, a group of persons, or a particular person in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them.

Refugee

According to the UNHCR, a refugee is a person whose life has been uprooted by violence in their area and is outside the country of their nationality in fear of facing religious or political prosecution by their state government.

Caliphate

An Islamic State led by a caliph, who is believed to be the successor of the prophet Muhammed. The caliph is expected to lead the Muslim community as a united state.

Jihadi

A jihadi or jihadist refers to a person, group, or organization that believes in Jihadism, or the idea that a centralized Islamic State should govern a group of Muslim people. Jihadism can be traced back to the Qur’an but has resurfaced in recent decades in parallel with the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East as well as the rise of political Islam.

Background

History

Syria’s domestic politics were extremely complicated in the mid-20th century. The country was founded on the Sykes-Picot agreement, a treaty that guaranteed France and Britain “spheres of influence” in the former Ottoman Empire after World War I, thus creating arbitrarily drawn borders separating tribal and ethnic groups in the region. After gaining
independence from the French, the government experienced a series of military coups and power struggles between the socialist Baathist party and nationalist/military influence. Existing tensions between various secular and ethnic groups, such as the Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd Arabs have further complicated the politics of the ongoing war.

Presently, Syria’s relations with the international front are strained, mainly due to its role in neighboring Lebanon in the 1970s, its support for insurgents an Iraq, as well as its crackdowns against government protests in 2011-2014. These crackdowns eventually resulted in the Syrian Civil War.

**Syrian Civil War: An Overview**

What began as a series of protests demanding the release of political prisoners in 2011 quickly escalated into violence. After protests inspired by the Arab Spring were held in various parts of the country during the March of 2011, the military under the Assad regime began to crack down on protesters. The violence continued, and UN action ultimately failed despite international efforts to acknowledge the scale of human rights abuses under the Assad regime.

Government-induced massacres and fighting between government and rebel forces continued to intensify in 2012 and 2013. Assad further ignored requests for him to step down, claiming that “criminals” and “terrorists” were causing the violence. Peace talks were held by the UN in early 2014, though representatives of the government and the opposition failed to come to an agreement. Meanwhile, jihadist terrorist groups such as ISIL and Al-Nusra had risen amidst the chaos, with leader of ISIL Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declaring the establishment of a new Islamic “Caliphate” within the country in June 2014.

**ISIL and Jabhat Al-Nusra:**

ISIL and Jabhat Al-Nusra (Al-Nusra) both emerged out of the US War in Iraq. Both are known to be derivatives of Al-Qaeda, rising to prominence during the Syrian Civil War and gaining control in the region as the war continued.

**Ideology**

Jihadist terrorist groups typically adhere to an extremely radical form of Islam. Both ISIL and Al-Nusra align with Sunni Islam ideology, though ISIL is more notorious for its extreme stances on ethnic cleansing (specifically targeting Shia Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Kurds) and the Islamic Sharia Law. Both organizations are based on the idea of establishing a Caliphate; while ISIL aims to establish a global caliphate, Al-Nusra’s main goal is to overthrow the Assad government and establish a caliphate within Syria.

**Human rights abuses**

Refugees in ISIL-controlled areas are at heavy risk for atrocities such as torture, crucifixions, executions, and sexual assault. Often, ISIL will either force one to comply with their ideologies or they will perform acts deemed even too shocking by Al-Qaeda itself – either way, they have been violating a staggering
number of human rights. The group has executed 20 people in 48 hours, killed 13 boys for watching soccer, and slaughtered 150 girls for “refusing Jihad marriage”. Civilians and refugees will often have no option but to accept ISIL control.

Infrastructure for essential services, such as hospitals, has continued to endure calculated attacks by these organizations as well. For two weeks, Al-Nusra Front cut off water supplies to people in Idleb City, affecting up to 600,000 people. Since ISIL controls most of Syria’s oil fields and power supply, they can very easily control a large group of people by denying them basic needs.

**Propaganda and social media**

ISIL and Al-Nusra are known for their powerful propaganda methods, utilizing social media to find new recruits. Before their account was deactivated, ISIL used Twitter to find new recruits; now, many members are presently active on Facebook, Instagram, online forums, and even an Ask.fm account wherein users may ask questions such as “May I have Yazidi sex slaves?”. These outlets serve as a hotbed for foreign recruitment, a probable cause for the spike of ISIL fighters hailing from Britain, the US, the Netherlands, and so forth.

**The situation of IDPs**

The number of people affected by the Syrian Civil War will most likely increase in 2015, according to the UNHCR. The ongoing destruction of infrastructure, coupled with political violence and insecurity, will continue to exacerbate conditions for refugees and the humanitarian organizations that seek to gain access to refugees. Desperately needed aid is being restricted heavily by multiple conflicts in the region and worsened by the ever-expanding control of terrorist organizations. Many of these refugees already live in terrorist-controlled regions, so gaining access is even more difficult than overcoming just government forces.

**Not just a civil war**

It’s important to understand that the Syrian government forces and the National Coalition forces weren’t the only two groups fighting within Syria; as Middle East researcher Charles Lister says: “The conflict in Syria has become an intensely complex affair, incorporating overlapping political, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal narratives.”

**Major Parties Involved**

**Syrian Arab Republic**

The Syrian government’s role in the civil war has led to millions of refugees and slaughtered civilians. The country has committed a huge number of war crimes and systematically violated human rights on a massive scale. Some of these atrocities include conducting aerial bombing on populated cities and using chemical weapons on
civilians, which to date has killed at least 200,000 people. As of now, the Syrian government is fighting against the terrorist groups that occupy the region, continuing to conduct airstrikes and attacks on terrorist-held cities.

**UNHCR and UN Security Council**

The UN has been significantly involved in the Syrian conflict. Multiple resolutions were adopted by the Security council in 2014 regarding the access of humanitarian aid and the safety of refugees (see Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue), and the UNHCR has assisted up to 7 million Syrian IDPs by providing them with basic humanitarian aid. In addition, the UNHCR also maintains up to 8 field offices in Syria.

**United States**

The US was initially reluctant to get involved in Syria, though the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons in 2013 garnered a significant reaction. The US began sending “lethal aid” to opposition forces in Syria to defeat government forces, shifting targets in late 2014 when they began airstrikes against ISIL, deploying a series of fighter jets and bombers. Since then, the US has worked continuously on establishing a coalition against ISIL by placing a special emphasis on Muslim countries. Many advisors and troops have also been sent to help Kurdish and Iraqi forces in combatting ISIL.

**Russia and China**

Russia, along with China, had previously vetoed a Security Council resolution on the condemnation of the situation in Syria as well as one calling Assad to step down in 2011 and 2012, respectively. Russia is known to be close allies with Syria, supplying them with large amounts of arms during the war and bringing up several points regarding Syria’s sovereignty during Security Council meetings.

**Timeline of Events**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Protests in Damascus and Deraa demand release of political prisoners</td>
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<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Violent crackdowns begin nationwide</td>
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<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Up to 5,000 refugees flee the country</td>
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<tr>
<td>July-Aug 2012</td>
<td>Free Syrian Army seizes Aleppo, government forces suffer blows</td>
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<td>July-Aug 2012</td>
<td>200,000 refugees flee, with thousands crossing Turkish border</td>
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<td>Nov 2012</td>
<td>Opposition forces unite as National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Jihadist groups such as al-Nusra and ISIL refuse to join coalition</td>
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<td>March 2013</td>
<td>Government warplanes bomb city of Raqqa after rebels seize control</td>
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<td>March 2013</td>
<td>Syrian refugees reach 1 million</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>June 2013</td>
<td>US President Barack Obama authorizes US to send weapons to rebel forces after conclusive evidence of chemical weaponry usage in Syria surfaces</td>
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<td>Sep 2013</td>
<td>UN confirmation of chemical weapon usage in attack on Damascus in August, which Assad regime denies</td>
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<td>Jan/Feb 2014</td>
<td>US and British aid suspended UN peace talks in Geneva fail</td>
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<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Rebels evacuate from last stronghold in Homs, marking three years of instability and violence</td>
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<td>June 2014</td>
<td>ISIL militants declare a “caliphate” in territory from Aleppo to Iraq UN Security Council unanimously approves solutions that allow convoys to enter rebel-held areas without government approval</td>
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<td>Aug 2014</td>
<td>ISIL controls main oil and gas fields of Syria Obama authorizes airstrikes against ISIL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 2014</td>
<td>The Turkish border town of Kobani is seized by ISIL and almost 400,000 Kurds flee across to Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec 2014</td>
<td>500,000 new refugees flee from Syria to neighboring countries</td>
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**Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

The UN has been heavily involved in attempting to establish peace, condemn human rights violations and pave way for humanitarian access in Syria since the war began. Recent attempts by the Security Council have mostly been centered on ISIL, al-Nusra and affiliated militias, though further action needs to be taken to ensure the safety of the refugees and the humanitarian workers who enter the area.

- **UN Security Council Resolution 2139, 2165, 2191** – These resolutions, adopted unanimously in 2014, aimed to improve humanitarian access to affected populations within Syria, directing relief across border crossings and conflict lines. The Security Council reiterated its views on the importance of humanitarian ceasefires, stating that it would take “further measures” against non-compliance of the resolution by any Syrian party. The Syrian representative responded with the statement that “terrorists” in the country caused the suffering.

- **UN Security Council Resolution 2170** – The resolution was adopted on August 15th, 2014 and “condemned the recruitment by ISIL and Al-Nusra of foreign fighters and listed six individuals affiliated with those groups under the 1267/1989 Al-Qaeda sanctions regime.” The Al-Qaeda sanctions regime was established in 1999 to apply sanctions on those entities and persons associated with Al-Qaeda. Note that ISIL, however, has deviated from Al-Qaeda and does not receive its support. Furthermore, this does not address ISIL recruitment within Syria.
• **UN Human Rights Council Resolution 26/23** – Resolution 26/23 by the Human Rights Council was on the issue of “The continuing grave deterioration in the human rights and humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.” The resolution addressed issues such as the refugee crisis, the denial of humanitarian assistance, the treatment of journalists, extremism, aerial bombardments, etc.

**Possible Solutions**

In light of the current conditions in Syria, however, the refugees are essentially helpless by themselves; thus, it is vital to guarantee the safety of the persons helping them. Progress has already been made in gaining humanitarian access, though further implementation, funding, and cooperation with government parties are needed. Furthermore, groups such as ISIL must be tackled head-on in order to prevent them from securing strongholds in regions where humanitarian aid is desperately needed.

• **Increased cooperation with the Syrian government** is vital in establishing unrestricted access to the region, whether it is in terms of aid workers or basic supplies. The UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator has mentioned, “Administrative hurdles imposed by the Government of Syria still hamper the delivery of aid.” Keep in mind, though, that the Syrian government has violated numerous human rights, arms, and international treaties over the course of the war, so simply asking for compliance may not be as effective.

• **Cross-line and cross-border humanitarian operations need to be protected from various militias,** which are quickly advancing towards the border regions. Border regions with ongoing humanitarian operations should be properly secured to ensure the safety of the workers.

• **Establish resettlement programs that encourage Syrian refugees to flee.** Many Syrian IDPs do not leave the country because they have nowhere to go. The expansion and/or creation of aid-based field offices and outreach centers in Syria, as well as new refugee camps in neighboring countries, will allow IDPs to have the option of escaping Syria and dangerous ISIL influence safely.

• **Ensure the basic protection of refugees.** If refugees do not have the option of fleeing, they must be protected, whether it be from state-sponsored bombings or ISIL-sponsored kidnappings. In areas not under militia control, consider ways to establish neutral safe havens/camps for refugees. In order to do this, though, **further funding for humanitarian aid is needed:** last year, only 48% of the requested financial amount was met. Approximately 2.9 billion dollars is needed this year, according to the UN Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator.

• **A strong resistance should be established** in order to counter ISIL control – local resistance units such as the YPG and other affiliated groups may be strengthened with increased supply chains, arms support, and third-party recruitment. Promoting awareness of abovementioned resistance units can prove to be helpful; recently, a US army veteran is now fighting against ISIL with the YPG after finding them on the Internet.
• **Coverage of the situation in Syria**, particularly those of IDPs, should be increased. Although Syria is not exactly a safe haven for journalists or media specialists, US-based organization VICE News has once obtained unprecedented access to film a documentary (see Appendix) on ISIL. Alternative media outlets such as VICE with extensive contacts in the region will have a much better chance of sending in journalists than national, US-aligned organizations such as The New York Times and CNN. This, of course, would also bring up the issue of ensuring safety for journalists in the region.

• **The use of social media is crucial.** As previously mentioned, ISIL is notorious for recruiting new members through the extremely effective use of social media sites. Counter-tactics should be developed as a means of demeaning or degrading these organizations. Think differently from the usual “raising-awareness-on-an-issue” clause - 5 Likes on an #ISIL2K15 video or giving out brochures isn’t helping anyone.

**Bibliography**


Appendix


   Extremely helpful for getting the gist of who’s who in the war.


   A reliable timeline of the war that goes into further detail than needed, but could still prove to be useful.


   A clear and organized overview of the situation in Syria.


   Lots of statistics as well as an overview of what UNHCR has done in Syria so far.


   HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. A 40-minute documentary on the inner workings of ISIL that was filmed by a journalist embedded in ISIL for three weeks.