

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Teaching Notes

What to Do About Syria

More than three years after the start of the Syrian civil war, debates continue about what role, if any, the United States should play in the conflict. Ryan Crocker of Texas A&M, Freedom House's Charles Dunne, and Paul Pillar of Georgetown University join CFR President Richard N. Haass to outline the courses of action available to the United States and debate whether U.S. intervention would be desirable or effective. While the panelists differ on the question of intervention, they agree that a greater U.S. commitment to humanitarian relief efforts should be made.

This meeting is part of the "What to Do About" series, which highlights specific issues and features experts who put forward competing analyses and policy prescriptions in a mock high-level U.S. government meeting.

- [Event video](#)
- [Event transcript](#)
- [Event audio](#)

Background

Questions for Class or Writing Assignments

1. How did the Syrian conflict begin? How has it evolved over time?
2. Who comprises the recognized opposition to Bashar al-Assad's government? Have they been effective leaders? How or how not? What other groups or forces are participating in the fighting?
3. What were the goals of the 2011 protesters that sparked the war? What are the goals of the groups fighting now? To what extent are they similar a) across groups and b) to the 2011 goals?
4. What role do religious or sectarian differences play in the conflict?
5. Other countries and non-state actors have become involved in Syria's civil war. Describe the involvement to date of the United States, the United Nations, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the most important terrorist organizations (Hezbollah, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the al-Nusra Front), and discuss the goals and effects of each.

6. Which countries are hosting Syrian refugees? What challenges – political, economic, etc – are those countries grappling with?

Supplementary Readings

1. [Syria's Crisis and the Global Response](#), CFR Backgrounder, September 11, 2013
An introduction to the political dynamics of the crisis through 2013.
2. [Syria Conflict: Key Dates in the Conflict](#), *The National*, March 17, 2014
A brief timeline of important dates in the Syrian conflict (600 words).
3. [Syria: Its History, Its Culture, and Why the Civil War Erupted](#), *Yahoo News*, November 6, 2013
A brief overview of the conflict's origins (1,300 words).
4. ["There's No Hope Left": The Syrian Refugee Camp That is Becoming a Township](#), *The Guardian*, February 18, 2013
A journalist describes conditions in a Syrian refugee camp (1,400 words).
5. [Syria: Mapping the Conflict](#), *BBC*, March 13, 2014
A map of the Syrian conflict with supplementary text and links to additional resources (500 words).
6. [Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War](#), Brookings Institution, July 2014
This report analyzes the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry in the Middle East and its pertinence to the conflict in Syria (33 pages).

Stakes

Questions for Class or Writing Assignments

1. What U.S. interests and values are at stake in Syria?
2. What are America's goals in Syria? What efforts has it pursued to achieve those goals? What effect have those efforts had?
3. What risks might Syrian refugees pose to their host countries? What could be done to mitigate those risks?
4. Why might the United States and others be concerned about the number of foreign fighters participating in the Syrian conflict?
5. Should it be important to the United States that Bashar al-Assad's government has reportedly used chemical weapons? Why or why not?
6. Describe how and to what ends Syria's neighbors are involved in the conflict, and discuss the potential ramifications of their actions for the war's outcome.

7. Does the United States have a responsibility (e.g., humanitarian, national security, moral) to intervene further?
8. Was the United States right to support calls for regime change?

Supplementary Readings

1. [Debating U.S. Interests in Syria's Civil War](#), MIT Center for International Studies, September 16, 2013
This piece outlines and debates various U.S. interests in the Syria conflict (3,200 words).
2. [Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013](#), *whitehouse.gov*, August 30, 2013
This White House press release accuses the Syrian government of using chemical weapons (1,500 words).
3. [Statement by the President on Syria](#), *whitehouse.gov*, August 31, 2013
President Obama says that he will seek Congressional authorization for the use of military force in Syria after the Syrian government used chemical weapons (1,500 words).
4. [Statement by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#), September 3, 2013
Secretary Hagel testifies before Congress in favor of authorizing the use of U.S. military force against the Syrian government (1,100 words).
5. [Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Syria](#), *whitehouse.gov*, September 10, 2013
President Obama announces that he will seek Congressional approval for a military strike in Syria (2,200 words).
6. [In One Map, the Dramatic Rise of the Islamic State Militants](#), NPR, June 13, 2014.
A map and brief article illustrating the rapid advance of ISIS from Syria to Iraq (450 words).
7. [Dual Threat Has Mainstream Syrian Rebels Fearing Demise](#), *The New York Times*, August 15, 2014
A news piece about the expansion and current state of ISIS (1,700 words).

Options

Questions for Class or Writing Assignments

1. The CFR meeting discussed a number of ways the United States could act in Syria, including airstrikes and other direct military action; arming and/or otherwise supporting select opposition groups; diplomacy to resolve the conflict; and humanitarian support. Discuss the positives and negatives of a particular option in light of the goals the United States is (or should be) pursuing.
2. What might be the consequences of not acting militarily, both for Syria and for the United States?

3. How does the emergence of ISIS affect U.S. policy options?
4. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of current U.S. policy? What, if anything, should the United States have done differently and why?

Supplementary Readings

1. [Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts \(Executive Summary\)](#), International Crisis Group, June 27, 2013
This report explores some of the diplomatic and military options for ending the war (1,900 words).
2. [Obama's Syria Policy is a Deadly Mistake](#), *Financial Times*, February 10, 2014
CFR Senior Fellow Max Boot argues for U.S. military action on Syria (900 words).
3. [For Obama, Few Options in Syria](#), *Defense One*, February 24, 2014
CFR Senior Fellow Gayle Tzemach Lemmon describes the diplomatic, political, and logistical challenges facing those trying to resolve the Syrian conflict. (1,000 words).
4. [In Trying to Help Syria, an Intervention would Destroy It](#), *Washington Post*, August 30, 2013
Intervening militarily in Syria could hurt U.S. interests, says CFR Senior Fellow Steven Cook (900 words).
5. [Assad is the Least Worst Option in Syria](#), *New York Times*, December 21, 2013
Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria argues that the United States should not seek to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (450 words).
6. ["Syria After Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy."](#) Statement by Anne Patterson (Asst. Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs) before Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 26, 2014
Ambassador Patterson describes the state of the conflict, the steps the United States had taken to date to address the conflict, and the goals of U.S. policy (3,600 words).

Class activities

1. White House role play: Either individually or in small groups, students should place themselves in the shoes of a Presidential adviser. Taking into account regional and international political dynamics, they should make clear and internally coherent recommendations as to what the United States should do in Syria, taking into account both the Syrian civil war and the growing presence of ISIS. [As a more challenging variant, hold a National Security Council-style meeting, in which each student or group represents the interests and positions of a particular U.S. department. Players could include: Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of National Intelligence, USAID Administrator, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, and the Secretary of Homeland Security.]
2. Class discussion: Consider the events of late August, 2013, when the Syrian government used chemical weapons against its people. The class should discuss the options that were available

to the President (e.g., a military strike, deeper involvement with opposition forces, diplomacy, no action, etc). Can the group reach a consensus on a response to the situation?

3. Regional role play: Divide the class into multiple small teams covering a variety of countries and groups active in the Syrian conflict (e.g., Bashar al-Assad's government, the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, the United States, Israel, Hezbollah, ISIS, refugees, etc.). Each team should prepare a presentation outlining its principal interests and allies; describing its role in the conflict to date; and discussing what it would take for their group to agree to stop fighting. Class discussion after the presentations should explore a) what the presentations illustrate about why agreement has not been reached and b) what that suggests for U.S. interests and policy.