

The Latest Middle East Crisis: The Rise of ISIS

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WARNING: In preparing for the role play scenario, students must only research the conflict using reputable mainstream media sources, such as The BBC, CNN, ITN, The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, etc. Briefing papers are provided to explain the broader context of the conflict.

Background and context

The background to the present crisis in the Middle East is a long and bloody one. The region is the home of empire, with the Akkadian Empire emerging 4,000 years ago as the first recognised imperial body. Since Biblical times, conflict in the region has both concerned and circumnavigated differences in faith and belief, with peoples involved in disputes over the nature of God/s and worship, seeking to link belief to tracts of land and sometimes contradictorily conducting war with allies whose beliefs seem to challenge their own. This religious complexity is furthered by the uneven distribution of natural resources across the region, with gas and oil plentiful in some areas and water scarce in others.

The causal factors in the rise of ISIS are complex and many. The nature of the state and the capacity of the state to monopolise power has created an incentive for groups to take control of the state. The drawing of the map by European technocrats in the wake of WWI has fostered territorial conflicts over ownership of the state and the status of minority groups within it. The creation of the state of Israel and the treatment of minorities within Israel and Israeli occupied territories has created resentment, but it must be noted that the treatment of minorities in other regional states has hardly been exemplary. The support of external powers, such as the US, UK, France and Russia, for dictatorial regimes which appeared to preserve interests in peace and secularism, has also created resentment, with citizens consistently oppressed, subjugated, exploited and mistreated.

The Arab Spring Protests of 2010-2012 were an attempt, initially by secular, but increasingly by religious, citizen groups to overthrow dictatorial regimes in a number of North African and Middle Eastern countries. The consequences of those revolutionary protests have been mixed: in Tunisia, where the protests began, there has been a broadly democratic transition of power

between Islamist and secular forces; in Egypt, there has been a return to dictatorship; in Iran, there has been a consolidation of the Shia Islamist regime following the protests of 2009-2010; in Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Islamist regime remains despite growing international suspicion about its complicity with extremist organisations and its disastrous intervention in Yemen, and, in Syria, the initial protests have led to a war of stalemate, with Bashar al Assad's Alawite regime surviving in parts and being replaced by new and unprecedentedly brutal Islamist regimes of ISIS and Jabat al-Nusra (now renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in order to distance itself from al-Qaeda) in others.

ISIS took advantage of the political vacuum in Syria and Sunni resentment of Iraq's Shia-led Government to bulldoze its way through ineffectual Iraqi Army resistance before declaring a Caliphate on 29th June 2014 which straddles the two countries. Atrocities continue to be committed against those who fall foul of ISIS's brutal conception of Islam, with Kurds, Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims, homosexuals and other minorities subject to the most abhorrent forms of oppression and abuse.

This development was met first by US, UK and Arab (Saudi Arabian, Jordanian and Emirati) airstrikes, which have checked ISIS' advances, but have left large parts of the region in a state of insecurity and fear. Russia, with ground troops already deployed, then began its own air campaign against a range of opposition groups include Nusra and ISIS in support of Bashar al Assad. Having initially supported the overthrow of Assad, the West now finds itself apparently fighting alongside Russia and Iran against Assad's opponents. The crisis has lain bare the ambitions of Sunni regional powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which have supported elements of the Sunni opposition to Assad, and Shia Iran, which has supported Assad, the Iraqi Government and Hezbollah.

The situation in Syria and Iraq is troubling, among other reasons, a) because of the enormous human misery within both Syrian Government and ISIS (and Nusra) controlled territory, b) because of the wider geopolitical implications for the stability of the region as a whole, c) because of the strain placed upon neighbouring countries which have been inundated with large numbers of refugees, d) because of the way in which regional and global powers are using the conflict to pursue their own questionable interests, and e) because of the possibility of territory being used for the exportation of terrorism elsewhere, as seen recently in Beirut, Paris and Ankara. The idea that Syria acts as a finishing school for terrorists is of serious concern to the UN Security Council who are suffering from an inability to decide unanimously on the best policy to deal with the threat that ISIS poses to global security.

In the eyes of many, this complicated and confusing situation appears to call for decisive, co-ordinated action to promote some form of peace and to deal with the near genocidal activities of ISIS, in particular. The crisis calls for UN Security Council action on account of both its historical, post-WWII concern for global conflict and its more recent concern for humanitarian intervention to prevent crimes against humanity – often expressed in terms of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). If the Security Council is to be of any relevance, some suggest that this should be a situation in which it should act and act swiftly.

What, though, can the UN Security Council achieve considering the apparently contending interests of the parties involved?

Aims and objectives

The aim of this role play scenario is to improve understanding of the challenges of dealing with extremist groups by:

- a. fostering knowledge of the background to, nature of and participants in the conflict in Iraq and Syria and the UN Security Council in general,
- b. facilitating the adoption of the interests, motivations and actions of the participants in the conflict during the role play,
- c. providing scope for engagement with 'the media' through the activities of the media team, and
- d. enabling reflection on the success of strategies and tactics adopted.

Preparation

The participants in the role play will prepare for a lobby in advance of a UN Security Council meeting on the Middle East crisis. Limited instruction will be provided as to the nature of the groups, with the onus lying on participants to develop their own understandings as they approach the event. Facilitators will discuss and help clarify these understandings during the research and preparation period in the role play as well as throughout the rest of the day.

In advance of the event, participants will:

- a. conduct preliminary research into the conflict and prepare for their roles through engagement with media sources and briefing papers at the event,
- b. identify the interests, aims and objectives of their roles and the roles of others
- c. allocate roles within groups for individual participants (e.g. Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Ambassador, General, Religious Cleric, Chief Negotiator, Spokesperson Interviewer, Producer etc)
- d. co-ordinate within groups in developing a strategy to pursue those objectives
- e. engage with other groups in pursuing those objectives through communication and lobbying through whatever means are deemed appropriate (but safe!)
- f. prepare a summary of each group's position and the state of play between groups as they prepare for the UN Security Council session after the event, reflect upon the dynamics of conflict

Important considerations

Injunctions or interventions will be made by the role play facilitators throughout the scenario. These will ensure that groups will have to think on their feet and respond to changing circumstances. The facilitators must decide if and when to use the injunctions.

Groups can make injunctions or interventions themselves, where realistic. All injunctions and interventions must be approved by the role play facilitators.

All injunctions or interventions intended for general consumption will be released by the Media team, but the actors making injunctions or interventions can make them in secret to specific groups. It is up to the recipients of those secret injunctions or interventions as to whether they wish to reveal them to the Media, but the Media is entitled to try to uncover secrets.

The Media team will release information through printed sheets of paper that will be disseminated physically to the groups.

Interventions

- a. Turkish troops commit atrocities against Kurdish civilians within Syria, where they are deployed to attack ISIS and PKK rebels
- b. Saudi Arabia is revealed as having sponsored ISIS
- c. Russia accidentally bombs a team of US and UK Special Forces deployed against ISIS
- d. Israel bombs Hezbollah forces acting within Syria
- e. ISIS carries out a large-scale terror attack on civilians within Iran
- f. Kurdish Peshmerga forces attack Mosul with US air support

Key Actors

There is the possibility for 14 groups within the role play, which can be divided up according to the number of participating students. The optimal number of participants is between 60 and 70, preferably with 5 students in each group.

It is possible for groups to operate with three or four members, but no fewer, as there will be insufficient numbers to sustain group activities, while it is difficult for all members of a group to participate fully if there are more than six in each group.

If there are too few students to allocate optimal numbers of students to each group, it is wise to reduce the number of groups. Start by withdrawing groups, such as the UK, which are likely to have very similar interests to other groups, such as the US. It is impossible to run the role play without the US, Russia, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, ISIS, Kurds and the Media. With a minimum of 4 students in each group, the minimum number of participants is around 32.

UN Security Council

- US (Permanent)
- UK (Permanent)
- Russia (Permanent)
- The other members of the Council will be represented by the role play facilitators, who will advise of a particular state's (e.g. France's, China's, etc.) course of action.

Regional powers

- Syrian Government
- Iraq
- Iran
- Saudi Arabia
- Turkey
- Israel

Regional actors

- ISIS
- Representatives of Kurdish groups and Kurdistan Government
- Free Syrian Army
- Hezbollah

Media

Students elect the editorial approach of their organisation. BBC, Sky, CNN and Fox are all viable options and all present different challenges to the different groups.

Resources

In advance of the event, you are asked briefly to look through relevant news sources to conduct some preliminary research on the topic. Enclosed below are some links to resources on the topic. It is very important that you only read news from credible news agencies, such as the BBC, Guardian, Telegraph, Times, Independent, etc.

At the event, please bring with you your laptops for the purposes of research and communication.

You will be able to follow updates from the Media team through the main projector.

There is in-depth discussion of the topic filmed during a Question Time event at Fuse Media Centre, Prudhoe Community High School. The videos feature a panel including Carla Power, a journalist and author of *If the Oceans Were Ink: An Unlikely Friendship and a Journey to the Heart of the Quran* (Henry Holt, 2015), Dr Simon Mabon, Director of the Richardson Institute, Fatima Manji, a journalist for Channel 4 News, and Dr Noel J Guckian CVO OBE, Former British Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman (2005-2011). The discussion can be found in the following:

Opening statements: <https://youtu.be/ik-qEv7vzVY>

Prepared Q&A: <http://youtu.be/ooBMTvirO0Y>

Closing Q&A: http://youtu.be/3S_Ld_OqPTk

Background Guides

- UN Security Council Home: <http://www.un.org/en/sc/>
- The ISIS Papers, (Guardian article): <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria#comments>
- The Washington Institute Review of Strategy: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operation-inherent-resolve-an-interim-assessment>
- UNHCR Syria Review: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html>
- UNHCR Iraq Review: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486426.html>
- Council on Foreign Relations. Kurds Info Guide. http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/time-kurds/p36547?cid=otr-marketing-use-Kurds_InfoGuide#!/

Basic and easy reads on ISIS

Who are they? What do they want? What is going on in Iraq and Syria?

- <http://www.infoplease.com/news/2014/isis-explained.html>
- <http://www.vox.com/2015/11/23/9779188/isis-syria-iraq-9-questions>
- <http://uk.businessinsider.com/map-of-syria-shows-what-isis-is-truly-fighting-for-2015-6?r=US&IR=T>
- <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/daesh>
- <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-loses-40-of-iraq-territory-and-20-in-syria-as-international-air-strikes-support-ground-a6797486.html>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/07/leaked-isis-document-reveals-plan-building-state-syria>
- PBS FRONTLINE. The Rise of ISIS (Film) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/rise-of-isis/>

Information for Facilitators

Practical resources

Ideally be one large hall and four smaller rooms which groups can be based in after the students split up. The rooms should contain the following groups:

- UN Security Council and the Media
- Regional Powers
- Regional Actors
- ISIS

If there are fewer rooms, the Regional Powers and Regional Actors can be combined into a single room, minus ISIS, which will always require its own room

- A television to display video clips and interviews produced by the media team

Alternatively, a projector and screen should be used

- The media should have access to a camera, electronics and recording devices
- All groups should have access to laptops or PCs

Ideally one laptop per team - these should be utilised to research online articles and access resources

- The facilitator will provide 'runners' who can take information to each room; interventions should happen fairly frequently during the negotiation/lobbying period and groups will need to react to developments in a timely manner.

Instructions

- Assign students to groups prior to arriving
- Assign groups to rooms/ spaces
- Distribute timetable, instructions and group briefing to students as they arrive
- Distribute interventions at the appropriate moments to the appropriate groups
- Encourage students to interact between groups
- Direct students to resources list when they need direction

Timeline

The role play is the second session of three in a three week module. In the first session, students are introduced to the conflict and associated issues and in the final session there is a debrief and discussion of radicalisation.

After the first session, facilitators should finalise a list of participants and allocate each participant to a group so as to enable adequate preparation for their allocated role.

The role play session can last anywhere between two and a half and five hours.

A five hour timeframe enables more comprehensive examination of the topic, affording greater emphasis to research.

Facilitators can easily reduce the timeline if there are fewer students and groups or if there are additional time constraints. The separate sessions and stages should remain, but can be condensed effectively. Successful sessions with smaller cohorts have been run in as little as two and a half hours.

9:30	Arrive at venue
9:45	Welcome talk and introduction
10:05	Separation into groups
10:15	Research and preparation period in groups
11:10	Break
11:30	Strategy and tactics meeting in groups
12:00	Lobbying and co-ordination session
13:00	Break
13:40	Summarising session in which groups outline a timeline of activities, the success with which they achieved their aims and reflect on how they would act differently if they were to repeat the activity
14:40	Debrief
15:20	End of day

The timeline is flexible. If the facilitators believe that the role play has reached a conclusion (such as a general agreement between major parties) in advance of the scheduled end, they can call an end to proceedings.