Dear Delegates,

My name is Nerses Kopalyan and I will be co-charing in the Security Council. I am an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I attained my M.A. and Ph.D. in political science at UNLV. My area of research and expertise lies primarily within international relations, with attention to global conflict, international security, terrorism, and geopolitical considerations with respect to world powers. I have traveled and done research in Russia, Armenia, Georgia, France, and several countries in the Middle East, primarily Lebanon. It is my pleasure to be partaking in this Model UN conference.

Background Information

The recent conflict in Syria has not only had serious implications for the political system of this country, but also upon its general populace, ranging from diverse ethnic minorities to large number of refugees. The conflict, however, is not specific to the domestic politics of Syria, for we have seen the intervention of important regional and global powers, and along with these actors, the rise of powerful ethnic groups as political actors in their own right, one of the most important of such groups being the Kurds. The complexity of the Syrian Civil War entails developments both internally (the government against the opposition; the opposition against one another; and Kurds against the Islamic State), transnationally (Islamic State against the Syrian Government as well as against various opposition groups), regionally (the role of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia), and internationally (the role of the United States, its NATO allies, and Russia).
The Syrian government considers the rebel opposition and the Islamic State to be its biggest enemies in the conflict. It views the behavior of the Turkish government as hostile and in opposition to the Syrian regime. Similarly, it also considers Saudi Arabia to be a hostile country, especially Saudi Arabia’s continued funding of the various opposition groups in the civil war. Syria views the United States to be part of the hostile camp of outside countries, but does not consider the United States as problematic as Turkey or Saudi Arabia. More recently, the Syrian government has actually been quite happy of the effect that US airstrikes have had against the Islamic State within Syria. Thus, while criticizing the United States for violating its country’s sovereignty by bombing inside of Syria without the government’s consent, the Syrian government, nonetheless, has tacitly condoned US actions. In the same light, Syria considers the Kurds (specifically the People’s Protection Units, going by the acronym YPG, which primarily forms the mass of the Kurdish forces), to be part of the neutral camp, and as such, while the Kurds are not deemed allies, they are, nonetheless, due to their successes against the Islamic State, considered friendly actors. With respect to its allies, Syria places much confidence on the following actors: Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia.

Iran has remained one of Syria’s most steadfast allies, supporting the regime of President Assad from the very beginning, both materially and militarily. The presence of high-ranking military operatives, special forces, and extensive weaponry are one of the primary reasons why the Syrian government has been able to survive the conflict. At the same time, because Iran views Turkey and Saudi Arabia to be regional enemies, its support of Syria is both geopolitically relevant, and an extension of its own sphere of influence. Just as important as Iran’s support has been the efficient role played by the militant group Hezbollah. Based out of southern Lebanon,
Hezbollah has been sending large number of fighters into southern Syria to fight along government troops. The operational success of Hezbollah fighters has been instrumental in stopping the advance of Islamic opposition groups in the south, especially of the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front.

More recently, the tide of the Syrian War has tilted in favor of the Assad government due to Russian intervention, as Russia remains Syria’s most important international ally, protecting Syria both in the United Nations and within the broader international political arena. The utilization of Russia’s superior military, specifically its air power, has profoundly altered the dynamics of the conflict, giving way to the regime to both stop the advance of the opposition and, in turn, re-conquer much lands. Russia’s interests in the Syria War are defined by two variables. First, as its closes Middle Eastern ally, Russia does not want to see the Assad regime toppled, and with one of Russia’s strategically important naval bases being in the Syrian coast, the preservation of the Assad regime has important strategic interests for Russia. Second, in opposition to the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, Russia seeks to establish itself as a regional player in its own right, and as such, by turning the tide in the war and advancing the interests of the regime, Russia has, in essence, advanced its own strategic and geopolitical interests.

Within this maze of domestic, regional, and international actors, the most interesting group that has come to play a crucial role in the conflict has been the Kurdish population. Since the Syrian conflict has spread into Iraq and Turkey (two countries that also have very large Kurdish populations), the Kurds have become very important players in the conflict. The role and influence of the Kurds may be addressed by the following points. First, Kurds have remained politically neutral in the conflict, while only taking up arms to fight against the Islamic State. Thus, by positioning itself as the only viable force that can repel the advances of the Islamic State, the
Syrian Kurd have proved themselves to be indispensable. Second, by virtue of their political positioning, Kurds have attained the goodwill of the Syrian government, while, at the same time, serving as allies of both the United States and Russia. And this is a very unique development, for both Russia and the US are at odds with one another with respect to Syria: however, when it comes to the Kurds, both countries view them in a favorable light. Third, while the Syrian Kurds have proven themselves successful in the conflict, their brethren, the Iraqi Kurds, have established an entire region in northern Iraq under their control, and as such, both Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds have demonstrated themselves as political and military powers in this conflict. Fourth, while being favored by the Syrian government, along with Russia and the US, the Kurds, however, are considered by Turkey to be their number one enemy. Namely, while we have the Syrian Kurds aligning themselves with the Iraqi Kurds, it must be noted that the largest Kurdish population in the world lies in Turkey, and as such, the Turkish Kurds (primarily represented through the PKK, the Kurdish Worker’s Party) now find themselves aligned with their brethren in three different countries, a development that is terrifying Turkey, for this has brought about considerations of creating a Kurdistan. Thus, within this context, the Syrian War, aside from the concerns of the Islamic State and the preservation of the Assad regime, has given birth to the Kurdish question: should their be a Kurdistan, and if so, how should this new country be carved out, and at whose expense?

From the outset of the Syrian conflict, the United Nations has played an active role to address the following developments: the spread of the Islamic State; the human atrocities committed by all sides; the use of chemical weapons; the humanitarian crisis prevailing throughout the country; and the need for cessation of hostilities by all sides in favor of diplomatic discourse. United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2118 and 2235, for example, were unanimously
adopted with the goal of eliminating use of chemical weapons during the Syrian conflict. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139 demanded free access with respect to humanitarian aid, and this was supplemented by Resolution 2165. Security Council Resolution 2254 recognized the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG) as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations’ efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria, demanding a cessation of fighting, the development of confidence building measures, protection of the civilian population, and the safe and secure return of refugees. Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2258 condemned, in the gravest terms, the role of ISIS (ISIL, Dash) and Al Nusrah Front in the Syrian conflict, while also condemning the inflow of foreign terrorist fighters into the country.

Within the context of these resolutions, the UN has demonstrated an active role in both attempting to end the hostilities while also providing extensive humanitarian aid to the Syrian populace. From late 2013, the international humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis has been under the coordination of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). Utilizing the Syrian Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan (SHARP), UNOCHA has sought to reach the estimated 3 million displaced persons/refugees within Syria, 1.7 million in Turkey, and about 1.3 million spread around neighboring countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan.

The recent agreements between representatives of the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition (Islamic State and Salafist groups excluded), which was brokered by the United States and Russia, has given way to an agreement for a ceasefire, with the underlying goal of re-establishing the political process in the hopes of attaining a long-lasting political solution. Possible solutions to the Syrian war remain inherently complex, for the number of actors in the conflict thoroughly complicates the process, and the magnitude of inter-fighting between the groups
themselves makes considerations of a coherent solution untenable. At the same time, sets of frameworks may be provided that could facilitated magnitudes of solutions. First, the removal or defeat of the Islamic State from Syria is a necessity, for this group remains a threat to both the government and the Kurdish population, while, at the same time, coming into conflict with opposition groups, such as the Free Syria Army. Second, the ceasefire between the opposition and the regime is not enough to offer a solution to the civil war, since other actors that are not part of the agreement continue hostilities. Third, even upon the possible alleviation of the first two problems, there remains the re-organization of Syrian society, especially of such powerful actors as the Kurds. Fourth, would outside actors, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, both of whom have demanded the collapse of the Assad regime, ever accept a resolution to the conflict that is not on their terms, and even more, accept an outcome to the conflict that they may consider to be against their national interests. And fifth, with a powerful Kurdish presence in three countries, could part of the solution to the Syrian conflict be the establishment of a Kurdish nation that would serve as both an ally and a bridge to Russia and US, as well as a buffer against the Islamic State and other Salafist groups in the region?
Questions to Consider

1. What is my country’s position on the Kurdish question?

2. Should the right of self-determination of a people trump the claims of state sovereignty, and if so, could this create a domino effect, where minorities throughout the world may begin demanding self-determination?

3. What has my country done to address the role of the Kurds in the Syrian War?

4. What would my country’s position be in supporting or opposing the formation of a Kurdistan?

5. How would my country balance the positions of Turkey and Iran with respect to this issue, and what leverage does my country have to oppose or support the formation of a Kurdish nation?
Works Cited


