

**Forum:** General Assembly 4 – Special Political and Decolonization (SPECPOL)

**Issue:** The question of foreign sponsored religious wars in the Middle East

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## Introduction

With the increasing popularity of international forums, such as the United Nations, and globalization, domestic politics are intertwined with international policies more than ever before. International cooperation has arguably increased the rate at which the world is developing. However, there is suspicion that foreign involvement is only aggravating global issues.

With notably high levels of religious tensions, the Middle East is a prime location for conflict, and opportunities to resolve conflict. Foreign interest, and therefore involvement, in the Middle Eastern area has increased drastically after World War 1 and World War 2 due to high quantities of oil and other natural resources. Current conflicts in the area include the Syrian Civil War, which has high enough levels of foreign involvement to merit a separate Wikipedia page.

The United Nations Charter Article 1 states that the purpose is to ‘maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace and to bring about by peaceful means [...] settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace’<sup>1</sup>. For this issue, the role of foreign sponsorship should be regulated to accomplish the aims of the UN Charter.

## Definition of Key Terms

### **War of aggression**

The United Nations defines this in General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX) as “the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations”.

### **Religious War**

A war caused by or justified by differences in religion.

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<sup>1</sup> “Chapter I.” United Nations, United Nations, [www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html](http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html).

## **United Nations Charter**

Treaty of the United Nations. Article 1 describes the aims and purposes of the organization.

## **Sunni Muslim & Shia Muslim**

Two sub-classifications of Islam.

## **Background Information**

Currently, there are 3 major conflicts with foreign involvement occurring in the Middle East: the Iraqi Civil War, Syrian Civil War and the Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict.

## **Syrian Civil War**

The Syrian Civil War began in March 2011<sup>2</sup>, following a bout of violence during pro-democracy demonstrations against the government in Deraa, a city in Southern Syria. Prior to this, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad has ruled the country since 2000, with limits on freedom of the press and opposing political powers. The violence escalated, turning from a conflict between the government and its people to a conflict between the Sunni Muslims, which composed the majority of the Syrian population, and the predominantly Shia Muslim government. The turmoil provided an opportunity for ISIL to take power. The scale of the conflict and introduction of chemical warfare created a humanitarian crisis, driving the UN into action. In 2014, the United States and Russia joined the conflict, with the intention of targeting 'terrorists'.

Several political solutions have been attempted, including negotiations and two cease-fires, mediated by the Arab League, but none have come to fruition. International aid has also polarized with the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, the United Kingdom and France supporting the opposition and Russia and Iran supporting the Syrian government under Assad.

## **Iran-Saudi Arabia Cold War**

It has been speculated that this war is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iran declared that secular regimes and monarchies should be replaced with Islamic republics. This may have triggered an Islamic insurgency in Saudi Arabia that same year against Saudi Arabia's monarchical ruling system. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia are primarily due to Iran's declaration in 1979, therefore this conflict can be classified as a religious war. Additionally, US support for Saudi Arabia and Russian support for Iran allow it to be classified as 'foreign sponsored' as well.

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<sup>2</sup> "Syria: The Story of the Conflict." BBC News, BBC, 11 Mar. 2016, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868).

## **Iraqi Civil War**

Since 2014, Iraq has been sieged by a civil war between ISIL and the current government. In 2012, Sunni Muslims protested against perceived marginalization by the Shia government. The violence escalates until an insurgency intensifies, bringing Iraqi Kurds into the picture when the Kurdistan capital, Irbil, is bombed by ISIL. In response, the government was reformed in 2014 to include Sunni Muslims and Kurds, but ISIL remained at large, resulting in the current conflict between the national government, which is supported internationally, and ISIL.

## **Key Issues**

The main issue is the ambiguity surrounding 'foreign sponsored religious wars, which is undefined by the United Nations. Foreign sponsorship of wars could refer to either foreign involvement prior to the beginning of the conflict that potentially escalated the magnitude of the conflict or the use of armed force by a foreign nation during the conflict. It is estimated that about 7% of all wars arose due to religious conflicts, and an even smaller percentage are due to or had foreign involvement.

Furthermore, the definition of religious wars is also ambiguous. One such example is the Iraqi-Kurdish Conflict (1919-2003). The most prominent separation between the two opposing sides is their ethnicity. The 'Iraqi' side of the conflict was predominantly Arab whereas the other side were ethnically Kurdish. Both sides have a multi-religious composition, but with 62% of the Iraqi side Shia Muslim and 98% of the Kurds Sunni Muslim<sup>3</sup>, it can be argued that it was escalated or even heavily caused by religion.

Another example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is viewed by the majority as an ethnic conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. However, the religious composition of Israel is predominantly Jewish. These cases demonstrate that it is difficult to differentiate between an ethnic war and a religious war, especially without a clear definition, as both seem intertwined. This does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. The most prominent case that clearly fits into both the definition of 'religious war' and 'foreign-sponsored' is the Syrian Civil War.

Another key issue is how foreign sponsorship should be regulated and if it should be. As can be seen in the Syrian Civil War, foreign intervention has had minimal success in solving the issue, which may imply that foreign sponsorship is only worsening conflicts. On the other hand, international aid has a beneficial impact on humanitarian crises, which may extend towards mediating solutions to conflict, as the Arab League has previously attempted. The lack of unified response may be a reason for ineffective foreign sponsorship; hence if foreign sponsorship should be

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<sup>3</sup> Mohamed, Besheer. "Who Are the Iraqi Kurds?" Pew Research Center, 20 Aug. 2014, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/20/who-are-the-iraqi-kurds/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/20/who-are-the-iraqi-kurds/).

allowed, guidelines may be an effective method of unifying international responses. Guidelines such as mandatory negotiations or referendums prior to a conflict may reduce the need for international armed force.

## Major Countries & Organizations involved

### **Arab League**

An intergovernmental organization of Arab countries consisting of: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria (Syrian National Coalition), Tunisia, Yemen (Cabinet of Yemen)<sup>4</sup>. The purpose is to “strengthen ties among, coordinate their policies and promote common interests”. It is involved in some of these wars, such as the Syrian Civil War, where they tried to mediate a solution with minimal success.

### **Yemen**

Currently, Yemen is undergoing a civil war with levels of foreign involvement, mostly around the Middle East. However, it is questionable as to whether it can be considered a ‘religious war’. This is linked to the speculation that it is a proxy war between Iran and Iraq as the Houthis and Iran are both predominantly Shia Muslims whereas the opposing side (the government) and Iraq are predominantly Sunni Muslim. This leads into the question of defining religious wars. If the Yemeni Civil War is defined as a religious war, then it will be involved in the topic.

### **Syria**

Syria has been sieged by a religious civil war since 2015 with high levels of foreign involvement; hence this topic applies heavily to them. With a 4 way civil war between 3 factions within the country and an international terrorist organization (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant), as designated by the United Nations, foreign involvement aims at resolving the conflict, often with a the aim for the result to be in their favour. Those supporting Assad’s regime (Syrian Arab Republic) include Russia, Iran and Iraq, whereas those that support the Syrian Democratic Forces include the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and more. The other 2 sides are the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, supported by Al-Qaeda and the Free Syrian Army, supported by Turkey. The lack of unified foreign response is arguably escalating the magnitude of this conflict.

### **Islamic State of Iraq and Levant**

Previously a part of Al-Qaeda, ISIL is an extremist militant group aiming to establish an Islamic state. Firmly in ‘*jihad*’ (Holy War) against those they believe are

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<sup>4</sup> Generally, the membership countries undergoing political instability is temporarily suspended. In the case of Syria and Yemen, membership has not been suspended but the representative political party has been specified by the Arab League.

unrighteous, ISIL has attempted to spread achieve their goal through seizing territory with military force. Alternative names include ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and Da'ish, which is preferred by most Middle Eastern politicians, as some have stated that ISIS is neither “Islamic” nor a “State”<sup>5</sup>.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1919-2003	<b>Iraqi-Kurdish Conflict</b>
1920-1948	<b>Intercommunal Conflict in Mandatory Palestine</b> Conflict between Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Yishuv
1948 – present	<b>Arab-Israeli conflict</b> Clearly ethnic conflict, but also has a religious background.
1975-1990	<b>Lebanese Civil War</b> Civil war between Maronite Christians and Muslims. Escalated due to US Intervention support on one side and Chinese, United Arab Republic and Soviet support on the other.
November – December 1979	<b>Grand Mosque Seizure, Saudi Arabia</b> Islamic extremist insurgents attempted to overthrow the House of Saud (ruling family of Saudi Arabia) to reinstate a ‘return to the original ways of Islam’. The French Groupe d’Intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale (GIGN) was involved.
1980-88	<b>Iran-Iraq War</b> Conflict between Iran (Shiite Muslim government) and Iraq (Sunni Muslim government but predominantly Shiite Muslim population). Numerous foreign countries were involved in this.
1988-2015	<b>Al-Qaeda Insurgency in Yemen</b>
2004-2015	<b>Houthi Insurgency in Yemen</b> It is unclear whether this is a religious war. The Yemeni government alleged that the Houthi insurgents were attempting to overthrow the government to instate religious law. However, these accusations were denied.
2005- present	<b>Iran-Israel Proxy Conflict</b> This is a conflict between Lebanon and Israel, where Iran supported Lebanon. Iran’s view of Israel’s regime is that it endangers vulnerable people and threatens Islam, making it Iran’s ideal enemy. Foreign sponsorship includes the United States (Israel) and Syria, Iran and Sudan (Lebanon).
2011-present	<b>Syrian Civil War</b>

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Adam. “France Is Ditching the ‘Islamic State’ Name — and Replacing It with a Label the Group Hates.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 17 Sept. 2014, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/17/france-is-ditching-the-islamic-state-name-and-replacing-it-with-a-label-the-group-hates/?utm\\_term=.86c4a12a983e](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/17/france-is-ditching-the-islamic-state-name-and-replacing-it-with-a-label-the-group-hates/?utm_term=.86c4a12a983e).

2011-present	<b>Iran-Saudi proxy conflict</b> Iran's policy calls for the replacement of secular regimes and monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, with Islamic rule.
2014-present	<b>Iraqi Civil War</b>

### Relevant UN Treaties

Specifically relating to this topic, there are no previous UN resolutions. However, resolutions concerning the treatment of several specific foreign sponsored religious wars can be found here:

- [Resolution 242](#)
- [Resolution 61/26](#) – Jerusalem
- [Resolution 2336](#) – Syria
- [S/RES/2216](#) – Yemen

### Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

There have been no previous general guidelines established specifically on foreign sponsored religious wars.

### Possible Solutions

In accordance with the UN Charter, delegates should work towards solutions that resolve points of disagreement before the beginning of the conflict. Possible solutions include defining 'foreign sponsored religious wars' before tackling ways of resolving current conflicts as well as preventing future wars, escalated by foreign intervention.

Consider your country's views as to whether it believes in foreign involvement in resolving domestic issues, and if so, whether it believes in foreign involvement prior to the conflict or during it.

Keep in mind that the issue does not focus on a specific war in the Middle East, hence the resolution should be general enough that it can be applied to most, if not all, hostile situations.

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