

A Classroom Simulation of the Syrian Conflict

Richard W. Frank and Jessica Genauer

Biographical note

Richard W. Frank is lecturer in international relations in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. He can be reached at richard.frank@anu.edu.au.

Jessica Genauer is a lecturer in international relations in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. She can be reached at jessica.genauer@anu.edu.au.

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Abstract

This paper describes a semester-long classroom simulation of the 2011-2018 Syrian conflict designed for an introductory international relations class. The simulation culminates with two weeks of multi-stakeholder negotiations addressing four issues—humanitarian aid, economic sanctions, ceasefire, and political transition. Students randomly play one of fifteen roles involving three actor types: states, non-state actors, and international organizations. This paper outlines the costs and benefits of simulation design options towards encouraging students' understanding of international relations concepts, and it proposes a course plan for tightly integrating lectures, readings, assessment, and simulation, regardless of class size or length. We highlight this integration through a discussion of two weeks' material—domestic politics and war, and nonstate actors—and a discussion of the incorporation of bargaining concepts and frameworks into the two weeks of multi-stakeholder negotiations.

Keywords: simulation; international relations; Syria

INTRODUCTION

On a cold January morning in early 2017, Syrian government officials and rebel leaders met face-to-face in Astana, Kazakhstan to negotiate an end to a conflict that had, to that point, lasted over five years and cost over 450,000 people their lives (Barnard and Saad 2017; Human Rights Watch 2017). Within hours the talks fell apart—one of many instances of failed negotiations to end this conflict. The sheer number and variety of domestic and international actors involved in the Syrian conflict and the subsequent strategic challenges to ending Syria’s war reflect a number of core international relations (IR) concepts from bargaining theory and international law to domestic politics and human rights.

These concepts can be difficult to convey to college students new to the field in a way that is engaging, informative, and not overwhelming. Large introductory courses are typically populated by students new to the discipline who can struggle to connect theoretical approaches to real-world international affairs (Arnold 2015; Loggins 2009). A growing literature suggests that active learning techniques, including in-class simulations, improve students’ experiential understanding of IR theories, maintain students’ level of interest, and encourage information retention (Asal and Blake 2006; Baranowski and Weir 2015; Krain and Lantis 2006; Jones and Bursens 2015; Morgan 2003). However, using such active methods involves tradeoffs and requires careful linking of simulation design to course material (Wedig 2010).

This paper describes an extended classroom simulation of the 2011-2018 Syrian conflict that culminates in a simulated peace conference and systematically links eleven weeks of lectures, reading material (Frieden, Lake, and Schultz’s [FLS] 2016 textbook *World Politics*), and student assessment to this complex conflict. We outline the costs and benefits of different simulation designs to encourage students’ understanding of IR

concepts, and propose a course plan for tight cohesion between course material, assessment, and a simulation regardless of class size.

This manuscript proceeds as follows. We begin by describing the simulation design and several important decisions behind it. The following sections demonstrate how lecture and reading material were linked to simulation activities in teaching core concepts (e.g. domestic politics, non-state actors, and bargaining interactions) as well as the place of reflective analysis and integration of learning. We conclude by summarizing the key contributions and how the simulation can be adapted to other teaching scenarios.

SIMULATION DESIGN

The simulation was designed for a 550-person Introduction to International Relations class at the Australian National University and took place during weekly 15-student sections. To date it has been used twice—in 2017 and 2018. Each section, facilitated by a teaching assistant (TA), operates a discrete simulation, which runs over eleven weeks and culminates in two weeks of multi-stakeholder negotiations. During the first week, students are randomly assigned a real-world actor with an interest in the Syrian conflict including three actor-types: states, non-state actors, and international actors (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Four distinct issue areas (humanitarian aid, economic sanctions, ceasefire, and political transition) are discussed throughout the simulation and negotiated in the two-week final summit. To ensure consistent teaching across sections, the instructor provides a weekly substantive and logistical guide for TAs (see web appendix), as well as regular in-person meetings throughout semester.

The simulation is divided into three phases (see Table 2). In the first phase students are briefed on the simulation, assigned an actor, and guided through activities to facilitate student comprehension of course material week-by-week through the lens of their assigned actor. In the second phase, utilizing bargaining frameworks learnt in the course, students engage in multi-stakeholder negotiations spanning the four issue areas. In the final phase, students discuss the simulation and lessons learned.

[Table 2 about here]

We chose the Syrian conflict because of its normative, policymaking, and theoretical importance, as well as its complexity and conceptual richness. The Syrian conflict has, as of this writing, led to over 450,000 deaths and millions of displaced persons, affected regional interactions, and escalated Russia-US tensions. It comprises overlapping conflicts involving the Syrian government; diverse rebel groups; state actors including Turkey, Iran, the US, and Russia, as well as civilian and international groups including the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the United Nations Security Council, and others.

Designing a simulation requires choosing either a real or hypothetical case. A real-world, on-going case like the Syrian conflict can encourage student interest and engagement (Austin, McDowell and Sacko 2006, 89-90) by demonstrating the applicability of IR concepts to a political conflict shown in nightly news. However, it might also trigger students personally affected by the conflict; and students allocated a violent actor, may be uncomfortable being associated with this actor. A real conflict may also detract from course engagement if students become absorbed in current events rather than on how IR theories apply to these events. These disadvantages can be mitigated by introducing the case to students as, first and foremost, an analytical arena to apply course theories to current policymaking. This can create analytical and

reflective distance between a student and their actor. In addition, students should be made aware of points of contact (i.e., instructor, TA, or college support services) if they feel any discomfort with the simulation.

A second choice is whether to run a short or long simulation. The latter are expected to provide greater educational benefit (Glazier 2011, 376). However, due in part to logistical limitations (Nishikawa and Jaeger 2011, 135-136), many simulations are short-running; Baranowski and Weir (2015)'s survey of twenty-seven course-based simulations, showed that only six were semester-long. The main disadvantage of a long-running simulation is the trade-off between time spent on exploring the simulation case in depth and time covering multiple case studies and examples. Teachers 'sacrifice a degree of breadth' in favor of depth (Smith and Boyer 1996, 691); however, discussion of multiple and complex real-world examples may be less useful to first-year college students with limited understanding of these events (Arnold 2015, 162). Rather, as students grapple to integrate new material, a simulation can provide a framework within which students accumulate a deeper comprehension of one case study, understanding new concepts through the lens of their actor. So, a long-running simulation seems best suited to an introductory IR class.

LINKING THEORIES TO PRACTICE

A simulation is a useful teaching tool to the extent it helps students engage with and understand course substance. There are many ways to teach an introductory IR class, with some focusing on historical events or particular theoretical paradigms. Our simulation is part of a coherent puzzle-based approach to understanding why scholars study different parts of IR and the assumptions and implications underlying the theoretical frameworks they build to answer these puzzles. Lectures compliment the

reading material— each week poses simple questions (e.g., Why is there war? How can domestic factors help explain international relations?) that can also be connected to the Syrian conflict. As Table 2 demonstrates, the topics follow in a logical sequence that builds on previous weeks' material. Below, two examples highlight the links between lecture, reading, and the simulation.

Domestic politics and the Syrian conflict

Week 4's lecture introduces students to the causal mechanisms by which domestic politics can affect the likelihood of violent conflict. Core concepts introduced in the lecture and assigned reading (FLS, chap. 4) include mechanisms through which domestic interest groups affect state policy, the 'rally around the flag' effect, diversionary incentives for actors to engage in violent conflict, as well as how regime type determines a state's selectorate and impacts its decision-making calculus.

The applicability of these concepts to the Syrian conflict is illustrated by the impact of domestic interests driving states such as Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and the US's level of engagement in Syria. For example, Russia's intervention in Syria may be driven by domestic interests to divert attention away from the costs of international sanctions after the invasion of Crimea. The US's reticence to intervene on the ground in Syria is partly driven by domestic electoral concerns and a growing resistance to US 'boots on the ground' in the Middle East. Besides state actors, the concepts outlined can apply to non-state actors or international actors whose strategic calculus is impacted by the domestic political calculus of both their allies and their opponents in the conflict.

In this week's section, students consider how domestic interests affect their actor's strategies and behaviour. First, students discuss whether their actor's preferences are

cohesive or fractured by competing interest groups. Second, students examine how domestic politics can shape alliances or rivalries in an internationalized civil conflict.

Nonstate actors and the Syrian conflict

Week six examines the causal mechanisms behind asymmetric conflicts involving nonstate actors. Lecture and assigned reading (FLS, chap. 6) focus on how civil war can be seen as a bargaining failure resulting from incomplete information, commitment problems, and indivisible issues. We examine group-level, country-level, and international-level factors that could account for the outbreak of civil war. We also discuss counter-insurgency strategies and terrorism as a tactic employed by non-state actors. We note four key terrorist strategies of coercion, provocation, spoiling, and outbidding employed to achieve political goals.

In the Syrian conflict itself these concepts can frame our understanding of its underlying causes. We can examine causes at the group-level (e.g. sectarian divisions), country-level (e.g. authoritarian regime type), and international-level (e.g. Arab Spring, NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya), as well as how incomplete information (both the Assad regime and rebel groups may have overestimated their ability to win the conflict), commitment problems (lack of mechanisms to enforce agreements), and indivisible issues (e.g., leadership of Syria). In addition, tactics used by ISIS, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and the Syrian Democratic Forces can be theoretically categorized according to the four types of terrorist strategies introduced to students.

In sections, each student considers who is an ally and an opponent for their allocated actor. Based on this information, the TA draws a conflict matrix that shows clusters of groups that share at least one key ally or opponent. These cluster-groupings then discuss whether incomplete information, commitment problems, or indivisible issues form the

greatest obstacle to resolving the divergence of interest with their opponent. Next, these groups examine the type of counter-insurgency and terrorism tactics used by themselves and/or their opponents, and the function of these strategies in impacting their actor's strategic calculus in achieving their objectives in the conflict.

These examples of domestic politics and non-state violent actors illustrate how a simulation can be designed to link readings, lecture, and simulation activities. To compliment this process and link learning outcomes with written assessment, students complete two short written pieces, one in week 4 and one the week before the multi-stakeholder negotiations. First, students post a 300-word description of their actor to their section's online forum, accessible only to students in their section. Second, students write a 300-word position paper (also posted to the section forum) the week before negotiations begin, in which students' outline their actor's interests regarding the four issue areas. Students are encouraged to read the profiles and position papers of other actors and are given time to negotiate initial alliances in section, as well as participate in online discussions in the forum, and coordinate outside class in person or online.

SIMULATED CONFERENCE

The substantive sections discussed above provide the foundation for two weeks of sections devoted to a simulated conference modelled after real cases like the 2017 Kazakhstan conference mentioned above. The first session focuses on two issue areas, humanitarian aid provision and a temporary ceasefire to enable aid deliveries. The second section focuses on ending Syrian economic sanctions and longer-term solutions to the conflict including a leadership transition. Each week ends with a joint

communicate written up by the TA during discussion and posted online. See Figure 1 for our 2018 simulation outcomes.

[Figure 1 about here]

First-year IR students are frequently introduced to the concept of international bargaining interactions. In a long-running simulation, we suggest dedicating two or three pivotal sessions to facilitating student understanding of bargaining theory through simulated negotiations with other actors. Students are primed before starting their negotiation sessions to pay attention to how actors' strategies and interactions in negotiations can be framed in terms of core IR concepts related to bargaining frameworks taught in class.

Concepts linked to bargaining that are covered in lectures and readings include causal mechanisms such as coercive bargaining, issue linkage, tying hands, brinkmanship, deterrence, and the impact of a limited bargaining range or outside options. In addition, Fearon (1995)'s framework for explaining why bargaining fails (i.e. commitment problems, information problems, and indivisible issues) is also emphasized and is particularly useful for the simulation. Students consider whether these factors help us understand the negotiations' success or failure in each issue area. Finally, formal models like the Prisoner's Dilemma (introduced in Week 3 with students playing the game in section) also provide a framework for explaining negotiation outcomes.

STUDENT REFLECTION

Previous research suggests that analysis and reflection of experience increases the integration of learning (Glazier 2011, 380). In our simulation, we include two modes of reflection: an in-person group debrief, and an individually written response paper.

The former allows students to reflect critically and interactively on their experience (facilitated by a lecturer or TA) and provides a “wealth of potentially useful information to instructors” (Baranowski and Weir 2015, 395) to improve future iterations of the simulation.

As a further means of integrating the simulation with course material and assessment, after the conference concludes students write a 1,000-word response paper, in which they critically reflect on their simulation experience and link the entire simulation (with a particular focus on the two weeks of negotiations) to the theoretical IR concepts introduced throughout the course. This not only provides an additional incentive for in-depth student engagement with the simulation; it is also a means for integrating learning from the simulation.

CONCLUSION

Engaging first-year undergraduate students with IR concepts and theories is often a challenging task. Using a contemporary, applied lens can be a useful means to learn about, and grasp complex theoretical concepts. Like the failed 2017 conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, for instance, diplomatic efforts need to address actors’ interests and what the international community can reasonably support.

This paper describes an extended simulation and a discussion of the Syrian conflict as part of an introduction to International Relations class. It highlights the connections between IR theories like bargaining, domestic politics, and violence by non-state actors to the current Syrian conflict. It also suggests ways that this simulation can help students in a large class feel more directly connected to the theoretical material and lectures.

This simulation can be adapted in a number of ways. Given that each section constituted a discrete simulation with fifteen actors, the simulation could be used in a

smaller class of 15 students. In a class of 30-50 students, two or three students could be assigned the same role and could work as a group or students could be allocated various actors within a role (e.g. actors representing the executive, bureaucracy, and/or interest groups). If a full-semester simulation is not practical, the simulation can be shortened to 2-3 weeks with one week dedicated to choosing roles and discussing their motivations and structural constraints and one to two weeks' conference focusing on one to four of the negotiation topics. Lastly, it is possible to choose a different conflict of more interest to the instructor or students. For instance, current conflicts in Yemen, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Cameroon would also provide for good discussion of IR theories and international interests.

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Table 1. Simulation roles

Type of actor	Actor
<i>Syrian actors</i>	
<i>State</i>	Syrian government
<i>Non-state actors</i>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
	Jaysh al-Islam
	Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)
	Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)
<i>International actors</i>	
<i>State actors</i>	Iran
	Jordan
	Russia
	Saudi Arabia
	Turkey
	United States
	A non-veto member of the UN Security Council
<i>Non-state/interstate actors</i>	European Union
	Syrian Arab Red Crescent
	United Nations

Table 2. Simulation outline

Week	Lecture & reading topic	Simulation activity	Linking IR theory to activity
1	Theorizing IR	Simulation introduction and allocation of student roles. Read brief article about recent Syrian peace talks and break up into groups to list actors and their interests, as described in article. Do different types of actors have similar types of interest? What factors allow us to see these interests in practice?	Conceptualizing various types of actors and theorizing their interests.
2	Why do wars occur?	Discussion of post-WWI system's impact on contemporary Syrian conflict focusing on Sykes Picot agreement. Students break up into pairs to play prisoners' dilemma under three sequencing rules.	Connecting core concepts - war is costly, commitment problems, issue indivisibility, misperception, interest groups, importance of territory, resolve, and relative power – to Syrian conflict.
3	Domestic politics and war	Students are divided into groups according to their actor-type (state actors, non-state actors, international actors), discussion prompts are given for each group to investigate the role of competing sub-state, sub-group, or sub-institutional interests on their actor's preferences. Is their behaviour towards opponent/allied actors shaped by an understanding of the competing interest groups that drive that actor's behaviour?	Differentiating general and particular interests. Understanding mechanisms (rally around the flag, diversionary incentives, regime type) through which sub-state interests impact state actor preferences, as well as non-state or international actors' strategies towards state actors.
4	International institutions and war	Students discuss their actor's alliances, and consider whether they are engaged in 'balancing' against a great power and how this impacts their behaviour in the conflict. Students also discuss their actor's relationship with the key international security organization (i.e., the UN). Are they furthering the UN's agenda for cessation of conflict, or thwarting it?	Applying alliances, balance-of-power, and bandwagoning, as well as collective security organizations as security mechanisms to the Syrian conflict. Why did these mechanisms fail to prevent protracted conflict in this case?
5	Violence by non-state actors	Students describe their actor's main opponents, both state and non-state. They then discuss how motivations and tactics drive their actor's strategies, as well as those of allies and opponents.	Linking inter and intra-state conflict mechanisms (commitment problems, information issues, indivisible issues, greed and grievance) to Syrian conflict. Using a theoretical understanding of asymmetric conflict strategies (counterinsurgency, terrorism, spoiling, outbidding, coercion, provocation) to explain actors' behaviour in the Syrian conflict.
6	Politics of trade and finance	Small groups explore economic linkages between simulation actors and how this shapes their preferences.	Linking political-economic mechanisms like economic diplomacy, sanctions, and aid, to conflict strategies and the Syrian conflict.
7	Economic and political development	General discussion linked to course themes followed by devising of pre-summit positions in groups of actors with convergent interests on four issue areas.	Students consider how themes of colonialism, the divide between less-developed and more-developed countries, a resource-based economy, and alternative pathways of economic development may impact the outbreak of conflict and Syrian conflict actors' preferences.
8	International law	Multi-stakeholder negotiations on two issue areas: humanitarian relief, and a ceasefire	Link to bargaining theories learnt throughout the course including game theory, causal mechanisms that lead to bargaining failure or success. Relevant to this week, the theoretical understanding of norms and international law is considered by actors when appealing for a ceasefire and delivery of humanitarian aid.
9	The global environment	Multi-stakeholder negotiations on two issue areas: lifting of sanctions, and political transition	Link to bargaining theories as in previous week. Drawing on this week's lecture, students also consider the applicability of collective action problems when attempting to reach resolution on the two issues under discussion.
10	Human rights	Debrief—students reflect on (and analyse) the simulation experience, including suggestions for improvement	Links to laws of war, humanitarian aid, and Responsibility to Protect and Syrian conflict.
11	Conclusions	Writing of response paper linking course material to simulation experience	Students synthesise course material and experience in written response.

Figure 1. Simulation outcomes, 2018

