

Chapter 9

Case Study: The Arab Spring and the Refugee Crisis in Syria

To give students a graphic illustration of the Arab Spring, they could be directed to videos on the BBC News website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>) or on YouTube.

1. Which characteristics indicate that the Arab Spring countries were authoritarian?

It would be useful for students to refer to p. 294–5 for the characteristics of authoritarian regimes, and to compare them with those of liberal democracy on p. 292–4.

Some of the regimes were headed by dictators; political freedoms and civil rights such as freedom of speech—the media being state-controlled and trade unions not being able to operate freely—were curtailed; one particular way regimes dealt with critics was to hold them in prison for long periods of time without trial and to use torture. Such coercion indicates that the justice system was not operating independently of the regime. Public employees received favours, presumably to maintain their support for the regime. (See the Freedom House website for information on countries in North Africa and the Middle East; for the media in Syria see <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14703914>.)

2. Why has it proven so difficult to establish democracy in a country like Syria?

Although President Bashar al-Assad was elected with 88.7% of the vote in 2014, and there were elections to the legislature, the People's Senate, in 2016, Syria is rated by Freedom House as 'Not Free' and is regarded as 'one of the world's most repressive regimes' (see Freedom House at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/syria>). The Civil War, ongoing since 2011, has highlighted the ethnic and religious factions in the country, which had previously been held together by the suppression of dissent, control of the media, and restrictions on civil liberties. The complexity is compounded by the fact there are cross-cutting ethnic differences within religious groups, for example, 10% of the majority Sunni Muslim population are Kurdish. It is difficult to establish democracy in a territory without shared common acceptance of diversity and tolerance.

The country won its sovereignty from French colonial rule in 1946, and liberal institutions were established, but since then country found it difficult to develop economically and to overcome internal religious and ethnic divisions, or to establish mechanisms and institutions through which disputes could be settled and consensus reached. The Baath Party, which came to power in 1963, is a secular party which came to dominate political and social life through, at various

times, balancing and suppressing various factions. During the Arab Spring, in 2011, opposition to the regime was unable to establish any democratic ground due to the often brutal repression by the regime, the consequences of which have been on-going since in the Civil War,

3. Discuss what the case of Syria tells us about global political institutions like the UN.

The UN was established in 1948, and the preamble to its charter sets out its purpose 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'. However, as with other global institutions, the UN has often found it difficult to overcome the national interests of its (now) 193 members. Global political institutions tend to lack ultimate political authority, meaning that, as noted in the chapter, the increasingly globalized economy is difficult to 'manage' politically at a global scale.

The case of the UN actions with respect to the war in Syria shows this very clearly. In particular, Russia has used its veto 11 times in the UN Security Council, refusing to vote to condemn, impose sanctions on, or refer to the International Criminal Court the Assad regime for human rights abuses which have been documented by the UN Human Rights Council. China has also consistently used its veto. In particular, Russia has continued to offer the Assad regime military support, particularly via air-strikes on opposition positions, and often with civilian casualties. When, in April 2018, the US launched air strikes against Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, it did so without first seeking UN approval, as would normally be assumed to be required. (See

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11915649/How-Syria-and-the-bloody-conflict-has-torn-the-UN-Security-Council-apart.html>.)

4. Looking at examples from Europe, what does this case tell us about the 'demise of the nation state' thesis?

As explained in the Chapter (see pp. 307–9), the idea that globalization has contributed to a 'demise' of the nation state has been resonating for some time, but has been challenged from several sources.

As noted in the Case Study, the Syrian civil war has led to the displacement of huge numbers of people; according to UNHCR (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>), by December 2017, there had been 1,000,000 applications for asylum in European countries by Syrian refugees. These formed the majority of the 1.8 million refugees who have entered Europe since 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/what-current-scale-migration-crisis-europe-future-outlook>). Whilst global and regional governance bodies- like the UN and the EU, have tried to deal with the crisis, it has been a

contributory factor to a rise of nationalist sentiment. Whilst not the only cause, immigration has been a key issue in an increasing questioning of the benefits of globalization and a turn to protectionism and nationalist sentiment—what has been labeled a rise in ‘populism’. The election of Donald Trump, with his protectionist, ‘America First’ message, and the Brexit vote, have been seen as illustrative of this.

In Europe, the refugee issue has undoubtedly led to an increase in popularity for parties stressing a nationalist and protectionist message. For example, in March 2018, the Italian elections produced a Coalition government comprising the League and the Five Star Movement. The ‘populist’ League gained 17.6% of the vote, enough to gain it a place in government and the post of Interior Minister for its leader, Matteo Salvini. Since December 2017, the Far-Right Freedom Party has been in coalition government in Austria, and in the Swedish elections in 2018, the Sweden Democrats, a ‘national-conservative’ and anti-immigration party gained 17.6% of the votes—finishing in third place—an unusual result in what is usually regarded as a ‘socially progressive’ country. In Germany, which has seen the biggest intake of refugees in the EU, the 2017 elections saw the AfD (Alternative for Germany) party increase its vote to 13%, becoming the first ‘openly nationalist’ party to gain seats in the Bundestag for over 60 years (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/24/angela-merkel-fourth-term-far-right-afd-third-german-election>). Whilst in some cases the nationalist parties remain in a distinct minority, their electoral performances have given established leaders and mainstream political parties problems in forming coalition governments and keeping them together- as can be seen with the difficulties which Angela Merkel has had in this regard in Germany. In addition to these examples the governing party in Poland, the national-conservative Law and Justice Party, and the government of Viktor Orban in Hungary, have both gained popularity with a nationalist message. Overall, there is an indication here that nationalism, and policies aimed at protecting the symbolic and economic integrity of the nation-state, continues to be an important political factor, and that there is clear evidence of a disenchantment with some of the effects of globalization (see <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/08/the-rise-of-european-populism-and-the-collapse-of-the-center-left/>).

You need to carry out further research for the remaining questions.

5. What part, if any, do you think that ‘Fake News’ has played in the discussion about the impacts of refugees from Syria to European countries?

Discussion about immigration can be emotive, and it is not to be denied that for many, the ‘facts’ about its impacts are secondary to emotive and sentimental feelings about its effects on national and community identity. As always, there is a tendency for people to listen to stories which reinforce their previously held

positions. This does make it difficult to have an impassioned debate about migration generally.

However, it is clear that immigration and in particular the issues of refugees and asylum seekers have been an important target for those seeking to generate anti-immigrant sentiment via the circulation of 'Fake News'. Because sentiments and emotions run deep over the subject, it is perhaps to be expected that people's fears with respect to the issues can be targeted—for example, even without Fake News, people tend to over-estimate the number of migrants there are (see

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>).

Firstly, students could research some of the data which we have from legitimate sources. These could include, for example:

Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics

European Parliament:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170629STO78630/eu-migrant-crisis-facts-and-figures>

UNCHR: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/>

Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/migration/>

BBC World News: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-44660699>

And on the impact of refugees:

IMF: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1602.pdf>

https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/01/09/FDMD_Europen_Migration_Keynote_Speech_Bruegel

European Commission:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/ip033_en_2.pdf

Secondly, students could look at some of the 'Fake News' stories which have been exposed as such, and some of the emerging research about its impact.

This document has some good examples/ cases of false stories:

http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_FakeNewsMigrationStudy_EN_20170607.pdf.

See also, for example: <https://www.voanews.com/a/german-officials-fake-newshelped-stoke-anti-migrant-riot/4549276.html>;

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-europe-threat-refugee-crisis-europe-aggravate-propaganda-kremlin-farenc-katrei-hungarian-spy-a7642711.html>;

and <https://teyit.org/en/how-is-false-information-used-worldwide-to-target-refugees/>

Also, students could search some of the increasing number of fact-checking sites such as <https://www.poynter.org/tags/international-fact-checking-network>.

(Caution, there are now 'fake' fact-checking sites!)

It is important that students consider the case that, whilst there may be a lot of Fake News in circulation, its political impact may be less than is assumed, and is difficult to quantify; for example:

https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/ip033_en_2.pdf

6. How has the EU tried to collectively resolve the issues resulting from the increase in refugee numbers, and to what extent have they been successful?

As discussed in question 5, above, the increase in refugee numbers into Europe has played a part in a turn towards nationalism which has inevitably caused concern for a pan-national, multilateral, body like the EU. The presence of increasingly nationalist voices at EU summits has led to deep political divides over immigration, with questions being asked about the future of the EU as an institution if it cannot resolve them. Poland and Hungary have refused to take any refugees, and have now been joined by the Czech Republic in this stance. This has resulted in legal action being taken against them by the European Commission. There have been long-standing concerns from Greece and Italy about the numbers of refugees crossing the Atlantic by boat and arriving on their shores. These political pressures have had to be set against humanitarian concerns—there were 2,676 dead or missing refugees in the Mediterranean in 2017 (<https://www.iom.int>) leaving the EU with an increasingly difficult political and moral problem to resolve

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/22/divided-europe-refugee-crisis-italy-serbia-greece>).

This has been exasperated by the rise of populist parties, particularly in Italy, where, since the 2018 election, the coalition government, including the League and the Five Star Movement has taken an increasingly hard line on the issue of immigration. The EU's difficulties are this perhaps best illustrated by the refusal by Matteo Salvini, Italy's Interior Minister, to allow the *Aquarius*, a ship carrying 629 migrants, to dock, in June 2018; Malta similarly refused, before Spain agreed to accept the ship.

The EU have attempted to resolve the issue of migrant numbers by attempting to work with countries of origin, and by encouraging settlement elsewhere. The EU-Turkey Settlement Deal of 2016 led to migrants arriving in Greece being sent back to Turkey if they did not apply for asylum, and an agreement that for each Syrian refugee taken back by Turkey, one Syrian already in Turkey would be resettled in the EU. There was associated aid, also, for Turkey.

(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35854413>).

Although the numbers of refugees entering Europe via the Aegean Sea dropped significantly after this, there are doubts as to the overall effectiveness of the measures and issues concerning whether the problem has simply been displaced (<https://theconversation.com/refugees-out-of-sight-out-of-mind-two-years-on-from-eu-turkey-deal-93451>)—there are an estimated (June 2018) 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. At a Summit in June 2018, EU leaders agreed a compromise deal which included sending migrants to control centres across the bloc and setting up processing centres in some African countries (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/29/eu-summit-migration-deal-key-points>). The deal has been criticized, however, for being vague, with the EU agreeing to just enough for all sides to save face—no commitments have been made by member states, and the steps are all voluntary (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/29/world/europe/migration-european-union-merkel.html>).

The EU is now a large institution with considerable divergence in political outlook amongst its members. The migration issue has placed it under considerable pressure at a time when one of its long-standing members has taken the decision to leave. It remains to be seen if these tensions can be overcome in the long term, for some, it faces an existential crisis, whilst for others the fact that, even in this environment, the EU leaders were able to agree any deal at all, is a sign of its durability.