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Belgium and Syria: Final Thought Piece

Belgium and Syria have not had a close relationship historically but today Syria is an important topic for Belgium to finally address. Syria is a nation located at the western edge of the Middle East and is a part of the historical fertile crescent. It is approximately 185,000 square kilometers in size, with a population of about 17 million people (CIA). Damascus is the capital and second-largest city in Syria and is one of the oldest cities in the world. Though Arabs make up most of the population, Syria is an ethnically diverse country with cultures from all over Europe and the Middle East (CIA). Before World War I, the region was under the control of the Ottoman Empire (CIA). The modern Syrian state was established by a French mandate at the end of World War I (CIA).

After world War II, Syria finally became an independent nation after in 1945, and went on to be a founding member of the United Nations. (CIA). Syria then underwent a series of military coups continuing until 1963 when it fell under “Emergency Law” which suspended most constitutional protections for citizens indefinitely (Freedom House). For nearly 50 years now, Syria has essentially been ruled by one regime and is an oligarchy. Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000 succeeding his father Hafez al-Assad, who was in office from 1970 to 2000 (Bröning, 2011).

Contemporarily, Syria is in the midst of a civil war between the Bashar al-Assad regime and oppositionist factions. As a result of this violent conflict, there have been expanded sanctions levied against Syria by the members of the European Union (EU), the nation of Turkey and the Arab League, in which Syrian membership has been suspended (CIA). Due to the violence and

sanctions, there is currently an immense group of refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing the nation into Europe.

“Unrest continues in Syria, and according to a January 2015 UN estimate, the death toll among Syrian Government forces, opposition forces, and civilians had reached 220,000. As of January 2016, approximately 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, with 6.5 million people displaced internally, and an additional 4.4 million Syrian refugees, making the Syrian situation the largest humanitarian crisis worldwide” (CIA).

Therefore, the main publics that Belgium is morally obliged to target in their outreach are the Syrian refugees that are fleeing the country and seeking asylum in Belgium, as well as our neighboring European nations who are also working to receive and aid refugees and asylum-seekers. However, subsequently this means that Belgium must also prepare to target the Assad regime, the oppositionist sects and the members of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, within Syria that are causing the violence from which the Syrian people are fleeing. To this end, Belgium must call upon its fellow members of the EU as well as the other member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to support an initiative to form a united front against ISIS and the Syrian Assad regime.

As the epicenter for activities by the EU and NATO, Belgium’s main objective would have to be the safety of the European people. Therefore, it is imperative that aid and a new standard of living is safely and securely provided to the Syrian asylum seekers coming into all of the nations of EU. Therefore, Belgium calls upon the members of both the EU and NATO to

discuss with one another and decide on a united plan to address the immediate needs of these refugees and address the imminent violence of ISIS and the Assad regime.

In order to fulfill the objectives listed above, Belgium needs to formally declare war on ISIS. According to the language of NATO, of which Belgium is a founding member,

“the Parties [of NATO] agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them... will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area” (NATO).

Therefore, the other participating member states of NATO will be obligated to rise to the defense of Belgium if it should declare a formal war on ISIS. In this way we can end this terror organization and its supporters, once and for all.

Though declaring war is a big step, it is a necessary one that will force the members of NATO to convene and discuss the problem at length. Though their tactics will be ultimately for the purpose of destroying ISIS, in order to do so they will have to mitigate the violence between the Assad regime and opposition forces of Syria. Together, NATO can come to a cooperative commitment with those opposition forces to have their leaders also dedicate to fight our united enemy, ISIS and, if necessary, the Assad regime.

Where public diplomacy comes in is in the way we assist the Syrian refugees coming into Europe looking for our aid. We must treat these victim with dignity and respect while ensuring the safety of our nation and our citizens. We must make mutual connections with this new

diaspora to better understand the Syrian situations and use this information as we approach the people still in Syria who are able to fight against the oppressive regime and terror organization.

We must help these people by welcoming them into our society and defending their right to live happy and free lives where they can learn and express themselves without fear of persecution. This cross-cultural exchange that our people and the new members of our society, the Syrian refugees, will engage in will be the driving force in rebuilding Syria after the Assad regime is gone. In fact, until these subjugated citizens of Syria are willing to rise up against their own government and their own people who have propagated extreme violence among their population, it will be difficult to have success in ending the terrorism in the region.

Due to the vast distance between the political and cultural proximity of Belgium and Syria, the Belgian people as well as many other Europeans sometime make the mistake of considering Syria only in terms of its leader, Assad. Due to a phenomenon referred to as the lighthouse effect, the lack of interaction and proximity between Belgium and Syria causes both populations to view the other country in terms of the head of government (Balmas and Shaefer, 2013). This lighthouse effect is precisely why the Assad regime has been the focus of so many Americans and Europeans.

To diminish this lighthouse effect it is important to engage with the Syrian refugees coming into our country. This will help to better understand the cultural context in which the terror propagated by ISIS. Understanding the ethics, communication methods and holistic worldview of the Syrian refugees will help us better understand ISIS and the way it targets its audiences (Zaharna, 1995). The first step in doing so is engaging in open dialogue about the cultural differences in our people's perspectives and in our visions for the future. It is necessary

that we enhance the proximity between our two cultures and build shared political and social values together.

One Professor of Communications at American University who specializes in public diplomacy Rhonda Zaharna is attempting to reduce the cultural and political proximity gap between Arab and Western cultures by improving the understanding of the distinct cultural rationales for how Arabs communicate in a different way than Western cultures. In her 1995 article *Understanding Cultural Preferences of Arab Communication Patterns*, she explains that the level of context, the directness, the linearity and the means of expression, oral versus written, are some of the key differences in the Arab culture that makes communication difficult with Western societies (Zaharna, 1995). Furthermore, certain narrative devices such as repetition, imagery, exaggeration and ambiguity have been proven more effective with Arab publics than the simple, accurate, understated specifics often used when directing a message to Americans or Europeans (Zaharna, 1995). In learning more about the Syrian people from the refugees coming into Europe, the communication tools necessary to create a mutual understanding will be developed.

As of now, Assad has taken on the role of a mediated political personalization in international news arenas (Van Aelst, P., et al, 2012). He is the public embodiment of what ISIS stands for and for that reason his regime must also be put to an end. He is using international news broadcasting systems to fuel the fear that ISIS wishes to instill in its Western publics. That fear must not be allowed to paralyze our people as well as the people of the rest of the Western world. For that would mean that the true objective of ISIS-- the totally subjugation of humanity through fear-- would be realized. This demonstrates why cultural understanding is so important.

By combating the ISIS ideologies with an improved understanding of the culture within which it works, we have a better chance of dissuading the Syrian people from joining ISIS forces while we create a plan to end the fear and terror being spread by ISIS.

For the purpose of fulfilling this objective and ending ISIS terror, Belgium must turn to its many allied help address the problem of these terrorist groups. The European Union headquarter and the NATO headquarters are both located in Brussels, Belgium. Among the more reliable European allies is France, who was also attacked by ISIS in November 2015. Not only is the United States a member of NATO, it is also the nation that first declare a war on terror. Since the Al-Qaeda attack of September 11, 2001 it has been the mission of the United States to locate and eradicate all terrorism.

To this day, it is still the United States' top national security priority and as of April 23rd, 2016, the US has deployed 250 additional special operations forces to Syria (Starr and Liptak, 2016). Unilaterally, all of the member states of NATO must work to form an effective international narrative that will call upon the leaders of the opposition factions of Syria as well as any other government leadership of any neighboring Islamic nation that will to stand against members of their own religion and put an end to the violence and terror.

In response to this global violence crisis, all of the nations of Europe have stood in solidarity for one another after the ISIS attacks on France in November of 2015 and on Brussels on the morning of March 22, 2016. In fact, after the attack on Brussels “the most emphatic response came from Paris... [announcing] that the Eiffel Tower would be lit up in the colours of the Belgian flag, returning the gesture from last year, when the French tricolour was projected on public monuments around the world.” (Borger and Khomami, 2016).

Furthermore, neighboring nations such as the United Kingdom, Germany and Holland, as well as Pope Francis himself, have all publicly spoken out against this violence and shown their support for the Belgium people. In our own way of speaking out against ISIS, “Brussels’ most famous landmark, the Manneken Pis – the “peeing boy” in Dutch – was depicted urinating on a Kalashnikov assault rifle, the type of gun used in the Paris attacks, one of which was found in the wreckage at Brussels airport.” (Borger and Khomami, 2016).

This is incredibly important, because a divided Europe will not be able to put an end to the violence or assist the Syrian refugees that need protection and are looking for asylum. History will judge Belgium and the rest of the European Union on how it chooses to handle the Syrian refugees seeking asylum and Belgium should chose to be on the right side of history and protect the innocent and those in need of the basic human and civil liberties that free members of our own democratic nations can enjoy.

Deciphering the effects of a multilateral, multicultural public and traditional diplomacy effort to combat global terrorism is an immensely daunting task. In fact, only posterity will truly tell whether the actions we have chosen to take today will change things for the better. Nevertheless, in order to determine the level of success our tactics have in achieving our objectives, we will ultimately want to measure by examining the sentiments about the situation held by all parties involved. To do so, we will have to conduct in-depth interviews with all of the leaders involved in this conflict and gauge their sentiments about the situation. However, this can only occur after actions have been taken and major changes have occurred. For now, this action is needed and the immediate metrics will be determined by whether there are any more incidents

of ISIS terror attacks and whether Syria can recover and usher in a government that is secure and stable.

That is precisely why public diplomacy is necessarily at the heart of every effective foreign policy objective. No campaign to make positive change for the future, in a situation of bilateral or multilateral cooperation, can be made without a reciprocal understanding and respect between the governments and peoples. Therefore, public diplomacy is necessary to reach the policy objectives which Belgium has sought to achieve.

Public diplomacy has been defined by scholars in many ways, and the true meaning is still up for debate in the academic community. However, for the purpose of this piece, public diplomacy has been defined as strategic management function that build and maintains mutually beneficial relationship through two-way symmetrical communication with foreign publics for the purpose of foreign policy goals and objectives (Grunig, 1984).

As such, what we have seen all throughout is that there is an ethical and strategic quality of the content of the foreign policy itself which a public diplomacy practitioner must grapple with as they attempt to communicate and persuade a foreign public to accept this policy. Hence, it is necessary that the Belgian government take a tactful and multilateral approach in developing its foreign policy towards the institutions of extremism, terror and violence, because this truly global threat needs an equally global response if the world ever hopes to live without fear of an attack.

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