Honorable delegates,

Welcome to the Disarmament and International Security Committee (DISEC) at the 2019 edition of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Model United Nations Conference!

We are thrilled to have been given the opportunity to serve as chairs for this committee in the conference this year. Octavio is studying systems neuroscience, electrical engineering, and enjoys learning about geographical exploration and modern affairs. Adina is a freshman who intends on studying Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

As times advance, engaging with peers and discuss real challenges that every corner of our world faces is essential. The issues that we will be considering are still pressing and not yet solved: we are enabled to create frameworks for solutions to these problems together.

The specific topics we have chosen for our committee this year are:

I. Crisis on the Tigris and Euphrates Basin
II. Prevalence of Cyber Attacks

During the conference we sincerely look forward to learning much from your thoughts, ideas, and opinions. We hope that you all feel enabled to speak your minds openly during the conference, as this is a great opportunity for all of us to partake in a discussion on solutions conflicts that even scholars and policy makers debate today. We are confident that this committee will be both fun and thought-provoking, and we look forward to meeting all of you at MITMUNC 2019!

Please be sure to email your position paper (one page per topic) to mitmunc-disec@mit.edu.

Thank you,

Adina and Octavio
Chairs, Disarmament and International Security Committee
Topic I: Measures to Limit Conflict along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers

Introduction and Background

Spanning the nations of Turkey, Syria and Iraq is one of the Middle East’s most fertile regions: a valley civilization containing the ancient Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Throughout millennia of Mesopotamian history, the basins have provided both a home for countless agrarian societies and a rich source of natural resources for the entire region surrounding the rivers flowing south east (2,700 kilometers) from the Armenian Highlands of eastern Turkey to their confluence at the edge of the Persian gulf.

From the dawn of ancient eras, the hydrology of the geographic region, referred to historically as “The Cradle of Civilization,” has been essential to the ecology of the entire upper Persian Gulf. In the Uruk Period, some of the world’s earliest urban civilizations arose in the Tigris-Euphrates
section of the greater Fertile Crescent region, allowing vast populations to foster early industrial
innovation on account of the profuse natural surpluses that the rivers provided.

More recently, the war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s gravely harmed the Tigris-Euphrates
ecosystem; the Iraqi wetlands were severely dried out and subsequently left to suffer a very slow
recovery thereafter. In 1992, former dictator of Iraq Saddam Hussein learned of the possibility that
the Arabs inhabiting the marshlands were harboring fallen Shia insurgents; to retaliate, Hussein
worked to divert the Tigris and Euphrates rivers away from the marshlands. By the 2003 invasion of
Iraq, the wide marsh was downsized by nearly 90% and turned to desert, and hundreds of thousands
of people were displaced from the once-fertile land.

Current Situation

Today, the rivers remain of crucial importance for food, water, border policy, and energy security in
the trio of nations aforementioned, and continue to support a recently dwindling population of over
50 million people. After thousands of years, however, their ecological condition is critical. The rivers
experienced degradation at the behest of pollution, exploitation, and population growth for years,
and the aridity of the Middle East attests to the vital nature of water availability as a focal point of
geopolitical conflict therein.

In 2009, the marshes were reduced to approximately 30% of their original size do to the upstream
construction of dams by Turkey and Syria. Between 84% and 90% of the rivers’ marshes have been
destroyed, and the Turkish GAP project, founded in 1960 to harvest water from the Tigris and
Euphrates for hydroelectric energy projects, contributed to this degradation by its construction of 22
of these dams. The water conflict has created significant tension between Turkey and its eastern neighbors of Iraq and Syria, perceiving the project as a threat.

Ongoing civil war and violent upheaval in Syria and Iraq only worsen the imperilment of the vast majority of the Tigris-Euphrates ecoregion, with threats to critical infrastructure and hindrances to cooperation on policy. Baghdad officials and U.S. scientists are working slowly to revive the Iraqi marshes, with progress slowed by violence and terrorism. Conflict limits the rivers’ ability to recover from previous devastation and greatly endangers the existing populations along the rivers.

Modern warfare is effectively separated in part geographically by the presence of the rivers; in Zour Maghar, located on the eastern bank of the Euphrates in Syria, Kurdish militants and American special forces align themselves across from the Turkish-backed Arab rebels, firing at one another from opposing sides of the river. Generations have cultivated their crops and raised families in this very region, yet scores of people are fleeing Zhour Maghar to escape the ensuing conflict. These families can no longer obtain the resources their home once held, and their mass exodus brings them to the risk of starvation and poverty. The Islamic State still holds small sectors of power near the Iraqi border in Syria, heavily limiting border negotiations and sectioning off the populations. Syria’s war, along with the terrorism haunting Iraq and Syria, debilitate an entire sector of the eastern Fertile Crescent.

This humanitarian crisis requires urgent attention; left unchecked, the rivers’ resources will not only continue to deplete but also become far more inaccessible as conflict becomes more chaotic along the banks of the rivers.
Subjects of Concern for DISEC

One of the main concerns for the DISEC committee is mitigating the presence of human rights crises across the globe. The premise of limiting suffering and improving the well being of Iraqi and Syrian civilians is complexified by the presence of wars and civil conflicts that have lasted decades; finding the appropriate means to pursue the balance of health and security along Tigris-Euphrates civilizations in the midst of violent conflict is the true challenge.

In the past, the United Nations has warned against the depletion of natural resources in the Near eastern marshlands/Fertile Crescent and is fully aware of the previously harmful efforts to divert and manipulate the rivers for geopolitical gains. In recent months, humanitarian crises have continued without any significant aid or progress. There is further concern of the continuation or growth of violent conflict across Syria and Iraq near the rivers, and the mass departure of civilians from their homes in the war-torn fertile crescent.

Conclusions and Questions

Some questions that DISEC delegates at MITMUNC may wish to consider are:

- How should the international community view and respond to growing threats of conflict between nations such as Syria, Turkey, and Iraq over the geopolitics of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers?
- How should the international community respond to the continued humanitarian crisis in the Fertile Crescent and its implications for refugees, aid, and more?
● What can and/or should be done by the UN to prevent the escalation of tensions between Turkey, Iraq and Syria regarding the water crisis and borders?

● How should the UN respond to any continued threats of terrorism fueled by organizations such as ISIS that also threaten borders and the Tigris-Euphrates basin?

● What can or should be done to solve and/or limit the fighting between factions such as the Kurdish militia and/or Arab rebels?

● What measures can the UN take to limit the adverse effects of the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, if not solve them, on the settlements in the Tigris-Euphrates valleys?

The questions listed above are intended to facilitate discussion and debate and is not exhaustive. Feel free to prepare responses to these questions in particular, related topics, or unrelated topics.

The role of DISEC is to discuss global challenges, disarmament, and threats to peace all over the world. Among others, the crisis surrounding the modern Mesopotamian marshes is an extremely challenging and multi-faceted conflict whose threats extend beyond the rivers themselves. As such, it is of the utmost importance that the committee discuss this issue profoundly, thoughtfully, and thoroughly.

References and Further Reading


Topic 2: Prevalence of Cyber Attacks

Introduction

As the world moves further into the digital age, the need for cyber security protocols increases greatly. Cyber attacks on countries and their institutions greatly affect their stability and could be detrimental to the safety of their people. International cooperation is crucial to the prevention of cyber warfare, and as this subject is still quite new, compromises should be made to define the consequences of cyber attacks.

Cyber attacks can affect everybody, from the highest government position down to the most common folk. There have been attacks on weapons facilities, including nuclear and chemical weapons facilities, in addition to attacks via ransomware, malicious software that forces people to pay in cryptocurrency in order to get their digital goods (pictures of family, train tickets, etc.) back.

There are many unanswered questions regarding cyber warfare and cyber attacks. If a national of Country A sends an attack while in Country B, which country is responsible? Are cyber attacks acts of war?

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As delegates, your role is to come up with a multi-faceted resolution that will help prevent further cyber warfare and includes responses to the unanswered questions regarding cyber attacks.

**Historical Cyber Attacks**

**Estonia:** Estonia was relatively technologically advanced, as most of the country’s affairs are on the grid. “By 2007, Estonia had instituted an e-government in which ninety percent of all band services, and even parliamentary elections, were carried out via the internet.” They have free Wi-Fi, and their tax services are even online. They were even known as eStonia.

But in April of 2007, they were attacked. Several important websites were compromised, and there was rioting and unrest that left casualties. It was the first time that an entire country had been digitally targeted, and the Minister of Defense invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which states that an attack on one of the countries in the alliance compels the entire alliance to defend themselves against the aggressor. It is rumored that Russia made the attacks. Regardless, the cyber attacks on Estonia were the first large scale cyber aggressions on a country.

**“WannaCry:**” In 2017 a ransomware called “WannaCry” hit people in over 150 countries. Most of the people affected had to pay significant amounts of money in BitCoin in order to recover their kidnapped items such as family photos, important files, or transportation tickets.

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4 https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/berkjintlw27&id=195&men_tab=srchresult
Neil Walsh, Chief of Cyber and Emerging Crime at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said, “Law enforcement and diplomats have been warning people of ransomware for some time, but this is really the first time that we’ve seen an attack of this size.” On the subject of the scale of the attack, Walsh also said, “If we consider this sort of weaponization of cyberspace and the impact that that could have, especially on developing countries, it could be enormous. If you had a significant cyberattack on a country that had no real capability to respond to a threat to its critical national infrastructure, you could have an immediate and long-standing impact.”

Cyber weapons like the “WannaCry” ransomware could be used to hijack not just computers, but telephone systems and even nuclear plants.

**The Netherlands:** Earlier this year, Russian spies were caught in The Netherlands attempting to remotely launch a cyber attack against the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons\(^6\). British Prime Minister Theresa May and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte released a statement saying, “This attempt to access the secure systems of an international organisation working to rid the world of chemical weapons demonstrates the GRU’s [Russian intelligence agency] disregard for the global values and rules than keep us all safe. Our action today reinforces the clear message from the international community: we will uphold rules-based international system, and defend international institutions from those that seek to do them harm.”

Russian intelligence has been caught attempting to cyber attack several other institutions, including the United States’ Democratic National Committee.

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The Threat

Several studies have pointed towards the nuclear weapons systems of the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as other countries, being at risk of cyber attacks\(^7\). Most nuclear weapons facilities have not kept up with advancing technologies, so terrorist organizations, enemy states, and criminals would be easily able to send cyber aggressions to infiltrate the nuclear systems. A report from the thinktank Chatham House says, “There are a number of vulnerabilities and pathways through which a malicious actor may infiltrate a nuclear weapons system without a state’s knowledge. Human error, systems failures, design vulnerabilities and susceptibilities within the supply chain all represent common security issues in nuclear weapons systems.”

In addition to nuclear weapons systems, as stated above chemical weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s) could be at risk of infiltration through cyber attacks. Common folk and nongovernmental institutions are also affected through the use of malware and ransomware. According to Comparitech\(^8\), the countries most hit by ransomware are:

1. India
2. Russian Federation
3. Kazakhstan
4. Italy
5. Germany
6. Vietnam
7. Algeria

\(^8\) https://www.cybersecurity-insiders.com/list-of-countries-which-are-most-vulnerable-to-cyber-attacks/
There is very little that has been done to regulate and prevent against cyber attacks, as technology keeps growing and evolving. During your research as delegates, you should be thinking about the following questions:

- Should cyber attacks be considered acts of war? Should nations be able to invoke Article VII of the UN Charter after being cyber attacked?
- How do threats of cyber attacks affect the international compromise on nuclear proliferation? Should the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty be revised?
- Should cyber criminals be tried in their native country, the country they attacked, or the International Court of Justice?

Feel free to use this background guide to help with your preparation, but it is strongly suggested that you do your own research outside of this guide.