

Committee/ Council: Security Council
Issue: The situation in Syria
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Position: President

Introduction

“For the sake of Syria, and for the region, we must end this violence and begin to restore hope in a political transition to a democratic future – a future in which all communities have their place.”
-Kofi Annan, UN Joint Special Envoy,
Press Conference, May 29 2012

More than one year ago, in March 2011, the Arab World experienced a series of mass and violent demonstrations, many of which ended with the overthrow of the authoritarian governments that have been ruling the countries in the region for many decades now. Influenced by this unprecedented wave of protests locals in the southern Syrian city of Deraa marched calling for democracy and greater freedom, thus marking the beginning of the unrest in Syria. The security forces responded opening fire and killing four protesters, who were to become the first victims of this sanguinary revolution accounting for the loss of thousands of lives. Now that the Arab Spring has reached its nadir, the situation in Syria is more urgent than ever.

Despite international intervention and diplomatic pressure, the Syrian regime remains cohesive and committed to the suppression of the rebellion using all means -legitimate or not- necessary. Relying on its indubitable tenacity, the Syrian government has manifested an intransigent policy of unwillingness to cooperate with international actors and even halt the hostilities. It is, however, undeniable that these events pose the greatest threat to the four decades rule of the Assad family in the region. The pressure put on the current President, Bashar al-Assad, to step down is immense. Not only the United Nations (UN) and the Arab League, but also former allies of the country, such as Jordan, have condemned the current regime and have called for a political reform.

This study guide seeks to examine the main aspects of the current situation in Syria, including its historical background and possible solutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Arab Spring: The term is used to describe the series of protests and rebellions in many Middle Eastern and Northern African countries that aim at overthrowing the current regimes and establishing democracy. It began in Tunisia in December 2010 with the self- immolation of Mohamedd Bouazizi, a civilian, who was protesting against the authoritarian government.

Ba'ath Party: (from the Arabic- *ba'ath*= resurrection) The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is a political party officially founded in 1952 as the result of the merger of the Arab Ba'ath Party and the Arab Socialist Party. Its core ideological objectives are socialism and pan-Arab unionism. Nowadays, it is split into two factions: the Iraqi-led and the Syrian-led one. The Ba'ath party has been the only legitimate party in Syria since 1963, when it ceased power with a military coup. In 1970 Hafez al-Assad overthrew the previous president with a new coup and remained in power until 2000, when he was succeeded by his son and current President, Bashar al-Assad. The Assad family has been one of the longest ruling families in the Arab World.

Syrian National Council (SNC): The SNC is a representative body of the Syrian nation that encompasses the youth of the revolution, the nation's political forces and national figures. It is the result of an attempt to unite the opposition, in order to overthrow the regime and establish a democratic, multi-party and civil state. It has been recognized by the European Union as "a legitimate representative of Syrians".

Alawites: A sect of Shii Muslims that makes up approximately 12% of the Syrian population. Even though they consider themselves Muslims their religion incorporates some beliefs that are rejected by orthodox Islam. The Assad family, as well as many members of the government are Alawites, thus rendering them beneficiaries, even though a minority.

Shabiha: The term is used to describe heavily armed groups that operate in Syria and allegedly carry out the majority of the massacres and killings. Even though it is not clear who they are loyal to, it is widely believed that they act alongside the security forces. The government denies any relation to them and characterizes them as "armed criminal gangs".

Background Information

History

Prior to the Arab Spring

The modern history of Syria has been stigmatized by the country's tense relations to the neighboring countries and the US, which have often culminated in armed conflicts, as well as the instability that prevails within it. The massive demonstrations that broke out, when Hafez al-Assad, who seized control with a military coup in 1970, dropped the constitutional requirement that the president must be Muslim were the first sign of the popular disaffection to the government that would mark the next decades. The death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 and his succession by his son, Bashar, did not ease the popular dissatisfaction.

The Hafez al-Assad fostered strong ties to Egypt and Iran, a fact that led to the deterioration of the relations between Syria and many other nations. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Syria and Israel had constant disputes over the region

of the Golan Heights, which would not end even after long efforts for negotiations initiated in the 1990s. Egypt continued to be the main ally of Syria in this long lasting conflict. The tensions between Syria and Israel escalated in 2007, when the latter carried out an aerial strike against a site in northern Syria, which was said to be a nuclear facility under construction. The Israeli allegations, however, were not taken into consideration until 2011, when the nuclear watchdog of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) decided to report Syria to the UN Security Council.

As a close ally of Israel, the US was always skeptical towards Syria. The tense relations between the two countries worsened in 2002, when senior US officials included Syria in the list of the countries that belonged to the “axis of evil”(annex1). The term was coined by President Bush in a speech earlier in the same year. In 2004 the US imposed the first economic sanctions against Syria, as it claimed that the regime supported terrorism. After the Israeli air strike the US backed its ally and accused North Korea of facilitating Syria with the construction of a nuclear reactor, which was destroyed by Israel. It was not until 2010 that the US appointed the first ambassador to Damascus in an attempt to ameliorate their relations. However, just two months after this step of progress, the US amplified its sanctions on Syria, as it supposedly continued supporting terrorism, sought for weapons of mass destruction and provided Lebanon’s Hezbollah with missiles in violation of UN resolutions.

The last accusation was based on the hostilities that had been taking place between the two countries since 1976, when Syria intervened in the Lebanese civil war. Even after the two parties announced the cessation of hostilities in 1983, the Syrian troops remained in Lebanon and were even reinforced in 1987. This led to a 2004 resolution of the UN Security Council that called for the withdrawal of all forces from Lebanon, which was realized by April of the following year. Finally, in 2008 Syria and Lebanon restored their diplomatic relations.

Lastly, it is of great importance to examine the unstable relations between Syria and the neighboring country of Iraq. The conflict between the two countries started in 1980 with the Iran- Iraq war, in which Syria openly backed Iran, possibly driven by the traditional rivalry between the Syrian and the Iraqi faction of the Ba’ath party. A decade later, during the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait, Syria joined the US- led coalition against Iraq, thus establishing a brief period of improved relations with the US. After almost a quarter century of conflicts the two parties restored diplomatic relations in 2006, which however did not prove to be stable.

Current Situation (Arab Spring)

The Arab spring, this series of mass demonstrations against the authoritarian governments of the Middle East, triggered the Syrian uprising, which started in March 2011, with civilians demanding the immediate release of political prisoners. The riots broke out in the city of Deraa and the security forces intervened without delay and shot a number of people dead. These violent reactions caused days of unrest that steadily spread nationwide within a brief period. President Bashar quickly responded, in order to avoid a further escalation

of the protests and a possible threat of his position, and announced some conciliatory measures, such as the release of dozens of political prisoners and the dismissal of the government. Later, he lifted the 48-year-old state of emergency. In the following months the rebellion took on a more violent form and the government resorted to heavy weaponry, in order to crush anti-regime protests. The US and the European Union imposed more sanctions, so as to force Assad to halt the hostilities. As aforementioned, Assad accused “armed gangs” of carrying out the killings, which were clearly the work of security forces, loyal to the government. In the summer, the opposition met in Istanbul in an attempt to unify against the government. This meeting resulted in the formation of the Syrian National Council (SNC), which became the official representative of the Syrian people. On an international level, the Syrian regime relied on China and the Russian Federation, in order to avoid foreign military intervention. After the Chinese and Russian veto of a UN resolution condemning Syria in October, Assad seemed to have eluded the fate of other leaders, such as Muammar Qaddafi and Hosni Mubarak. However, the international pressure continued and in November 2011 the Arab League suspended Syria and imposed sanctions. In early 2012 the UN appointed former Secretary General Kofi Annan Joint Special Envoy in Syria with the mission to find a viable resolution to the conflict that all parties would agree with. In May 2012 the UN Security Council condemned the excessive violence used by the government in a massacre in a small town, Houla. The majority of the victims, which are estimated to be more than one hundred, were women and children. In response, France, the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Canada and Australia expelled senior Syrian diplomats.

The Peace Plan

In March 2012, a six-point peace plan was submitted to the UN by the Special Envoy to Syria, which had the support of China and the Russian Federation. At first, both the opposition and the government seemed willing to enforce the plan. However the lack of trust between them resulted in bilateral accusations of violation of its terms. Finally, after the Houla massacre and the ultimatum issued to President Assad by the Free Syrian Army the peace plan practically collapsed.

The text of the plan, as officially announced by the UN, is following:
(<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10583.doc.htm>)

To this aim, the Security Council fully supports the initial six-point proposal submitted to the Syrian authorities, as outlined by the Envoy to the Security Council on 16 March 2012, to:

1) commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people, and, to this end, commit to appoint an empowered interlocutor when invited to do so by the Envoy;

2) commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country.

To this end, the Syrian Government should immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centres, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centres. As these actions are being taken on the ground, the Syrian Government should work with the Envoy to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism.

Similar commitments would be sought by the Envoy from the opposition and all relevant elements to stop the fighting and work with him to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism;

3) ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, and to this end, as immediate steps, to accept and implement a daily two-hour humanitarian pause and to coordinate exact time and modalities of the daily pause through an efficient mechanism, including at local level.

4) intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons, and persons involved in peaceful political activities, provide without delay through appropriate channels a list of all places in which such persons are being detained, immediately begin organizing access to such locations and through appropriate channels respond promptly to all written requests for information, access or release regarding such persons;

5) ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them;

6) respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.

Conclusion

Some fifteen months after the outbreak of the turmoil, it is clear that the situation in Syria differs from those in its neighboring countries. What started as an integral part of the Arab Spring has now taken on the form of a civil war with many elements of a sectarian conflict. The President, an Alawite, represents a small minority of the Syrian people thus provoking clashes between rival communities. The Western world appears paralyzed, as negotiation initiatives brought on by foreign diplomats fail and the peace plans are violated by both sides. The death toll in the Syrian conflict has climbed to 9.000 and there is no valid sign of an oncoming end. It is clearly imperative that the situation in Syria be resolved immediately.

Main Countries and Organizations involved

USA: The US has explicitly expressed their support of the SNC and has noted the need for Assad to step down. However, the country does not seem willing to engage militarily in the conflict and focuses its efforts on diplomatic pressure, mainly on the Russian Federation. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, has said Moscow is contributing to a civil war, when it should be its priority to help prevent it. Moreover, US officials have noted that the solution to this conflict includes: "the

establishment of a fully representative and inclusive interim government which leads to free and fair elections, a ceasefire to be observed by all and equality for all Syrians under the law".

European Union: In a statement issued on August 18, 2011, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton said: "The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside." To this end, the EU has imposed a number of sanctions on the Syrian regime, which include an arms embargo and targeted sanctions against individuals participating in the regime. On June 30, 2012, Catherine Ashton noted: "[We reiterate] our full support for Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan and his six point plan and for UNSMIS (=UN Supervision Mission in Syria)."

Russian Federation: Russia has always been a close ally of Syria and to this day continues to back President Assad on an international level. Alongside with China, it has blocked two UN resolutions condemning the excessive use of violence in Syria. Moreover, it has declared that it will not tolerate a military intervention in the conflict. During the G20 summit in June, Russia once again manifested its unwillingness to accept a solution, which includes a change of the regime, even though Putin and Obama issued a joint statement calling for the cessation of violence in Syria.

People's Republic of China: As aforementioned, China has blocked two UN resolutions proposing the imposition of sanctions on Syria. Even though it seemed at first that China and Russia would a common front against the US, China's stance on the matter is more conciliatory than the Russian. In a rare statement, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman called in early June both sides to halt the hostilities. This move is seen with appreciation from the diplomatic circles, as it is included in a spectrum of a more rational action plan, in accordance with the official UN policy.

Arab League: Last November the Arab League decided with a unanimous vote of its 22 Member States to suspend Syria, because the country failed to halt the violence and honor its promises to the League that it would, among others, release political prisoners and hold negotiations with all parties. After Syria's suspension the Qatari Prime Minister stated: "Syria is a dear country for all of us and it pains us to make this decision. We hope there will be a brave move from Syria to stop the violence and begin a real dialogue toward real reform." In an effort to contribute to the cessation of the hostilities the Arab League sent observers to Syria, whose mission, however, failed and stopped due to excessive violence. Currently, the Arab League considers the peace plan proposed by Kofi Annan to be the most effective solution and urges all parties to implement it.

Iran: The roots of the strong alliance between these two countries can be traced in the common traits that their regimes share. Both are authoritarian and defiantly

independent and have a tendency for isolation from the international community. Even though the Syrian Ba'ath party follows a socialist ideology, which is directly opposed to the rigidly religious policy of Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President, their common strategic goals render them close allies. Moreover, Iran has a Shiite majority and, although Syrians are mostly Sunni, Assad belongs to the Alawites, a Shii sect. These facts result in the full support that Iran has repeatedly expressed for Syria. Together with Russia, Iran seems to be the most important factor that contributes to the strength of the Assad regime.

Timeline of events

Date	Event
January 26, 2011	self- immolation of a civilian as an act of protest against the governmental suppression
March 18, 2011	mass demonstrations against the government. Many killings are reported.

Over March the protests spread across the country. The security forces account for hundreds of deaths.

April 16, 2011	Assad lifts the 48-year-old state of emergency
May 1-10, 2011	tanks enter to other cities including Homs, Deraa and Banyas. In response, the US and the EU tighten the sanctions.
June 16, 2011	the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki- Moon issues a statement officially condemning the violence in Syria.
July 31, 2011	massacre in the northern province of Hama. Assad sacks its governor.
August 18, 2011	Canada, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States call for Assad to step down for the first time.

September 02, 2011	the EU announces an oil embargo on Syria, due to be implemented on September 3.
September 21, 2011	Turkey cuts all diplomatic relations with Syria.
October 04, 2011	Russia and China veto a UNSC resolution condemning Syria. The recently formed SNC delivers one of its first official statements.
November 2011	the Arab League suspends Syria and imposes sanctions.
February 04, 2012	Russia and China veto second UNSC resolution
February 23, 2012	former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is appointed UN Joint Special Envoy in Syria.
March 10, 2012	Annan visits Syria and holds talks with Assad, but they show little progress.
March 27, 2012	Syria agrees to the UN sponsored peace plan, which China and Russia have already agreed with.
April 10, 2012	official beginning of the cease fire. Activists report that it is not implemented.
April 12, 2012	a fragile UN- brokered cease fire comes into effect. Four days later UN monitors arrive to oversee its implementation.
May 25, 2012	Houla massacre
June 6, 2012	Assad appoints new Prime Minister

Over June there is an escalation of violence and a profound violation of the cease fire.

June 16, 2012	UNSMIS activities in Syria are suspended due to excessive violence.
June 30, 2012	Geneva meeting- Powers fail to agree on a plan for a transition government.

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

S/RES/2042: establishment of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria
S/RES/2043

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Until February 2012 and the appointment of Kofi Annan as Special Envoy in Syria, the United Nations had not taken any specific measures aiming at the cessation of hostilities in the country. The Russian and Chinese refusal to condemn the Syrian regime posed an obstacle in the attempts of the Security Council to increase the pressure on Bashar al-Assad to step down. However, the six-point peace plan submitted to the UN by Kofi Annan marked the beginning of the UN intervention in Syria, which was not as decisive as it should have been. The proposal collapsed and the violence continued.

On June 30 Kofi Annan initiated a meeting that was held in Geneva and aimed at the formation of a common plan, which would promote a transitional government with a new President. The countries, however, failed to reach a cohesive conclusion, as the controversy between the Russian and the American policy impeded the development of a plan. The outcome of the meeting was the announcement that a transitional government would contribute to the resolution of the conflict. The world powers did not call for President Assad to step down. The agreement was rejected by both the government and the opposition of Syria.

On April 21, 2012, the UNSC passed a resolution, which decided the establishment of a UN peacekeeping operation in Syria with the mandate to “monitor a cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties and to monitor and support the full implementation of the Envoy’s six-point proposal”. However, the excessive violence did not allow the forces to carry out their mandate and they have, therefore, suspended operation. This suspension is reviewed on a daily basis. (annex2)

Possible Solutions

- Due to the incompetence of Annan’s plan to establish peace and put an end to the hostilities in Syria, it is imperative that a new, innovative peace proposal be formed. The abstention of all parties from all kinds of violence is a prerequisite for the implementation of any other measure concerning Syria’s reform. In order for the new peace plan to be successful, its terms will have to ensure that all parties will abide by it, so as to create trust among them.

- There are numerous scenarios for the political reform in Syria. The most widely accepted one seems to be the formation of a transitional government that will lead the country to elections. It is, however, a contradictory point, whether Assad will continue to be the President and whether the current officials will have the right to participate. Such a solution could be implemented in a framework of UN supervision, so as to ensure the transparency of the procedures followed the representation of all minorities –and the Sunni majority- in the new regime.
- Other solutions have to cover the social and economic reform of Syria. The country has been under strict authoritarian rule for many decades and it is therefore a necessity to improve its infrastructure, including the public service. Moreover, a resolution could also propose a military and security reform in the country.
- Furthermore, it is urgent to discuss the reintegration of Syria in the international diplomatic community. During the turmoil Syria has been excluded and isolated from important organizations, such as the Arab League. Should a political reform take place, the country has to be admitted again in these institutions.
- After the implementation of the peace plan and the political reform the international community should also consider lifting the sanctions imposed on Syria, so as to enable its economic revival. Considering that Syria is a major oil supplier, lifting the oil embargo would benefit both the global market and the country itself.
- A resolution should also try to resolve the severe humanitarian crisis in the region. Another humanitarian aspect that should be addressed is the religious conflict between the Alawites and the Sunni, who have suffered under the governmental suppression.

As the situation in Syria is a very contradictory topic it is highly likely that many disagreements will arise during the debate. The severity of the issue necessitates realistic and effective solutions, as well as co-operative spirit from all sides. This Study Guide provides you with the basic background information, but it is up to you to gain thorough knowledge of the topic and come up with innovative solutions. It is your turn now!

*Please note that the Study Guide includes developments until July 7!

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“Monitoring a cessation of armed violence in all its forms” United Nations- it’s your world!.

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Annex

1) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3DqHylcsO8E>

2) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLCUCpNLLFM>