

Syria's Crisis and the Global Response
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What is the status of the situation in Syria?

Political violence in Syria has hit new heights in July 2012, and many observers speculate whether the revolutionary momentum has reached a tipping point. A deadly attack on Assad's inner sanctum on July 18, which killed several high-ranking officials including the defense minister and the president's brother-in-law, shook the regime at its foundation. Rebel forces have seized control over several border crossings and large tracts of Syrian territory, and may eventually establish "safe havens" from which to expand operations. Meanwhile, a spate of high-level Syrian defections has only added to the picture of a crumbling state.

International diplomatic efforts aimed at ending the seventeen-month-old conflict—namely a UN-backed ceasefire—have failed. A series of Russian and Chinese vetoes have remained an obstacle to UN economic sanctions. Syria's civil war has claimed as many as fifteen thousand lives and displaced millions more. A further unraveling of the conflict could cause ripples throughout the region.

What is the Syrian opposition movement?

The Syrian resistance is highly fractured, though most agree on the need to remove Assad. The main opposition is the Syrian National Council, an umbrella group dominated by the country's Sunni majority, including Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. The SNC was created in Istanbul, and at a meeting in June 2012, it elected Abdelbaset Sieda (NYT), a Kurdish academic, as its leader. He has vowed to expand the exile opposition group's political base. The SNC supports Assad's ouster, but unlike its domestic counterparts, has called for international intervention in Syria, including "immediate protection for civilians."

The National Coordination Committee (also Coordination Committee of the Forces for Democratic Change) is a domestic opposition bloc of center and left groups as well as independent individuals, including Kurdish activists. The NCC supports regime change but has denounced measures that would include outside military intervention. The group is led by Hassan Abdel-Azim (al-Ahram).

The Free Syrian Army (BBC) is a group of army defectors that have waged a violent insurgency to depose Assad by force. The FSA is led by colonel Riad al-Assad and based just inside the Turkish border, from which it launches attacks on Syrian security forces. FSA claims to have some fifteen thousand fighters, but analysts have put this number at no more than seven thousand. In March 2012, the FSA said it would conform to the Annan peace plan, but after subsequent actions by the Assad regime, it said it "will not give guarantees."

What are the implications of the Red Cross 'civil war' designation?

The Red Cross "civil war" designation will likely have little consequence on the ground in Syria, but the distinction does mean that international humanitarian law now applies throughout the country and could have implications for war crimes prosecutions. Humanitarian law, also referred to as the "rules of war," grants all parties in an armed conflict the right to use appropriate force to achieve their aims.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Josh Lockman, a legal scholar at the University of Southern California, said the new distinction may have tremendous significance in the long term. "With this application of international humanitarian law to the conflict, key regime officials could be held responsible for both massacres against civilians and also for the treatment of captured combatants, in this case rebel fighters, to the degree they're abused, harmed or killed," he said.

What is Kofi Annan's six-point plan?

As the UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan put forth a six-point peace plan in March 2012 to help bring an end to the protracted crisis. The abbreviated components of the proposal include:

1. Work with the international envoy
2. End violence by all parties under UN cease-fire; Syrian army to stop using heavy weapons and withdraw from population centers
3. Allow humanitarian aid
4. Free detainees
5. Ensure freedom of movement for journalists
6. Respect peaceful demonstrations

The Assad government initially agreed to abide by the plan on March 27, but on April 8 said it would not withdraw its military from cities until "terrorist groups" [armed rebel groups] provided written assurances to "halt all violence." The FSA rejected this demand. In May, a UN peacekeeping mission said both the Syrian government and opposition forces were in violation of the treaty (AP).

What has been the policy of the Arab and Muslim nations?

The Arab League suspended Syrian membership and imposed economic sanctions on Damascus in November 2011, unprecedented moves by the twenty-two-nation bloc. It also brokered an ill-fated peace agreement--a precursor to the Annan plan--with the Assad regime (al-Jazeera) that called for ending violence against protestors and opening negotiations with opposition groups. The League sent a team of observers to Syria in late December to monitor the plan's implementation.

In January 2012, the League officially called for Assad to step down and requested a resolution from the UN Security Council in support. The proposal was vetoed by Russia and China (discussed below). Just a few weeks later, the League withdrew its observer mission, citing the continued violence (Reuters).

Turkey, once a strong supporter of Syria, broke with Damascus after the crackdown began in March last year and has called for Assad to leave power. It has also permitted Syrian refugees and opposition forces to reside within its borders.

What are the U.S. sanctions on Syria?

The United States has placed a variety of sanctions on Syria that prohibit aid and restrict bilateral trade. This report (PDF) from the Congressional Research Service discusses the host of U.S. sanctions in much greater detail, but major policy provisions include:

State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation (1979)

This classification automatically subjects it to several general sanctions, including restrictions on foreign aid (which it hasn't received since 1981); a ban on defense exports; controls dual use exports; and other miscellaneous restrictions.

Syria Accountability Act (2004)

This banned all exports to Syria except food or medicine; prohibited U.S. businesses from operating in Syria; banned flight of Syrian aircraft in U.S.; reduced diplomatic ties; imposed travel bans on Syrian diplomats; and froze foreign transactions in Syria property.

USA PATRIOT Act

A ruling implemented by the Bush administration under the Patriot Act in 2006 bans U.S. banks and their overseas subsidiaries from doing business with the Commercial Bank of Syria.

Executive Orders

Subsequent Executive Orders under Presidents Bush and Obama have also targeted Syrian individuals and entities. Notable measures in response to the 2011-2012 crisis include Executive Orders 13572 and 13573, which froze the U.S. property of several high-ranking Syrian and Iranian officials, including President Assad. More broadly, Executive Order 13582 froze all U.S. assets of the Syrian government, prohibited U.S. persons from doing business with the Assad regime, and banned U.S. imports of Syrian petroleum products.

Additionally, Washington officially closed its embassy in Damascus and withdrew Ambassador Robert Ford on February 6 amid an escalating assault by Syrian security forces on the city of Homs (al-Jazeera). The U.S. government ordered the expulsion of Syria's charge d'affaires from Washington in May 2012, following the brutal slaughter of more than a hundred civilians, mostly women and children, by regime forces in the Houla region (VOA). Many other governments internationally also dismissed top Syrian diplomats in response to the massacre.

What are the European Union sanctions on Syria?

The European Union has passed more than a dozen rounds of sanctions on the Assad regime since the March 2011 uprising. This list from Reuters AlertNet provides more comprehensive details of the EU measures. Significant sanctions include:

Asset freezes and travel bans imposed on top members of the Syrian military and government, including Assad and his family

Establishment of an arms embargo

Sanction on the Syrian central bank

Bans on the import of Syrian oil and the export of equipment for the petro industry

What has been the sanctions' impact?

Western bans on the import of Syrian oil, the mainstay of its economy, have exacted a heavy toll, according to reports. In May 2012, Syrian oil minister Sufian Allaw said the restrictions had cost the country approximately \$4 billion (CBS). Prior to the March 2011 unrest, Syria obtained some \$7-8 million per day in oil export revenue, mostly from Europe.

The Syrian economy has averted collapse by relying on the aid of friendly nations, including Russia, Iraq, and Iran, according to Samer Abboud at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The sanctions that have hit Syria the hardest, he says, "are those imposed by the League of Arab States and the European Union. Their sanctions mainly target sources of government revenue by prohibiting transactions with individuals, companies, and state-owned institutions tied to the regime."

How have China and Russia responded to the Syrian unrest?

Both Russia and China have significant economic and military relations with Syria. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the countries have vetoed three Western-backed resolutions aimed at isolating the Assad regime-- the most recent July 19. Analysts say the

diplomatic opposition stems from fears of another Western-backed military intervention similar to that in Libya and the Ivory Coast (Reuters).

In early July, Russia endorsed a Syria "Action Group" plan that called for a transitional government in Damascus, but Moscow was keen to have the proposal omit any explicit demands for Assad to leave power. Russia has since re-emphasized that it will not back a UN proposal that would include sanctions as a solution to the Syrian political crisis (NYT).

What are the regional implications?

An unraveling of the crisis in Syria could bring significant repercussions for the region. One concern is of a brewing proxy war (Atlantic) in which Sunni states like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf countries line up in support of the Syrian resistance, and Shiite-majority nations such as Iran and Iraq seek to bolster Assad's hold on power. "When you consider the history of neighboring nations where civil wars led to the loss of power for minorities--specifically Lebanon in the 1980s and Iraq more recently--it doesn't bode well for Syria," says Aram Nerguizian of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Iran, a longtime Syrian ally, continues to have crucial links to the regime in Damascus. Tehran has provided Damascus with both military and much-needed economic assistance, including helping the regime circumvent Western sanctions on oil exports (WSJ), U.S. and European officials say. In May 2012, Washington claimed the Iranian Basij militia helped train the Syrian Shabiha, the militia implicated in the brutal Houla massacre (Guardian).

Adding to the political complexity is the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah (NYT), long supported by Iran. Hezbollah has warned that foreign intervention could stir a wider conflict in the region, particularly against the state of Israel.

Other possible regional impacts of the spiraling chaos in Syria include refugee flows, sectarian conflict, and non-state transnational violence, as well as the questionable security of Syria's large stockpiles of conventional and chemical weapons (WSJ).

What are the policy options?

Russian and Chinese resistance to international action at the UN has led to speculation of whether an independent group of nations or unilateral actors will intervene in Syria. However, there is no strong agreement on how the international community could assist the opposition in ousting the Assad regime.

Experts and analysts have offered several military options, including deploying ground troops, the use of air power, no-fly zones, and training and logistical support for the rebels. While diplomatic pressure (PDF) may provide symbolic value, most analysts do not expect it to change military conditions on the ground.

NATO has said categorically that it will not contribute to a military intervention in Syria (ForeignPolicy), nor will it provide assets to deliver humanitarian or medical assistance. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in February 2012, "Syria is ethnically, politically, religiously much more complicated than Libya."

The United States has not ruled out military options, including arming the Syrian opposition, but has nonetheless indicated a reluctance to do so. "We never take anything off the table ... as the President himself made absolutely clear, and as the Secretary has continued to say, we don't think more arms into Syria is the answer," said U.S. State Department spokeswoman Valerie Nuland in February 2012.

"You still need the international community to come up with a plan for an orderly transfer of power from a [Alawite, a Shia sect] minority to the [Sunni] majority," says Vali R. Nasr, Dean-elect of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, in this CFR interview. The Alawites are concerned, Nasr says, about who will protect them in Sunni-led Syria. "Because there is no satisfactory answer to that question, they're not going to give up power," he says.

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