



SECURITY COUNCIL REPORT UPDATE REPORT



26 May 2011 No. 2

SYRIA

Expected Council Action

On 25 May France, Germany, Portugal and the UK circulated to Security Council members a draft resolution condemning the government crackdown in Syria. At press time it was unclear when the draft might be put to a vote. Discussions at the G8 summit in France today and tomorrow could be significant in this regard.

The initiative to take action on the violence by Syria against its citizens has been gaining ground over the last month. But there have been divisions in the Council.

Key Recent Developments

The escalation of the Syrian government's violent suppression of public protests since mid-March—with reports, described as credible by the UN, of 850 killed and 8,000 arbitrarily detained—has led to increased pressure on Syria. Recent media reports have indicated mass graves found in Deraa and a death toll of 1,100.

The draft Security Council resolution recalls the Syrian government's responsibility to protect its citizens, stresses the need for accountability, condemns the systematic abuse of human rights including killings, arbitrary detention, disappearances and torture; and calls upon Syrian authorities to:

- respect human rights and international humanitarian law, act with restraint and refrain from reprisals, and allow unhindered humanitarian access;
- undertake comprehensive and credible reforms for genuine political participation;
- release all prisoners of conscience;
- lift the siege of Deraa and other affected towns and lift all media and communications restrictions; and
- launch a credible and impartial investigation and cooperate with the UN Human Rights Council's investigative mission.

In addition the draft resolution calls upon member states to prevent the supply or sale of arms and related material to Syria and asks the Secretary-General to report back to the Council within two weeks.

US President Barack Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron discussed the Syrian issue during the US state visit to London on 24-26 May.

On 25 May, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made his first public pronouncement on the situation in Syria calling on "Syrians to preserve their country as well as the ruling regime." (Hezbollah is backed by Syria and Iran.)

On 23 May, the EU imposed sanctions on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It had imposed similar measures on 13 members of the Syrian ruling elite on 9 May.

On 19 May, US President Barack Obama said during his Middle East speech that Assad should lead his country to democracy or step aside. On 18 May the US imposed sanctions on Assad and six members of his regime. The US took similar measures on 29 April against the Syrian regime.

Switzerland and Canada have also recently imposed sanctions.

On 22 May, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference expressed concern over the escalating violence and called for restraint.

On 20 May, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced it was working with Lebanon to aid Syrians in northern Lebanon who had fled the violence.

On 17 May, Assad seemed to acknowledge that there had been an excess of violence by the state. But he said the crisis was coming to an end and 4,000 police were undergoing training to “prevent these excesses”.

On 15 May, Israeli forces killed a number of civilians on the border between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and on the blue line between Israel and Lebanon when crowds of Palestinian refugees, living in Syria and Lebanon respectively, breached the border in al-Nakba protests. In the case of the Golan Heights incident, approximately 4,000 participated in the protest with 100 crossing the Israeli technical fence. Such protests in this area are annual occurrences, however the numbers this year were unprecedented and it was the first instance of Syria allowing unauthorised attempts to cross the border in the 37 years since UN Disengagement Force was established. Analysts note that the breach of the border could not have happened without the knowledge and acquiescence of the Syrian authorities.

It is noteworthy that on 10 May, Rami Makhlouf, an advisor to Assad, said that without stability in Syria, there would not be stability in Israel.

On 9 May, the Secretary-General again called for an end to the violence and mass arrests, for an independent inquiry into the killings and for a UN team to enter Syria to assess the humanitarian situation, as previously discussed with Assad in a 4 May phone conversation.

On 27 April, the Council held a public debate on Syria, which enabled many members to put on record their concern about ongoing violence by Syrian security forces against unarmed civilian protestors. Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs B. Lynn Pascoe briefed and Syria also participated.

On 26 April, the Council failed to reach consensus on a press statement on the situation in Syria. The statement called for an end to the violence, urged restraint and stressed the importance of respect for human rights. It also supported the Secretary-General’s call for an independent investigation into the recent killings.

On 21 April, Syrian emergency laws, in place since 1963, were lifted but other more recent repressive measures were not and a significant intensification of Syrian repression of demonstrations followed, including by military forces with armoured units.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 29 April the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution requesting an investigative mission to Syria, with preliminary findings expected in June and a follow-up report in September. Elections to the Human Rights Council were held on 20 May in the General Assembly. Earlier in the month, there was opposition to Syria's bid for membership. The Asia slate was uncontested and originally included Syria, India, Indonesia and the Philippines for the four vacancies. On 9 May, Kuwait announced its candidacy as another Arab candidate for the Asia slate, and on 11 May, Syria withdrew.

Key Issues

A key issue for the Council has been whether, in its approach to acute violence against civilians, it is able to be even-handed between say Libya and Syria.

A second key issue is whether the situation in Syria is purely domestic or is a threat to international peace and security. Some members are very concerned about the risks to security in the region yet ironically for others it is precisely these risks which are leading them to be cautious about Council action.

Options

One option is for the resolution to go to the vote without further significant changes to the draft.

A second option for the Council is to try to negotiate concrete amendments such as tasking the Secretary-General with reporting requests or softening the language in the operative paragraphs so that they focus on what the Council would say in the absence of credible Syrian action to meet legitimate popular demands or in the instance of continued violence.

Council Dynamics

The need for action on Syria has been raised variously by France, Germany, Portugal and the UK in the Council on at least seven occasions in May: during consultations following the regular monthly Middle East briefing on the 19th; in consultations during the 17 and 13 May briefings by the Department of Political Affairs; in the 10 May open debate on protection of civilians; following the OCHA briefing on Libya on the 9th; during the consultations on resolution 1559 (Lebanon) on the 6th; and following the briefing of the ICC prosecutor on Libya on the 4th.

It seems that there are now the necessary nine votes to adopt a resolution so the question of Council dynamics becomes the positions of the three permanent members who have not yet been willing to support formal Council action (China, Russia and the US).

China and Russia have resisted action on Syria initially arguing it as an internal matter. However, with displaced Syrians in northern Lebanon and recent cross border incidents in both Lebanon and Israel, the international implications for peace and security are more readily apparent and the arguments against action seems to be based more on the need to avoid stimulating further regional insecurity. There will be significant discussion at the highest levels on this at the G8 summit.

Russia and China have also been critical about the implementation of resolution 1973, the extent of NATO airstrikes and the position of the Contact Group on Libya which clearly favors Benghazi but this is something of a red herring since they are also the first to point out that Libya was a special case.

Brazil, India and South Africa have been wary about Council action on Syria. Brazil and South Africa seem sympathetic, however, to the acute human rights dimensions of the Syrian situation.

The US has been hesitant on Syria. It has major concerns about regional stability and the implications of Council action in that regard and perhaps Israeli voices calling for caution have also been influential. Further, the US is worried that a veto could embolden the Assad regime.

Lebanon, for its own domestic political reasons, is likely to be uneasy about any innovations on Syria and could abstain on any vote.

No Council member seems to believe that another Libya-style response is appropriate or necessary. However, many Council members find the silence on Syria, in comparison to Libya, problematic. In that sense, many Council members may feel a veto is worth the risk if the process demonstrates a majority of the Council members' concern about the situation and the desire for an even-handed approach.

At press time, reports of violent government repression seemed to have subsided somewhat. Against that background a number of Council members seem to feel that the draft resolution adds particular value as a call for political reform and as a deterrent to any further escalation of the situation.

Selected UN Documents

Security Council Meeting Records

- S/PV.6531 and resumption 1 (10 May 2011) on protection of civilians.
- S/PV.6524 (27 April 2011) was a briefing by Under-Secretary-General B. Lynn Pascoe on the situation in Syria followed by a Council public debate, which included statements by Council members and Syria.

Security Council Letter

- S/2011/310 (16 May 2011) was a letter from Israel regarding the 15 May al-Nakba protests in the Golan Heights.

Human Rights Council

- A/HRC/RES/S-16/1 (29 April 2011) requested an investigative mission to Syria, with preliminary findings expected in June and a follow-up report in September.

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