

Forum: Security Council

Issue: The situation concerning Syria

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Introduction

The current situation in the Syrian Arab Republic is at best troubling, and at worst verging on complete civil war. For nearly one year, protests have erupted across the country, focused mainly in major cities, where an increasingly large number of citizens have been demonstrating – initially peacefully but now through violent means – the current regime. Far from being unexpected, the roots of this discontent reach back many decades, to the time of Syrian independence from France in 1946 following the end of World War II. From its beginning, Syria has been plagued with instability and the country suffered multiple military coups for the first few decades of independence. In February 1958, Syria united with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic, a joint country meant to increase both states' standing in the Arab community and put further pressure on the similarly young Israeli state. However, the alliance lasted only until 1961 and Syria became independent again. After nine further years of instability, Hafiz al-Asad – a military man from a sect of Islam called the Alawites - seized control bloodlessly and greatly improved stability in Syria. Following al-Asad's death, his son Bashar al-Asad was named leader of Syria in 2000 and has been in power since. In March 2011, protests in many Syrian cities have increasingly called for the resignation of the current president, leading to increasingly violent crackdowns by the majority Alawite government.

Definition of Key Terms

Alawites

Alawites are a sect of Islam that was founded in the 9th century, which is largely similar to Shia Islam, but Alawites believe that the Caliph Ali (a former Arab ruler) is god-like. The majority of Alawites live in Syria and southern Turkey. Customs are similar to larger Islamist sects, but there is a significant Eastern Christian influence.

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring refers to the 2011 movements in many Arab states against ruling dictators towards more representative governments.

Background

The current situation in Syria is changing quickly, though protests still continue and the subsequent military reactions are becoming increasingly divisive and violent. Initially, the protests started over unhappiness with the Emergency Law that allowed the government to arrest citizens without warrants or evidence, as well as unilaterally remove officials and close monitoring of opposition political parties.

At first, the government reacted by allowing some reforms and even repealed the Emergency Law. However, as protests continued when the reforms were seen as ineffective, the government introduced the military to break up demonstrations and to continue arresting citizens. The opposition is now actively calling for President al-Asad to step down. After protests had been going on for six months, the leaders of the opposition to President al-Asad decided to unite to form the Syrian National Council. The Syrian National Council exists in exile at the moment, and is modeling itself after its Libyan counterpart that is now in power. The SNC is currently trying to unite all opposition movements to work together to bring down the current government.

The protests in Syria are strongly linked to similar protests that occurred in January and February in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt: the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is a wave of protests that swept many Arab countries during 2011, leading to many government changes. Protests started in Tunisia, where the dictator has now been disposed. Reasons for protests varied, but some of the common themes across most Arab Spring protests was that the people were tired of the same group of people controlling the country, were tired of less access to the economic benefits many of these oil-rich countries received, and tired of censorship and repression. In Tunisia and Egypt, the former government decided to step down because of the escalating protests, and the lack of military support. In Libya and Algeria, the government reacted like President al-Asad, by using the military to break up protests and quell opposition. While this worked in Algeria, these tactics only fermented more revolts in Libya, leading to a complete civil war that eventually disposed the government.

Aside from the above examples, protests also rose up in Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Yemen. Egypt, by ridding itself of its former “ruler for life” Hosni Mubarak, is moving towards forming a more democratic government, so far with some success. Libya’s dictator Muammar Gaddafi cracked down violently on the protests, leading to the creation of a democratic Libyan opposition government and spurring a complete civil war. Libya is now recovering from the ending of the Gaddafi era and is hoping for new peaceful beginnings. In many ways, these protests have many similarities to Syria’s current predicament: they were all uprisings of ordinary citizens who no longer wanted to be ruled by military dictators who had taken power through non-democratic means and had refused to relinquish any control. This was especially grating for Syria as the current President is the son of the former President, and is from a minority religious sect. Thus, the news of successful uprisings in nearby countries undoubtedly contributed to the protests in Syria.

Major Parties Involved

Syrian government

President al-Asad is still in power and has increased the ability of the military to retaliate against protestors. However, many Western think tanks such as the Council on Foreign Relations and governments are moving towards the conclusion that he will eventually be removed from power and are beginning to prepare for that outcome. In the meantime, the President is trying to shore up domestic support, especially in his Alawite sect and among the Christians of Syria who have so been either neutral or supportive of the President's regime.

Syrian National Council (SNC)

At first, the SNC was small and not recognized, and while most UN member states do not consider the SNC the "true" government of Syria, the SNC is increasingly seen as a possible alternative to President al-Asad's regime. The SNC is currently trying to unite the disparate opposition groups and promote sectarian unity. They are currently a government-in-exile, working from Istanbul, Turkey. The SNC currently is composed of over 70 Syrian opposition groups and are trying to work with other countries to come to a resolution to the situation in Syria.

Arab League

The Arab League was at first reluctant to move against Syria, but when military crackdowns began escalating, the Arab League initially suspended then kicked Syria out of the League entirely. After coming up with at least two peace agreements, the Arab League convinced the Syrian government to allow observers into Syria to get more information on the situation. However, conflicts developed and the observers left. However, on January 8 of 2012, the Arab League pledged to send more observers into Syria.

Turkey

While Turkey at first did not speak out against the treatment of protestors in Syria, the President eventually harshly condemned the Syrian regime. Since then, Turkey has set up refugee camps along their long Syrian border, and has received hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing the increasingly violent situation within the country. All trade has been shut down across the border, regardless of the economic costs.

United States

The United States government is divided on how to deal with the situation in Syria. While some politicians are in favor of an intervention like the recently successful expedition to Libya, the Executive branch and many Democrats seem to be more in favor of joint diplomatic solutions with the European Union, Turkey, and the United Nations rather than military options. Although the US is distant geographically, the USA has been heavily involved with the Arab Spring as a whole, and recently Syria in particular. While economic reasons – specifically to do with oil – are a factor, the US is also intent of denuding Iran of its allies and support: Syria is one of Iran's main, and last, allies.

If President al-Asad is removed from power, not only would the new regime probably be more open to trading and negotiating with the US and the US's long-time ally Israel, the new regime would also be less likely to support Iran.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
January 26, 2011	Protests against President al-Asad's regime start in Southern Syria. Protests in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco as well.
March 6, 2011	15 children arrested and tortured for painting protest slogans on a wall in Southern Syria
July 31, 2011	136 Syrians killed when tanks moved in on several towns to halt protests
December 27, 2011	Arab League observers arrive in protest-ridden city of Homs in the midst of 30,000 strong demonstrations

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

When the protests first start, President al-Asad's reaction was surprisingly conciliatory. He allowed local and national elections and lifted Emergency Law. This initially appeased outside observers, who believed that his regime could retain power and thus were willing to continue to support the regime. However, when it became clear that the protests were continuing and military force was being used against civilians many countries condemned the regime and began to call for the President to step down. The Arab League was at first reluctant to chastise the Syrian government, but has now suspended Syria's membership from the League and are contemplating further measures (which include?).

When this didn't work, sanctions were levied against Syria, but as its main ally – Iran – is still helpful, these sanctions appear to be futile.

Russia has drafted Security Council (UNSC) resolutions in recent months, but due to China's opposition, they have not passed. A similar fate has met resolutions drafted by the United Kingdom.

Possible Solutions

- The SNC must be strengthened through international support and recognition if it is to be a viable part of the solution. By including the SNC in future negotiations and by encouraging its efforts to unify the opposition, member states could develop a future democratic government for Syria.
- Some countries would like to create a multi-lateral military intervention, like the one that helped Libya overthrow Muammar Gaddafi a few months ago. However, unless a ground force was created, the SNC must be strengthened and be able to work with the renegade Syrian army troops who have joined the opposition. Likewise, any UN peacekeeping operation would have to be carefully planned to balance the various political factions involved in the situation.
- Some countries have already put sanctions in place against Syria, however if a larger group of countries helped to cut off key supplies to the country, it could stifle the economy and force the government into bankruptcy. For example, as the European Union has just passed huge sanctions against Iran, Iran may not be able to continue supporting Syria so closely. If the EU were to pass further sanctions on Syria, this would further impact the economic situation of the government. Another way sanctions would be effective is if Russia and/or China could be convinced to significantly participate in enforcing them or pressuring the President to step down.
- A less drastic option compared to military intervention would be global cooperation to supply humanitarian aid to citizens in Syria, as well as those who have fled. The UNHCR needs cooperation of neighbor states to set up facilities there for citizens who wish to leave Syria, and also help in facilitating ways for them to leave the country.

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