

## 3.4

# Syria

As the Syrian civil war escalated through 2012, the international community struggled to respond in a unified and effective way to the proliferation of violence on the ground. Estimates of total deaths since the conflict's beginning in March 2011 neared 60,000,<sup>1</sup> while over 375,000 refugees have fled Syria.<sup>2</sup> More than 1.2 million Syrians were displaced internally. By November, the death rate neared 200 per day.<sup>3</sup>

An amended constitution approved in February 2012 and parliamentary elections in May were insufficient to satisfy the aspirations of the Syrian opposition, who refuse to accept any outcome short of the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The regime has seen a number of high-profile officials defect to the opposition, including the Syrian

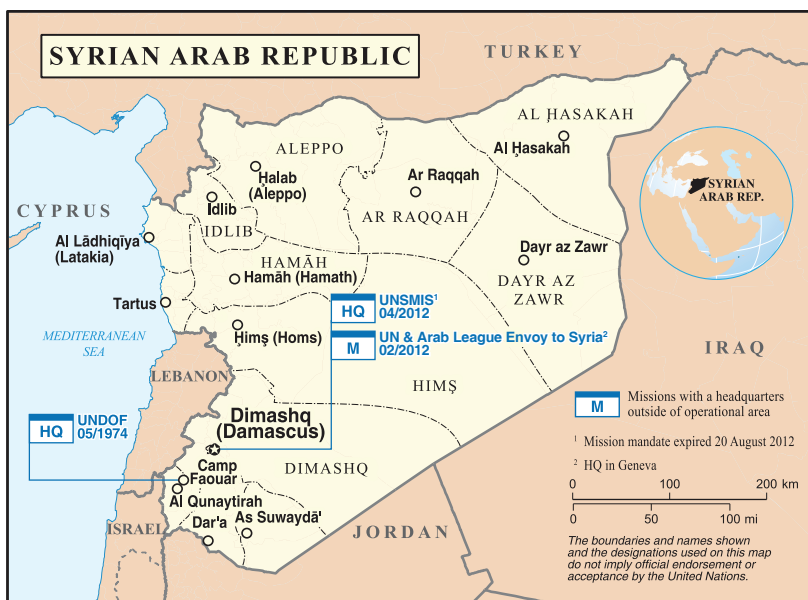
prime minister in August, and the top general responsible for preventing defections himself becoming a defector in December, but an end to the war does not appear imminent.

UN and Arab League efforts to mediate the conflict have not yet achieved a resolution. The Syrian war also illustrates the limits of peacekeeping missions in environments lacking a political agreement and suffering from active armed conflict, especially when mission freedom of movement is limited and distrust toward the mission exists on both sides of the dispute. The disparate interests of regional and international stakeholders and the worsening situation in the Middle East also makes effective multilateral involvement in Syria increasingly difficult.

## Background

The conflict in Syria was sparked in early 2011 when street protests against the regime were met with force, spurring further demonstrations encouraged by the wave of democratic uprisings across the Arab world. By mid-2011, the Assad regime had begun using heavy weapons, including tanks, to suppress dissent and security forces fired on demonstrators. By 2012 the conflict had escalated to a civil war, as rebel forces, locked in battle with government forces, gained control of Syrian towns and the government escalated its indiscriminate use of force.

Class and ethnic and religious differences are a key aspect of the conflict, with the regime dominated by privileged Alawites and the insurgents primarily consisting of impoverished Sunnis. The opposition is quite diverse, however, and the decisions of opposition



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leaders operating in exile rarely determine the actions of rebel militants on the ground. Assad has characterized the armed opposition as terrorists and has portrayed the actions of his regime as the legitimate responsibility of the state to protect its people, and maintain security and stability in Syria.

### Key Developments

The League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria was created in December 2011 to monitor the Syrian government's compliance with an Arab League peace plan. Syria agreed to allow observers into the country on 19 December, and an advance team arrived in Damascus three days later. The mission registered several achievements, including temporary withdrawals of government tanks and artillery from cities, the entry of food into the besieged city of Homs, and the release of 3,500 prisoners from government custody. As the number of observers grew, eventually surpassing 160, violence continued in the country and the mission was widely criticized by Syria's opposition as being ineffective.<sup>4</sup> Qatar's prime minister and the UN Secretary-General discussed ways in which the UN could offer technical support to the mission. The Arab League formally requested UN training for its observers, but this ultimately did not take place.

In January 2012, two Kuwaiti observers were injured and an armored car was destroyed during an incident involving a large number of progovernment protesters in Latakia. In response, the Arab League decided to refrain from sending new observers to Syria. The mission's internal report on 22 January called for extending its mandate, providing it more logistical support, and accelerating the political process. Assad, however, soon rejected a new Arab League plan for him to surrender power, while violence continued to escalate. The Gulf Arab states withdrew their fifty-five observers on 24 January and the Arab League suspended the mission on 28 January, ultimately terminating it one month later.

As the Arab League mission came to an end, the Arab League secretary-general, in a briefing to the UN Security Council, asked for international support to end the violence and to seek a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Arab and Western states supported a subsequent draft Security Council resolution demanding that the Assad regime end violence, cease arbitrary detention, launch an inclusive dialogue process, and hold free elections, with Assad giving up power. Russia expressed concerns that this resolution would enable a Western military intervention. Objecting to language that held Assad solely responsible for the violence, Russia and China vetoed the resolution on 4 February. On 11 February, the Arab League approved a proposal to send a joint peacekeeping force with the UN and provide economic and political support to the Syrian opposition. A "Friends of Syria" group including approximately seventy countries, but not Russia or China, met on 24 February and called on the Assad government to immediately cease all violence and permit humanitarian agencies to deliver aid.<sup>5</sup>

In the wake of the February Security Council veto, support grew for a new approach. On 23 February, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was appointed the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and Arab League to Syria. Annan set up an office in Geneva and was tasked with working with parties inside and outside Syria to end the violence and the humanitarian crisis, and to facilitate a political solution. Two deputies were appointed to support Annan. Former

#### UN and Arab League Joint Special Representative for Syria

• Authorization Date	21 February 2012 (UNGA Res. 66/253)
• Envoy	Lakhdar Brahimi (Algeria)
• Budget	\$7.5 million (1 January 2012–31 December 2012)
• Strength as of 31 October 2012	International Civilian Staff: 4

Palestinian Authority official Nasser al-Kidwa represented the Arab League and former UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guéhenno represented the UN.

On 10 March, Annan presented President Assad with a six-point plan calling for commitment to a political process and cessation of armed violence by all parties. The government was to immediately end the use of heavy weapons in population centers and to begin pulling back military assets in and around those centers as well as increase humanitarian access throughout the country, including to detainees. The plan also called for the release of detainees, freedom of movement for journalists, freedom of association, and the right to demonstrate peacefully. In late March, the Security Council adopted a presidential statement endorsing the plan, and the Syrian government expressed a commitment to the proposal.

In early April, Annan asked the Security Council to commission contingency plans for deploying UN observers to Syria to monitor implementation of the six-point plan. In anticipation of the cease-fire, a planning team from the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations went to Damascus to discuss the details of an eventual deployment of a UN supervision and monitoring mission. The

Security Council approved an advance team of thirty unarmed military observers on 14 April. An initial team of six observers arrived in Syria two days later to begin setting up an operating headquarters and reaching out to the government and opposition forces.

On 21 April, the Security Council authorized the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), with 300 observers to monitor cessation of violence and support full implementation of the Annan peace plan. Major-General Robert Mood, who had led the advance team, was named chief military observer and head of mission. While the roles of UNSMIS and the Joint Special Envoy were interlinked and the two missions collaborated on implementing the six-point plan, UNSMIS was directed from New York and was not directly under Annan's authority.

In early May, Mood said the cease-fire was not holding, but that UNSMIS was having a calming effect on the situation where observers were present. The mission worked to organize detainee exchanges between government and opposition forces and engaged with opposition activists for guidance on mission priorities.

By June, armed opposition groups stated that they were no longer bound by the cease-fire because Assad had failed to honor it. UNSMIS subsequently noted intensified armed conflict and the government's use of helicopter gunships and drones against opposition strongholds in urban centers. At the same time, opposition operations were using small arms, improvised explosive devices, and rockets to attack government and civilian infrastructure. Late in the month, Annan proposed setting up a transitional government that could include followers of Assad and opposition members, but opposition groups rejected any transition plan that did not explicitly require Assad to step down.

On 30 June in Geneva, amid continued deadlock in the Security Council on how to approach Syria, Annan held a meeting of the Action Group for Syria, including the foreign ministers of the five permanent Council

#### UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS)

• Authorization and Start Date	21 April 2012 (UNSC Res. 2043)
• Acting Chief Military Observer	Lieutenant-General Babacar Gaye (Senegal)
• Budget	\$6.8 million (1 July 2012–30 June 2013)
• Strength as of 19 August 2012	Military Observers: 2 International Civilian Staff: 6 National Civilian Staff: 28

*Notes:* Military Observers as of 31 August 2012. UNSMIS mandate expired on 20 August 2012.

*For detailed mission information see p. 446*

members, along with Turkey, the EU, and several Gulf States. Annan expressed a desire to include Iran in the meeting, but the United States demanded its exclusion. The group accepted the Annan plan, but Russia helped ensure that the peace proposal did not insist on Assad ceding power. The communiqué agreed on by the group called on all parties to recommit to a cessation of violence and the implementation of the Annan six-point plan immediately.

UNSMIS was the target of numerous attacks. In May, a large explosion hit a convoy of cars accompanying UNSMIS monitors in southern Syria, including General Mood, but no observers were wounded. Soon thereafter, six monitors were stranded overnight after an explosive device hit their convoy in an opposition-held area. By June, observers were regularly subjected to close fire and hostile crowds. UNSMIS personnel and vehicles were targeted by supporters from both sides in actions ranging from painting of slogans and graffiti on patrol vehicles to the use of rocks, bullets, and explosives. Civilians in opposition-held areas claimed to have been subjected to retaliation by government forces and their supporters following UNSMIS visits, and were critical of the lack of protection from the mission, becoming hostile toward observers on several occasions. The mission also experienced difficulties in transporting communications equipment into Syria and obtaining visas. The UN and Syria were unable to conclude a status of mission agreement regarding UNSMIS, with the government's stance on the mission's air transportation being one major issue of disagreement. As a result, UNSMIS did not have independent air support.

In light of the increasing limitations on implementing its mandate, General Mood announced on 16 June that UNSMIS would temporarily suspend activities, and he informed the government and opposition that it would not be able to resume its work without respect for the cessation of violence. Mood stated that UNSMIS monitors in the most contested cities would be kept on lockdown

for their protection. Following the consolidation of eight local observation posts into regional locations, UNSMIS shifted to conducting "targeted tasks" and sending larger groups of monitors to particular areas for extended periods of time.<sup>6</sup>

The July Secretary-General's report on Syria suggested that the mission's withdrawal would need to be considered if conditions rendered fulfillment of its mandate untenable, but the Secretary-General called on maintaining an UNSMIS presence capable of adapting to opportunities that might arise should the parties accept a political solution.<sup>7</sup> The Secretary-General commended the work of UNSMIS as crucial in establishing facts and providing an objective basis for international assessments and policies. The mission's access to key locations, however, had regularly been subject to security restrictions.

Differing perspectives among the permanent five Security Council members on approaches to the crisis in Syria have stalled progress in reaching a political solution and negatively affected Annan's mission. In addition to disagreement over authorizing the use of force, China and Russia have been more supportive of the Assad government and have criticized foreign support for the armed opposition, while the United States and other countries have provided nonlethal assistance such as communications equipment and medical supplies directly to opposition groups.<sup>8</sup>

This polarization intensified on 20 July when China and Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution threatening the Syrian government with sanctions for failing to comply with the Annan peace plan and extending UNSMIS's mandate. The veto was seen as a major defeat for the plan, and on 2 August Annan announced his resignation as Joint Special Envoy, citing the intransigence of the Syrian government, escalating violence, and a lack of unified Security Council support for his mission. Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi was chosen as the new Joint Special Representative and took office on 1 September, with Nasser al-Kidwa serving as his deputy.



UN photo/Neeraj Singh

Ahmed Himmiche (center), head of the UN Military Observers (UNMO) dispatched to Syria, is approached by citizens of Homs as he and his team patrol the city, 21 April 2012.

After the July veto, the Security Council compromised to renew the UNSMIS mandate for a final thirty days, despite Russian and Chinese efforts to extend it further. Russia and China saw the mission, with its limited mandate, as an important source of information from within Syria and as a tool to help coordinate Annan's mediation efforts. Resolution 2059 left open the option for mission reconfiguration and further mandate extensions if there were a sufficient reduction of armed conflict. As UNSMIS neared the end of its mandate and violence flared throughout Syria, General Mood resigned from his command on 20 July, noting that Syria "was not on the path toward peace."<sup>9</sup> On 21 July, Lieutenant-General Babacar Gaye took over UNSMIS leadership for its final month. The mission came to an end on 20 August.

Upon beginning his tenure as Joint Special Representative in September, Brahimi called the Syrian situation a "stalemate," but expressed hope that actors would gradually accept the need for real change, not minor reforms. He continued to focus on the Annan peace plan and the Action Group communiqué as the main tools in resolving the conflict. In

late October, Brahimi announced that the Syrian government and most opposition groups had agreed to a cease-fire to mark the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. While the first of the four-day holiday witnessed a reduction of violence, renewed clashes quickly brought the cease-fire to a premature end and the regime escalated its bombing campaign against the armed opposition. In November, China presented Brahimi with a new proposal to end the conflict, involving a phased-in truce and a stronger international response to the refugee crisis, but without any demand for Assad to step down. Brahimi continued to seek a binding resolution from the Security Council based on the guidelines for a political transition agreed in June by the Action Group for Syria. He warned in November that Syria risked becoming a "new Somalia," with "the collapse of the state and the emergence of warlords, militias, and fighting groups."<sup>10</sup> In December, the Joint Representative convened tripartite meetings in Dublin and Geneva with senior US and Russian officials to explore ways to implement the core provisions of the Action Group communiqué, possibly through a Security Council resolution. These meetings were followed by bilateral discussions in Syria and Russia at the close of the year.

The Syrian National Council (SNC), established in August 2011, had been the dominant umbrella opposition group outside Syria and was recognized by some states as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. It began to weaken by mid-2012 as activists and rebel fighters began increasingly operating under their own orders while a power struggle divided SNC leadership. In November, a new group called the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces was formed, and quickly gained full diplomatic recognition from Turkey and several Gulf states as well as France and the UK. The United States, as well as more than one hundred other countries, officially recognized the National Coalition following a 12 December Friends of Syria meeting in Morocco.

While this organization may help unify the diverse web of opposition forces, conditions

### Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

In July 2004 the UN established the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, which acts as an early warning mechanism for the UN Secretary-General and is tasked with collecting and assessing information on serious abuses of human rights that could lead to genocide and other flagrant infringements of international humanitarian law. In July 2012 the Secretary-General appointed Adama Diegn of Senegal as his Special Adviser in this capacity.

Given the close and complementary nature of their work, in 2009 the Secretary-General proposed the establishment of a joint office to merge the role of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and that of the Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect. However, this proposal has failed to move forward due to deep disagreement about institutionalizing the concept of “responsibility to protect.”

Building upon the work of his predecessors, Diegn has sought to continue raising awareness of the causes and dynamics of genocide. His office has developed an analytical framework that

identifies factors that can be used to assess the risk of human rights crimes and violations. Further, the office seeks to alert relevant actors where there is a risk of genocide or other serious humanitarian abuses, and to advocate for and mobilize appropriate action. As part of this effort, it operates in close collaboration with a multitude of entities within the UN system, including the Departments of Political Affairs, Peacekeeping Operations, and Field Support.

These measures were especially pertinent in the wake of the challenges that confronted the Security Council in 2012. In March and June the Special Adviser watched closely and expressed alarm at the increasing violence and deepening sectarian divisions in Syria and warned that inaction would heighten the risk of further mass atrocities. His office has also continued to monitor developments in Sudan and South Sudan with regard to continued attacks on civilian populations.

The office of the Special Adviser has also sought to increase its cooperation with regional and subregional organizations,

emphasizing the importance of a regional approach in the prevention of mass atrocities. For example, in April 2012 the Special Adviser took part in the meetings of the African Union’s High-Level Implementation Panel on Sudan and South Sudan. The office has also participated in the meetings of the International Committee on the Great Lakes Region. In addition, the office seeks to establish links with the Southern African Development Community and the League of Arab States.

In April 2012 the United States launched the interagency Atrocities Prevention Board, signifying a major commitment at the national level to prevent genocide and mass atrocities. This development underscores the important contributions of member states in strengthening their national capacities to complement and support the UN’s response capability. Notwithstanding achievements in this regard, the international community’s challenge will be to solidify these gains and to provide actionable and effective response to genocide and mass atrocities in the future.

on the ground and in the international arena do not make the work of Joint Special Representative Brahimi in securing mutual acceptance of a workable peace plan any easier than when Annan first took the post in February. As a sign of the growing regional dimensions of the conflict, in December NATO authorized the deployment of six Patriot missile batteries to Turkey to strengthen its defenses against a possible missile attack in retaliation for Turkish support for opposition forces.

### Conclusion

As the year came to a close, Joint Special Representative Brahimi redoubled efforts to implement the Geneva plan, calling for the

establishment of a transitional government with full executive powers, but warned that failure to achieve a political solution would lead to “the entire collapse of the Syrian state.”<sup>11</sup> The war in Syria presents a major challenge to multilateral peace operations seeking to promote a political settlement and decrease the violence between government and rebel forces. The Arab League and UN observer missions faced considerable difficulties in effectively fulfilling their mandates while operating in an active war zone where their freedom of movement was greatly restricted and observers faced hostility from citizens on both sides of the conflict. The Joint Special Envoys have made little progress, as both President Assad and rebel

fighters appear unwilling to accept a negotiated truce. As the conflict drags on, the number of civilians killed and displaced grows daily, as does the risk that this conflict will trigger additional violence beyond Syria's borders.

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## Notes

1. Megan Price, Jeff Klinger, and Patrick Ball, "Preliminary Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic," Benetech, 2 January 2013.

2. The latest data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Syrian refugees are available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

3. Neil MacFarquhar and Hala Droubi, "With Eye on Aid, Syria Opposition Signs Unity Deal," *New York Times*, 11 November 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/12/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-groups-sign-unity-deal.html?pagewanted=all>.

4. The mission was also subject to controversy because its leader, Muhammad Ahmed al-Dabi, had been accused of oppressive use of force and human rights abuses in Sudan as head of that country's military intelligence agency. His public statements on the violence in Syria were often dismissive and contradicted the reports of observers on the ground. See, for example, Kareem Fahimo, "Chief of Arab League's Mission in Syria Is Lightning Rod for Criticism," *New York Times*, 2 January 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/03/world/middleeast/arab-league-criticized-over-syria-observer-mission.html>.

5. Mujge Kucukkeles, "Arab League's Syrian Policy," SETA policy brief, April 2012.

6. Edward Yeranian, "UN Monitor Chief in Syria Says Violence Unprecedented," *VOA News*, 5 July 2012, <http://www.voanews.com/content/un-monitor-chief-syria-says-violence-unprecedented/1363830.html>.

7. The report suggested bolstering UNSMIS either through expanding the number of observers or through deploying an armed force—protection element to provide security for mission staff.

8. The opposition also began receiving significantly more and better weapons in mid-2012, with much of this paid for by Gulf states and coordinated in part by the United States. See Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebels Get Influx of Arms with Gulf Neighbors' Money, U.S. Coordination," *Washington Post*, 15 May 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAds2TSU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-rebels-get-influx-of-arms-with-gulf-neighbors-money-us-coordination/2012/05/15/gIQAds2TSU_story.html).

9. "U.N. Monitors' Chief Says Syria Not on Track for Peace As Clashes Erupt in Damascus," *Al Arabiya*, 19 July 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/19/227230.html>.

10. "Syria Could Turn Into a New Somalia—Brahimi," *BBC News*, 6 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20220183>.

11. "Syria: UN-Arab League Envoy Warns of Limited Options, Dangers of Fragmentation," UN News Centre, 30 December 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43856&Cr=Syria&Cr1=#.UOsnj4nj8s>.