



The Syrian crisis one year on

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On 4 February, Russia and China vetoed a draft UN Security Council resolution demanding an end to violence in Syria and that the Syrian government should implement an Arab League plan for a transition of power. Since then attempts have been made to find unity in the Council and to find a way of ending the accelerating violence in Syria, which is now thought to have caused more than 8,000 deaths.

- The Russian and Chinese veto on 4 February gave the Assad regime some breathing space
- Since the veto, the level of violence appears to have increased
- There are signs that Russia wants to distance itself from the Assad government
- Kofi Annan has been appointed special envoy and has proposed a new plan to end the violence
- It remains difficult to know exactly what is happening in Syria as the government restricts access
- Syria has become part of larger conflicts between Western powers and Iran, between Western powers and Russia, and between Sunnis and Shiites
- It is difficult to see a plan for international intervention being successfully implemented
- UK and EU policy remains the implementation of sanctions and the provision of humanitarian assistance where this is possible

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1 Preparations for a Security Council resolution

1.1 Arab League

The Arab League had for some time been working with Syrian representatives. On 2 November, it adopted a peace plan and welcomed the Syrian government's agreement to implement the plan. On 12 November, after the League had come to the conclusion that the Syrian government had no intention of implementing the provisions, Syria was suspended from the League and Qatar's foreign minister, chairing the League, said that it would consider sanctions.

An observer mission arrived in Syria on 26 December but it was beset by doubts from the start. Observers said that it was under-resourced and that it was being controlled by the Syrian authorities in what it could see.

Accusing Syria of failing to take the Arab League initiative seriously and failing to halt the violence, observers started to leave Syria. On 24 January, the Gulf Cooperation Council called on the Security Council to take responsibility for getting Syria to adopt the peace plan and on 28 January, the observer mission was suspended.

The peace plan called for Bashar al-Assad to hand power to a national unity government under the present vice president within two months and for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held within six months. The plan has similarities to the one under which the Yemeni president, Ali Abdallah Saleh, left power recently.

1.2 The draft

There had been several versions of the draft resolution before the one that was finally presented for vote by the Moroccan delegation on 1 February.¹ Russia was reported to be concerned that the resolution would be used as an excuse for Western countries to mount a military intervention and effect regime change. In response to those concerns, wording had been inserted into the draft explicitly ruling out the use of the resolution as a pretext for future military intervention.

Provisions had also been removed, one calling for states to prevent the supply of arms to Syria and another calling for Arab League sanctions to be imposed by other states.

The draft finally presented to the Council would have expressed grave concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria would have condemned widespread gross violations of human rights and "all violence, irrespective of where it comes from." It would also have called for the implementation of the Arab League's peace plan, which demanded that Syria should immediately stop all violence and protect its population; release all persons detained arbitrarily; withdraw all military and armed forces from cities and towns; and guarantee the freedom to hold peaceful demonstrations. The plan also called for "an inclusive Syrian-led political process conducted in an environment free from violence, fear, intimidation and extremism, and aimed at effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people."²

¹ "Text of Proposed UN Resolution on Syria", *Associated Press*, 4 February 2012

² "[Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China veto text supporting Arab Leagues proposed peace plan](#)", UN Security Council press notice, 4 February 2012

There had been some indications that Russia and China might not veto the resolution in the week leading up to the vote. However, amendments were presented at the last moment by the Russian delegation; Susan Rice called them “wrecking amendments”.

The disappointment was perhaps one of the reasons for the vehement condemnations issued by the governments of the other permanent members of the Security Council.

French representative said: “It is a sad day for the Council, a sad day for Syrians, and a sad day for all friends of democracy.” He also described the suggestion that the text would be the basis of military action as “obviously false”.³

The United Kingdom’s representative, Mark Lyall Grant said that he was “appalled” by the outcome, and said “the regime must end the violence,” warning that, if it continued on its “bloody trajectory”, the matter would come before the Council again.

Susan Rice, for the United States, said that the US delegation was “disgusted” that the vote of two members had prevented the Security Council from addressing a serious threat to peace.⁴ Some Council members, she said, had chosen to “sell out the Syrian people to shield a craven tyrant”.

1.3 The Russian position

The UN summarised the Russian UN delegation’s comments as follows:

VITALY CHURKIN (Russian Federation) said the bloodshed and violence in Syria must be ended immediately, adding that his country was taking direct action and planned to hold a meeting with President Bashar al-Assad on 7 February. While the Russian Federation was committed to finding a solution to the crisis, some influential members of the international community had been undermining the possibility of a peaceful settlement by advocating a change of regime. The draft resolution voted down today sought to send an “unbalanced” message to Syria, he said, adding that it did not accurately reflect the situation there. No proposal had been made to end attacks by armed groups, or their association with extremists, he said, adding that his delegation had, therefore, voted against the text. The Russian Federation greatly regretted the results of the Council’s joint work, and hoped that a successful Syrian political process would take place, he said, emphasizing that the Russian Federation would continue to work towards that goal.

2 After the veto

Over the weekend of the negotiations at the Security Council, an upsurge of violence was reported.

On 6 February, the US closed its Syrian embassy and on 7 February, Gulf Arab states announced that they were expelling Syrian ambassadors from their capitals and recalling their ambassadors from Damascus.

Also on 7 February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Damascus. He was greeted by cheering crowds of Assad supporters. After the meeting, Mr Lavrov said that the Syrian government was willing to initiate a dialogue:

³ [“Security Council fails to adopt draft resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China veto text supporting Arab Leagues proposed peace plan”](#), UN Security Council press notice, 4 February 2012

⁴ *Ibid.*

It is clear that efforts to end violence must be accompanied by the starting of a dialogue among all political forces. Today we have received from the Syrian president a confirmation of his readiness to facilitate such work.⁵

He also suggested that Mr Assad had been told that the violence must be controlled:

We have every reason to believe that the signal that we've brought here to move along in a more active manner along all directions has been heard. In particular, President Assad assured [us] that he is fully committed to the task of a cessation of violence, from whatever source it comes.⁶

If Moscow was hoping for a reduction in state violence to demonstrate its influence over Damascus, that appeared not to be forthcoming. Opposition groups in Syria complained that the government's assault on their positions, which had already been stepped up over the weekend of the Security Council negotiations, intensified even further.

2.1 Further activity at the UN

Although the Security Council resolution was vetoed, activity at the United Nations did not cease. Firstly, the General Assembly passed a motion on 16 February that "closely mirrored" the language of the vetoed Security Council resolution.⁷

Secondly, on 1 March, the UN Human Rights Council passed a motion expressing grave concern at the situation in Syria, and "in particular the ongoing human rights violations and use of violence by the Syrian authorities against its population".⁸ The resolution went on to call on the Syrian government to stop human rights violations:

[The Council] Calls on the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic immediately to put an end to all human rights violations and attacks against civilians, to cease all violence, to allow free and unimpeded access by the United Nations and humanitarian agencies to carry out a full assessment of needs in Homs and other areas, and to permit humanitarian agencies to deliver vital relief goods and services to all civilians affected by the violence, especially in Homs, Dar'a, Zabadani and other areas under siege by the Syrian security forces.⁹

In an important demonstration of unity, the Security Council issued a press statement on the same day calling for UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Valerie Amos, to be given full access to assess the humanitarian situation in Syria. On 10 March Baroness Amos received permission to visit Syria (see below).

2.2 Kofi Annan

In March, Kofi Annan was appointed as joint envoy by the UN and the Arab League. He visited Damascus to hold talks about a possible ceasefire between security forces and protesters. President Assad said that he could support "any honest effort" to find a solution, refused to enter any political negotiations while "armed terrorist groups" were operating.

⁵ ["Al-Asad ready for dialogue with all Syrian political forces – Lavrov"](#), *Interfax News Agency*, 7 February 2012

⁶ ["Syria opposition dismisses Assad assurances"](#), *BBC News Online*, 8 February 2012

⁷ General Assembly adopts resolution strongly condemning "widespread and systematic" human rights violations by the Syrian authorities, UN press release, 16 February 2012

⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council, [The escalating grave human rights violations and deteriorating humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic \(A/HRC/19/L.1/Rev.1\)](#), 1 March 2012

⁹ *Ibid.*

After the visit Mr Annan briefed the Security Council on the situation. He said that it would be helpful if the Council could speak with “one voice.” He also said that he had proposed setting up a new international monitoring mission and that officials would be visiting Damascus to discuss those proposals.¹⁰

2.3 Negotiations on a new resolution

After the failure of the Security Council to pass a resolution on 4 February negotiations began on a possible new one. It is reported that the new draft has removed references to the Arab League peace plan, which called on Bashar al-Assad to step aside in favour of a transitional government led by the Vice President and smacked too much of regime change for Russia and China. There is reportedly a specific phrase ruling out foreign armed intervention, but this was the case in the 4 February draft.

The main remaining sticking point is the language used to describe the violence and whether it gives equal weight to state and opposition behaviour. Russia’s position remains that any resolution should criticise the use of force on both sides. Other members of the Security Council maintain that the Syrian government’s violent suppression of the protests caused the violence, and that there is no comparison between the heavy weaponry used by the state and the opposition; they say that there should be no equivalence in the treatment of the two sides in the draft resolution.¹¹

Also problematic is the wording of the call for withdrawal of armed forces, and of the Council’s proposed follow-up of the situation and further measures.

2.4 Presidential statement

On 21 March a ‘Presidential Statement’ was released by the Security Council. Unlike a Security Council resolution, the statement has no legal force. In the statement, which reiterated the plan presented by Kofi Annan on the 16 March, the Security Council:

- supported the efforts of Kofi Annan to stop the fighting and seek a political solution.
- called on both sides to halt violence, while calling specifically on the government to end the use of heavy weapons in population centres
- called for humanitarian assistance to be provided, with the help of a daily two-hour truce for the purpose
- called for the release of arbitrarily detained persons
- and for free access for journalists
- and called for freedom of association to be respected.¹²

The Security Council would be updated by the envoy Kofi Annan and, importantly, would consider further measures in the light of these updates. However, no deadline was set for the implementation of any of the conditions. Unlike the Arab League peace plan, there was no call in Mr Annan’s plan or in the Security Council’s presidential statement for Bashar al-Assad to step aside.

¹⁰ “[Syria crisis: Kofi Annan seeks to set up monitoring team](#)”, *BBC News Online*, 16 March 2012

¹¹ What’s in Blue website: [Negotiations on a Syria draft resolution](#), 9 March 2012

¹² “[Text of U.N. Security Council statement on Syria](#)”, *Daily Star (Lebanon)*, 21 March 2012

Analysts said that the statement was a further sign of Russia not wanting to appear too close to Bashar al-Assad and indicated some success in attempts to present a united front on the Security Council: the statement was passed unanimously by the 15-member council. Russia had already signalled some impatience with the Syrian government on 20 March, when Russian foreign minister Lavrov said: "We believe the Syrian leadership reacted wrongly to the first appearance of peaceful protests and ... is making very many mistakes," in their handling of the uprising.¹³

However, the presidential statement was also assessed not to make practical difference to the situation on the ground. One regional expert said: "This statement isn't going to push the regime to lessen its repression. On the contrary, it provides it with more legitimacy."¹⁴

3 Information blackout?

3.1 Journalists

Foreign journalists have been highly limited in what they can do in Syria. They have not normally been granted permission by the Syrian Information Ministry to enter the country or to report from areas where conflict is taking place. On 9 March the Information Ministry threatened to take action against Arab and foreign journalists who had entered the country without permission. The Information Minister accused such journalists of issuing false reports and of collaborating with and justifying the work of terrorists.¹⁵ Journalists have also gone missing.

There have even been suggestions that the Syrian armed forces have intentionally targeted buildings sheltering foreign journalists. After the death of *Sunday Times* journalist Marie Colvin, a US citizen, and French photographer Remi Ochlik, French President Nicolas Sarkozy said that they had been "assassinated". There were also reports of house being used as a press centre in the Homs suburb of Bab Amr being targeted by snipers.¹⁶

The Western media have largely relied on mobile video recordings made by local activists for television images. These are obviously difficult to verify, but that has not stopped the authorities from attempting to stop them getting out. A number of 'citizen journalists' have been killed.

3.2 Humanitarian missions

The Syrian government has also been reluctant to allow international aid and humanitarian agencies to visit the country, perhaps because to limit the amount of information flowing out of the country. UN humanitarian representative Baroness Amos had repeatedly been refused access to Syria. Aid agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society have had 'huge difficulty' getting to the conflict areas of Syria in order to get aid on and to get wounded people out.¹⁷

On 10 March, Baroness Amos was finally permitted to visit Syria. She visited Homs and the Baba Amr suburb, where she said that the destruction was horrifying:

In Baba Amr I was horrified by the destruction I saw. No building was untouched and there was clear evidence of use of heavy artillery and tanks. Baba Amr was almost

¹³ "Russia says Syrian leadership has made many mistakes", *Reuters*, 20 March 2012

¹⁴ "UN finally agrees peace plan for Syria – but will it end bloodshed?", *Independent*, 22 March 2012

¹⁵ "[Syria: Foreign media threatened, journalists missing](#)", Index on Censorship press release, 14 March 2012

¹⁶ "Were Marie Colvin and journalists deliberately targeted by Syria's army?", *Guardian*, 23 February 2012

¹⁷ "Ground attack launched in Homs", *Financial Times*, 1 March 2012

deserted. A few people in tears, as they tried to salvage a few possessions. I am extremely concerned as to the whereabouts of the people who have been displaced from Baba Amr by the shelling and other violence.

I was told that some fifty to sixty thousand people used to live in the area. We need to know what has happened to them, where they are now and what they need. We also need to know where the wounded are and whether they are receiving treatment.¹⁸

4 Regional politics

The position of Turkey is crucial to the development of the Syria crisis. Syria and Turkey traditionally had difficult relations, allies as they were of the Soviet Union and the US, respectively. Turkey also enjoyed warm relations with Israel, while Syria backed hostile Hizballah in Lebanon, and Turkey's problems with the restive Kurdish minority in the south east were not helped by Syrian support for elements of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

As Turkey lost faith in its prospects of EU membership, the government turned its attention to its eastern neighbours and instigated the 'zero problems with neighbours' policy. This particularly involved improving relations with Syria, with which Turkey shares a long border. To the dismay of some western politicians, ties with Syria were rapidly strengthened and commerce flourished.



Map courtesy of the Ministry of Defence

The uprising in Syria called that policy into question, however. While the Turkish government was ambivalent about the Arab uprisings at the beginning, the ferocity of the Assad regime's repression of the protests seems to have decided the Turkish government to abandon the regime in November 2011 and call for al-Assad's resignation.¹⁹

Since then, Turkey has been one of the most vocal proponents of action against the Syrian government, suggesting that safe havens should be set up within Syrian territory on the Turkish border, a bold action that would violate Syrian sovereignty. Also in November 2011, Turkey imposed economic sanctions against Syria. Members of the Arab League also announced restrictions.

Some analysts have interpreted the Turkish moves against the Assad regime as a wholesale reorientation of Turkey's foreign policy towards the West and, crucially, against Iran.

¹⁸ "Statement to the press on Syria", Under-secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos, UNOCHA, 12 March 2012

¹⁹ "Syria crisis: Erdogan steps up Turkey pressure on Assad", *BBC News Online*, 15 November 2011

Saudi Arabia has likewise taken a strong line against the Syrian government. In November, King Abdullah said told Syria to “stop the killing machine” and said that the government should “think wisely before it is too late and issue and enact reforms.”²⁰ Such strong language and such clear backing for reform are both unusual for a Saudi minister. They might also be taken as somewhat hypocritical from a leader often criticised for failing to enact reforms. They should be seen in the light of the Arab/Persian and Sunni/Shia divides in Middle Eastern politics- something that looms very large in the world view of the Saudis.

For Saudi Arabia, the great prize in the Syrian crisis would be to deprive Iran of its only ally in the Arab world and to weaken the Shiite resurgence whose biggest milestone was the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the establishment of a Shiite led government there. To weaken Iran in that way would be a significant boost to Saudi Arabia’s claim to be the dominant regional power.

In March 2012 a number of bombs were exploded in Damascus and Aleppo, killing some 29 people. The Syrian government blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar for arming the rebels and inciting terrorism, while the Syrian National Council said that the government itself was to blame for the attacks, to vindicate its claim that it was fighting al-Qaeda-style terrorists.

Western diplomats are not sure who planted the bombs and doubt that Saudi Arabia has taken a decision to arm the opposition in Syria.²¹

Other neighbours Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon are too weak to intervene significantly in the conflict. Israel, which was even exploring the possibility of a rapprochement with Syria before the Arab uprisings began, has adopted a low profile on the situation in Syria. In the past, notions that the Assad regime was better than the uncertainty of a possibly Islamic-based alternative were widespread. However, a number of factors have persuaded Israel that the fall of the present regime would be beneficial. The extent to which Syria was backing Hizbollah and the war in 2006; and the discovery of the Syrian nuclear plant which Israel destroyed in 2007 have helped to change Israeli opinion. Most of all, the looming crisis with the Assads’ ally in Tehran means that mainstream opinion has moved against them. Israelis are reported to believe that the Assad regime must eventually fall.²²

5 Possible intervention?

As the death toll has mounted (UN sources put the figure at over 8,000 in March), there have been growing calls for some sort of intervention. This remains problematic, however.

5.1 Safe havens

Calls were made quite early in the conflict for the provision of safe havens for refugees. Turkey has suggested this possibility. An area of Syrian territory (probably close to the Turkish border in the North) would be declared a safe haven and protected militarily. This would allow free access for humanitarian agencies to those government opponents needing their help. It would also allow opposition forces a space in which to organise.

Such an area would be a clear violation of Syrian sovereignty and would require a Security Council resolution to make it legal. This is not likely to happen with Russian support for Syrian sovereignty remaining firm on the Security Council. It would also need a significant military commitment to defend the area against attack by Syrian forces.

²⁰ “Saudi King Abdullah to Syria: ‘Stop the killing machine’”, *Washington Post*, 8 August 2011

²¹ “Syria accuses Saudis over bomb attacks on its cities”, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 2012

²² “Israel feels mixed emotions over Syria”, *Financial Times*, 22 March 2011

The example of the Bosnian safe havens, declared in 1993 by the Security Council,²³ remains significant. The Bosnian safe havens relied on the good will of the Serb forces. The then UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali initially requested a force of 34,000 troops to protect the six zones. The response from European countries was a strong protest, and the UN then reduced its request to 7,600 troops. In Srebrenica 2,000 poorly armed Bosnian government troops were supported by some 300 Dutch troops under the UN banner.²⁴ In 1995, Serb forces overran Srebrenica, took some Dutch soldiers hostage and massacred 7,000 to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men.

A recent RUSI commentary underlines the difficulties of applying the safe havens concept to Syria:

...it is ironic to hear the same calls for safe havens being made now, when they were such a discredited concept in 1995 that, four years later in Kosovo, the West did not bother to declare anything other than a general military campaign against Milosevic's forces. For while a safe haven is appealing in theory, it is in practice an idea fraught with peril. Safe havens must be credible: if they can be starved out, shelled or indeed overrun, they are worth little and can in the worst case serve only as hellish, glorified concentration camps.

The threat of air strikes might make them credible. But if the Assad regime calls the bluff and attacks safe havens regardless, what then? The intervening powers will be compelled to up the stakes by not only increasing the physical resources committed, but also expanding the mandate of their operation.²⁵

5.2 A no-fly zone

A no-fly zone would have to be part of a safe haven policy. It would be necessary to have a credible force to prevent aerial attacks on a designated safe area. Not only that, but the surrounding area would need to be demilitarised to prevent the besieging or shelling of the haven from outside.

A no-fly zone in Syria would demand very significant air power. Syrian air defences are reported to be much more significant than Libya's, and, given that the Libyan campaign was reported to have run short of planes and ammunition, stronger US participation at least would probably be required for any successful Syrian no-fly zone. With Western defence expenditure cuts and conflict with Iran a looming possibility, finding resources for a no-fly zone would be complicated.

Again, the Russian government is likely to continue to resist a Security Council resolution authorising any such action, making it difficult to justify legally.

5.3 Humanitarian corridors

A related idea is that humanitarian corridors could be established, allowing agencies to access to conflict zones. On 6 March the Turkish government called on the Syrian government to allow such corridors and the French government has in the past made similar calls. The corridors idea appears to rely on Syrian forces respecting them voluntarily, and there is little sign that that would happen. Similarly, the Red Cross idea of having a voluntary daily ceasefire to allow humanitarian access looks difficult to achieve.

²³ UN Security Council [Resolution 824](#) of 6 May 1993 and 824 of 16 April 1993

²⁴ "Srebrenica: A U.N. 'Safe Haven' That Soon Was Not", *New York Times*, 29 October 1995

²⁵ Adrian Johnson, "[What Ends a War? The Limits of Bosnia-Syria Parallels](#)", Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 14 March 2012

The Assad regime has not responded in any convincing way to the exhortations of the international community and it seems that any 'intervention lite' relying on voluntary cooperation is unlikely to succeed, as set out by an analyst writing for Reliefweb:

Ultimately, protecting of the civilian population in Syria is the responsibility of the Syrian government, or, if required, the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in light of the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine. Considering the recent UN report alleging ongoing indiscriminate attacks against civilians ordered by the parties to the conflict, the parties' consent to a humanitarian truce to provide assistance to civilians will be of limited value. Humanitarian organizations may consider entering into truce and/or corridor agreements only when the Security Council has established robust and credible mechanisms to enforce these arrangements. Despite their neutral character, the success of humanitarian truces, zones, or corridors will inevitably rely on the international community's political will to take coercive action in protecting civilians in Syria.²⁶

6 UK government policy

On 6 February the UK recalled the British ambassador to Syria for consultations. Both the Syrian embassy in London and the British embassy in Damascus remained open, however. In his statement on 6 February, Foreign Secretary William Hague set out the steps that the government intended to take:

- Continue to support the Arab League.
- Widen the coalition of states working for a resolution, with particular reference to the proposal for an Arab-led Friends of Syria group.
- Intensify contacts with the Syrian opposition.
- Maintain a strong focus at the United Nations, both at the Security Council and the General Assembly.
- Increase pressure through the European Union and push for agreement of further EU sanctions at the Foreign Affairs Council on 27 February.
- Work with others to ensure that those responsible for crimes in Syria are held to account, with particular reference to the UN Human Rights Council meeting in March.
- Use the remaining channels of communication between the UK and Syrian governments to push for an end to violence.²⁷

6.1 Aid

According to a Parliamentary answer delivered in March 2012, the National Security Council coordinates the UK response to the Syria crisis.²⁸ The Department for International Development is attempting to contribute to the relief effort for Syrian refugees:

The immediate priority is to ensure that assistance can get to those who need it, and to support UN efforts to negotiate access and coordinate the international humanitarian response. UK support to humanitarian agencies working in Syria is providing

²⁶ Claude Bruderlein, "[Syria: Humanitarian corridors will depend on international commitment to protect civilians](#)," Reliefweb, 24 February 2012

²⁷ [HC Deb 6 February 2012, c23](#)

²⁸ [HL Deb 19 March 2012, c148-9WA](#)

emergency medical services and supplies for injured civilians, food rations for over 20,000 people, essential household items for 5,500 people forced to leave their homes, emergency drinking water for 2,750 people, and restoration of damaged water and sanitation infrastructure to ensure access to safe water for over 30,000 people. In addition, the UK is supporting UN efforts to help make food available for up to 1.7 million people caught up in the ongoing violence in Syria, as well as vital medical care.²⁹

The UK effort amounts to £4.5 million, but is hindered by access restrictions:

UK support amounts to £4.5 million of official development assistance. We are supporting those organisations which are working to get aid to the people most in need in Horns and other areas. However, humanitarian agencies continue to face restrictions on their access in Syria, which limits their ability to deliver aid to all areas and assess the full extent of humanitarian needs.³⁰

6.2 Support for the opposition

The UK government supports the Syrian National Council and other opposition groups in Syria in its efforts to make progress towards articulating a coherent transition strategy. However, that does not mean that Britain has officially recognised the SNC or de-recognised the Syrian government. The UK counts the SNC as “a legitimate representative” of the Syrian people.³¹ Foreign Secretary William Hague explained in a recent answer:

The UK is intensifying its support to the political opposition including, but not exclusively, the Syrian National Council to help them develop and set out their vision for Syria's future. We are encouraging them to work together under the auspices of the Arab League to deliver a credible plan for an orderly transition to a different type of political system.³²

Mr Hague went on:

The practical support that we have offered has concentrated on assisting Syrian human rights activists to record, collate and speak out on human rights violations conducted by the regime, so that the perpetrators can be held to account.³³

However, the government opposes the arming of the Syrian opposition, as explained in a recent Parliamentary answer:

The position of the UK Government are [sic] clear with regard to arming the Syrian opposition: we have repeatedly said that we will not provide equipment or support for any element of the Syrian opposition that does not comply with EU sanctions and our own export regulations.³⁴

On 13 October 2011, the Syrian Ambassador had been called to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to discuss reports that Syrian Embassy staff were harassing Syrians living in the UK. On 15 March, Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt said that there had been no further reports from the Metropolitan Police of such behaviour.³⁵

²⁹ HL Deb 19 March 2012, c148WA

³⁰ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c578W

³¹ “UK boosts Syria opposition ties, William Hague reveals”, *BBC News Online*, 24 February 2012

³² HC Deb 19 March 2012, c485W

³³ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c483W

³⁴ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c486W

³⁵ HC Deb 15 March 2012, c409W

6.3 Diplomatic relations

The UK has withdrawn all of its diplomatic staff from Syria and suspended the services of the embassy in Damascus, although the UK has not formally broken off diplomatic relations with the Syrian government. In a statement to the House of Commons on 1 March, Mr Hague said that the UK would continue its diplomatic efforts in Syria:

My decision to withdraw staff from the British embassy in Damascus in no way reduces the UK's commitment to active diplomacy to maintain pressure on the Assad regime to end the violence.³⁶

Any UK nationals still in Syria and needing consular assistance should contact any remaining EU embassy.

7 EU and sanctions

The EU has imposed a wide range of sanctions on trade with Syria and has imposed asset freezes and travel bans on a number of individuals connected with the government's repression. An arms embargo, together with bans on items which might be used for internal repression, is in force. There is also a ban on the import of crude oil and petroleum products and on investment in the oil industry, a ban on the provision of notes and coins and in dealing in gold or precious stones and many other restrictions. The measures are summarised in a list which contains references to the Council Decisions imposing them, where lists of individuals and details of restrictions can be found.³⁷

On 23 March, it was announced that the president's wife, Asma al-Assad, his mother and sister and several more members of the government would be joining Bashar al-Assad and 113 other Syrians and 38 organisations on the list of persons subject to asset freezes and travel bans. It was not clear how the travel ban would affect Mrs Assad, who was born in the UK and is thought to be a British citizen. If she has retained a UK passport, she could not be refused access to Britain, according to reports.³⁸

Commenting on the UK role in getting the EU to impose sanctions, Mr Hague said recently:

The UK has been at the forefront of delivering 12 rounds of EU sanctions, subjecting a total of 114 individuals and 39 entities to asset freezes and travel bans. These sanctions are targeted against those supporting, or benefitting from the regime, and those associated with them. We will continue to work closely with our international partners in considering new ways to increase the economic and political pressure on the Assad regime.³⁹

US sanctions are listed in the US Department of the Treasury website.⁴⁰ Like the EU, the US government has frozen the assets of many government officials.

³⁶ HC Deb 1 March 2012, c42-3WS

³⁷ European Union, [Restrictive measures \(sanctions\) in force](#), 6 March 2012

³⁸ "Syria: Asma al-Assad to be hit with EU sanctions", *Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 2012

³⁹ HC Deb 19 March 2012, c483-4W

⁴⁰ US Department of the Treasury, [Syria sanctions](#)