International responses to the Syrian uprising: March 2011–June 2012

Marty Harris
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section

Contents

Introduction............................................................................................................................................. 1
The United Nations Security Council ....................................................................................................... 1
  Russian and Chinese vetoes................................................................................................................ 3
  The adopted resolutions..................................................................................................................... 4
The United Nations Human Rights Council .............................................................................................. 5
Other international initiatives.................................................................................................................. 7
  The Arab League’s response and the Arab League peace plan .......................................................... 7
  The Annan peace plan and UNSMIS ................................................................................................. 10
  Friends of Syria Group meetings....................................................................................................... 12
  The expulsion of Syrian diplomats from Western countries ............................................................ 13
  The 30 June Conference on Syria ...................................................................................................... 14
Individual country responses ................................................................................................................. 16
  The US response ............................................................................................................................... 16
    Statements................................................................................................................................... 16
    Meetings with the Syrian National Council (SNC) ................................................................. 20
    The US Embassy in Damascus.............................................................................................. 22
  US Sanctions ................................................................................................................................ 22
  Arming the Syrian opposition......................................................................................................... 23
  The European Union (EU) and UK responses............................................................................... 24
    The UK........................................................................................................................................ 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey's response</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia's response</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China's response</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia's response</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

On 12 June 2012 the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Herve Ladsous, described the situation in Syria as a ‘civil war’.

In mid-March 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ protests began in the southern Syrian city of Dera’a, calling for the release of political prisoners and for political reform. Despite government repression and the nominal enactment of reforms—such as the lifting of the 48-year-old ‘state of emergency’ in April 2011—protests spread to other Syrian cities. From about June 2011, the emergence of armed insurgent groups signalled a new phase in the uprising.

In 2012, while protests have continued, the situation in Syria has more closely come to resemble a civil war, with opposition groups seizing villages (and parts of cities such as Homs) and fighting more sophisticated battles against government forces. In June 2012 in particular, rebel forces began to take and hold territory, especially along the Turkish-Syrian border.

This Background Note documents the evolution of the international responses to the uprising in Syria from March 2011 to June 2012. This includes the reactions of international bodies such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), as well as key individual countries.

The United Nations Security Council

The UNSC has debated the situation in Syria on at least six occasions. While two Security Council Resolutions have been passed, no United Nations-mandated international sanctions have been applied on the Syrian Government. The outcomes of the major UNSC debates on Syria are discussed below.

Firstly, in August 2011, the Security Council issued what is known as a ‘presidential statement’—a means by which the UNSC can express the consensus opinion of its members, without using the legally binding method of a UNSC Resolution. The statement included the following:

The Security Council expresses its grave concern at the deteriorating situation in Syria, and expresses profound regret at the death of many hundreds of people.


The Security Council condemns the widespread violations of human rights and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities.

The Security Council calls for an immediate end to all violence and urges all sides to act with utmost restraint, and to refrain from reprisals, including attacks against state institutions.

The Security Council calls on the Syrian authorities to fully respect human rights and to comply with their obligations under applicable international law. Those responsible for the violence should be held accountable.

The Security Council notes the announced commitments by the Syrian authorities to reform, and regrets the lack of progress in implementation, and calls upon the Syrian Government to implement its commitments.

The Security Council reaffirms its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria. It stresses that the only solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process, with the aim of effectively addressing the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the population which will allow the full exercise of fundamental freedoms for its entire population, including that of expression and peaceful assembly.

The Security Council calls on the Syrian authorities to alleviate the humanitarian situation in crisis areas by ceasing the use of force against affected towns, to allow expeditious and unhindered access for international humanitarian agencies and workers, and cooperate fully with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Prior to releasing this statement the Security Council debated a draft binding resolution that would have condemned the Syrian Government’s actions. China, Russia, Brazil, South Africa, Lebanon and India all opposed this resolution. The presidential statement was described as ‘completely inadequate’ by Amnesty International:

After more than four months of violent crackdown on predominantly peaceful dissent in Syria, it is deeply disappointing that the best the Security Council can come up with, is a limp statement that is not legally binding and does not refer the situation to the International Criminal Court.

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Russian and Chinese vetoes

In October 2011, Russia and China vetoed a draft UNSC Resolution that would have strongly condemned ‘the continued grave and systematic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities’. Russia stated that it opposed this particular Resolution because:

Today’s rejected draft was based on... the philosophy of confrontation. We cannot agree with this unilateral, accusatory bent against Damascus. We deem unacceptable the threat of an ultimatum and sanctions against the Syrian authorities. Such an approach contravenes the principle of a peaceful settlement of the crisis on the basis of a full Syrian national dialogue.

The Russian representative also hinted that the way UNSC Resolution 1973 had been used in relation to the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya was a reason for its veto. In her statement to the UNSC on the occasion of the Russian and Chinese veto, the US Ambassador to the UNSC, Susan Rice, expressed her country’s ‘outrage’ at Russia and China, declaring that ‘those who oppose this draft resolution and give cover to a brutal regime will have to answer to the Syrian people’. Rice termed the Russian allusion to Libya a ‘cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people’.

In February 2012, China and Russia again used their veto power at the UNSC to stymie a second draft resolution. This draft resolution, sponsored by a large number of Arab and Western countries, likewise would have condemned the Syria regime for ‘the continued widespread and gross violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms’. While the resolution would have also condemned violence from opposition groups in Syria, it would have demanded that the Syrian Government:

- cease all violence
- release all persons detained arbitrarily during recent incidents
- withdraw all Syrian military and armed forces from cities and towns, and return them to their home barracks
- guarantee the freedom of peaceful demonstrations
- allow ‘full and unhindered’ access to Syria by Arab League institutions and international media organisations and

• allow ‘full and unhindered’ access to Syria by Arab League observers (more on this below).\textsuperscript{11}

On this occasion, the Chinese representative at the UNSC justified its veto by arguing that Security Council members were attempting to ‘put undue emphasis on pressuring the Syrian Government’ and were aiming for a ‘prejudged result of the dialogue’ (meaning regime change).\textsuperscript{12} Russia argued that:

\begin{quote}
In the Security Council, we [Russia] have actively tried to reach a decision for an objective solution that would truly help to put a prompt end to violence and start a political process in Syria. The decision of the Security Council should be just that, but from the very beginning of the Syrian crisis some influential members of the international community, including some sitting at this table, have undermined any possibility of a political settlement, calling for regime change, encouraging the opposition towards power, indulging in provocation and nurturing the armed struggle.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

The British representative at the UNSC stated that by using the veto ‘Russia and China have today made a choice to turn their backs on the Arab world and support tyranny rather than the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people’.\textsuperscript{14}

The adopted resolutions

On 14 April 2012 the UNSC adopted Resolution 2042, which condemned the ‘wide spread violations of human rights by the Syria authorities’, as well as ‘any human rights abuses by armed groups’. The resolution also authorised the initial deployment of 30 unarmed military observers to Syria as part of the Annan peace plan (discussed below).\textsuperscript{15} Before being adopted, the draft Resolution was amended to avoid a third Russian/Chinese veto. Russia’s representative told the Security Council that ‘the initial draft resolution underwent substantive changes to make it more balanced, appropriately reflect realities and take into account the prerogatives of the Syrian Government in receiving the observer mission on its territory’.\textsuperscript{16}

Later in April the UNSC adopted Resolution 2043, which authorised the deployment of a further 270 unarmed military observers to Syria. This formally created the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), the official mandate of which was ‘to monitor a cessation of armed violence in all its

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item 13. Ibid., p. 9.
\item 14. Ibid., p. 7.
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forms by all parties and to monitor and support the full implementation of the Envoy’s [Annan’s] six-point proposal.17

Lastly, in the aftermath of the Houla massacre, the UNSC issued a ‘press statement’—which is even weaker than a presidential statement and which does not go on the Council’s record—condemning the massacre.18 Without specifically stating that the Syrian Government was responsible, the statement said:

The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest possible terms the killings, confirmed by United Nations observers, of dozens of men, women and children and the wounding of hundreds more in the village of El-Houleh, near Homs, in attacks that involved a series of Government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood. The members of the Security Council also condemned the killing of civilians by shooting at close range and by severe physical abuse.

... Such outrageous use of force against civilian population constitutes a violation of applicable international law and of the commitments of the Syrian Government under United Nations Security Council resolutions 2042 (2012) and 2043 (2012) to cease violence in all its forms, including the cessation of use of heavy weapons in population centres.19

The United Nations Human Rights Council

About a month after protests began in Syria the UNHRC convened a ‘special session’—by request of the US representative—specifically to deal with the Syrian Government’s crackdown on anti-regime protests in Syria. A resolution passed by this session:

Unequivocally condemn[ed] the use of lethal violence against peaceful protesters by the Syrian authorities and the hindrance of access to medical treatment [and urged] the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to immediately put an end to all human rights violations, protect its population and respect all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, and also [urged] the authorities to allow access to the

Internet and telecommunications networks and to lift censorship on reporting, including by allowing appropriate access by foreign journalists.\(^{20}\)

This resolution also called for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) to dispatch a fact-finding mission to Syria ‘to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law and to establish the facts and circumstances of such violations and of the crimes perpetrated’. This mission was refused entry to Syria.

At the time of the 16th Special Session, Syria was applying to become a member of the UNHRC. Many human rights groups called on the UN to reject Syria’s application, and in the end Syria was not put up as a candidate.\(^{21}\)

At the 17th [regular] Session of the UNHRC in June 2011, the Council was presented with the Preliminary report of the High Commissioner on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Report concluded:

> The material currently before the High Commissioner is a matter of grave concern and reflects a dire human rights situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. The alleged breaches of the most fundamental rights on such a broad scale require thorough investigation and, with respect to the perpetrators, full accountability. The fact-finding mission mandated by the Human Rights Council would contribute substantially toward these ends. The High Commissioner thus renews her call to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to grant the access requested.\(^{22}\)

The mission was refused entry to Syria, but nevertheless published a report on the situation in Syria on 18 August 2011. In its report, the UNHCR fact-finding mission stated that the Syrian Government had carried out ‘widespread or systematic attacks against the civilian population’, which ‘may amount to crimes against humanity’.\(^{23}\)

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The UNHRC has held a further three special sessions on Syria (in August 2011, December 2011, and June 2012). At each of these special sessions a resolution was passed which condemned the Syrian Government; in each case Russia and China voted against the resolutions. The UNHRC has also set up an Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, which has reported back to the Council a number of times since August 2011. In February 2012 the Commission of Inquiry noted that while both the Government and the opposition were responsible for ‘gross human rights violations’, those committed by the opposition were ‘not comparable in scale and organization to those carried out by the State’.

**Other international initiatives**

**The Arab League’s response and the Arab League peace plan**

The League of Arab States has been reasonably critical of Syria’s response to the uprising, in line with its criticisms of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and its support for the imposition of a no-fly zone in that country. The Arab League has, at least up until the ‘Arab Spring’, generally adopted a policy of non-interference concerning the internal affairs of its members. Indeed the *Pact of the League of Arab States* records:

> Every member State of the League shall respect the form of government obtaining in the other States of the League, and shall recognize the form of government obtaining as one of the rights of those States, and shall pledge itself not to take any action tending to change that form.

The Arab League has taken a lead role in urging the UN Security Council to act on Syria, has attempted to halt the violence through its own intermediaries, and has suspended Syria from the meetings of the organisation in response to the Syrian uprising. The League’s first public criticism of the Syrian Government’s crackdown on protestors came in mid-June 2011, with Secretary General Amr Moussa stating that Arab countries were ‘angry’ about Syria and were ‘actively monitoring’ the

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situation.  At the time, Moussa also noted that the views of member states differed regarding the situation in Syria.

Moussa’s successor as Secretary General of the Arab League, Nabil el-Araby, issued a stronger statement on the Syrian situation on 6 August 2011, expressing the League’s ‘growing concern and strong distress over the deteriorating security conditions in Syria due to escalating violence and military operations in Hama and Deir al-Zor [sic] and other areas of Syria’.

In late August 2011, following the bloody events in Syria during Ramadan, a meeting of Arab League Foreign Ministers (excluding Syria) ‘asked the secretary general of the Arab League to carry out an urgent mission to Damascus and transmit the Arab initiative to resolve the crisis to the Syrian leadership’. On 7 September 2011, however, it was reported that the Arab League ‘mission’ to Syria had been indefinitely postponed, with no official details given as to the reason or reasons for the delay. The London-based Arabic newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat claimed that the Syrian Government called off the visit to protest against a meeting Secretary General El-Araby held with Syrian dissidents in Cairo in early September.

Arab League Foreign Ministers held another meeting in Cairo on 13 September, with Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jasim bin Jabir Al Thani—the meeting’s chair—declaring:

We are keen to protect the unity of Syria, prevent foreign interference, stop the bloodshed and violent acts in addition to the army withdrawal from all the Syrian cities soon.

I wish from the bottom of my heart a dialogue will be established to achieve the ambitions of the Syrian people.

In September 2011 the Arab League announced a 13-point peace plan intended to end the violence and usher in an era of reform. In early November the Syrian Government announced its
acceptance of the peace plan, which called for a comprehensive cease-fire, the withdrawal of the Syrian armed forces from civilian areas, the release of prisoners, and the beginning of a ‘national dialogue’.  

The Syrian Government failed to adhere to the terms of the peace plan, and in mid-November Syria was suspended from the Arab League. The League also called on member states to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus and to impose economic and political sanctions on Syria. Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jabr bin Muhammad Al Thani said at the time:  

“Syria is a dear country for all of us and it pains us to make this decision. We hope there will be a brave move from Syria to stop the violence and begin a real dialogue toward real reform.”

...  

“We are calling all Syrian opposition parties to a meeting at the Arab League headquarters to agree a unified vision for the transitional period.”

Later in November the Arab League imposed economic sanctions on Syria. These included asset freezes and travel restrictions on senior regime officials, a ban on Arab funding for development projects in Syria, and restrictions on dealing with Syria’s central bank. Two of Syria’s Arab neighbours, Iraq and Lebanon, refused to implement the sanctions.

On 19 December 2011 the Syrian Government signed an agreement that would allow Arab League observers to be deployed to Syria. Under the agreement, the observers would reportedly be ‘under the protection of the Syrian government’ but would not be allowed to visit sensitive military sites. The first 60—of a total of 170—Arab League observers arrived in Syria on 26 December. The observer mission was criticised for both its makeup and its mandate. Some claimed that as the monitors would be under the Syrian Government’s protection, they would be unable to effectively document the violence; others questioned the wisdom of appointing a Sudanese General (with possible links to the conflict in Darfur) to head the observer mission. The Saudi and Gulf Arab

40. Ibid.
components of the observer mission were withdrawn on 22 January and 24 January 2012, respectively. The remaining observers were withdrawn on 28 January, with Arab League Secretary General al-Araby citing the ‘deterioration of the situation in Syria and the continued use of violence’ as the reason for the suspension of the observers’ activities.42

Just prior to the withdrawal of its observers, the Arab League presented a second ‘Arab League peace plan’ at its 22 January meeting in Cairo. The plan called for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to transfer power to his deputy, for a national unity government to be formed, and for early elections to be held.43

The Annan peace plan and UNSMIS

Following the withdrawal of its observers, the Arab League requested that the UNSC approve a resolution based on its peace plan. This would lead to the vetoed UNSC Resolution in February 2012 discussed above. On 23 February 2012 former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was appointed as the joint UN-Arab League ‘special envoy’ to Syria. Annan’s function was to:

[B]roadly engage with all relevant interlocutors within and outside Syria in order to end the violence and the humanitarian crisis, and facilitate a peaceful Syrian-led and inclusive political solution that meets the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people through a comprehensive political dialogue between the Syrian government and the whole spectrum of the Syrian opposition.44

In mid-March 2012, following meetings with, among others, Bashar al-Asad, special envoy Annan presented his six-point peace plan to the UN, which called on everyone involved in the conflict to:

1) commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people, and, to this end, commit to appoint an empowered interlocutor when invited to do so by the Envoy;

(2) commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilise the country.

To this end, the Syrian government should immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centres, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centres.

As these actions are being taken on the ground, the Syrian government should work with the Envoy to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism.

Similar commitments would be sought by the Envoy from the opposition and all relevant elements to stop the fighting and work with him to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism;

(3) ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, and to this end, as immediate steps, to accept and implement a daily two hour humanitarian pause and to coordinate exact time and modalities of the daily pause through an efficient mechanism, including at local level;

(4) intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons, and persons involved in peaceful political activities, provide without delay through appropriate channels a list of all places in which such persons are being detained, immediately begin organizing access to such locations and through appropriate channels respond promptly to all written requests for information, access or release regarding such persons;

(5) ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them;

(6) respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.45

The Syrian Government accepted the Annan peace plan on 25 March, and on 2 April 2012 special envoy Annan told the UNSC that the regime had agreed to a ceasefire to come into effect on 12 April. Annan also reportedly asked the Security Council, in a closed meeting, to consider sending a ceasefire monitoring force to Syria.46 A reduction of violence did occur following the start of the ceasefire on 12 April, and the UN deployed 300 unarmed military observers as part of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), as discussed above. However, violence again increased, and the UN Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations stated that both sides had violated the ceasefire agreement.47 On 4 June 2012, following the Houla massacre and a speech


by President Asad to the Syrian parliament in which he vowed to crush the uprising, the Free Syrian Army announced that it was no longer bound by the ceasefire, and stated that it was resuming armed attacks to ‘defend our people’.48

Finally, on 16 June 2012 UNSMIS announced that as a result of escalating violence, the observers were suspending their activities in Syria. This was at least partly the result of an attack on the monitors by an angry crowd in the village of al-Heffeh on 12 June, in which a UN vehicle was damaged. UNSMIS commander Major-General Robert Mood said in a statement:

> The lack of willingness by the parties to seek a peaceful transition, and the push towards advancing military positions is increasing the losses on both sides: innocent civilians, men women and children are being killed every day. It is also posing significant risks to our observers.49

On 19 June 2012 Major-General Mood addressed a closed session of the UNSC; afterwards he told reporters that the monitoring mission would resume if there was a significant reduction in violence.50 These recent events—the Houla massacre, the resumption of attacks by the Free Syrian Army, and the suspension of the monitoring mission—have led some commentators to opine that the Annan peace plan is in danger of collapse.51 However, UN Under-Secretary-General of Peacekeeping Operations, Herve Ladsous, states that the UNSMIS remains an ‘indispensable tool’ and that the six-point Annan peace plan is the only ‘game in town’.52

Friends of Syria Group meetings

Following Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UNSC, France and the US initiated the formation of a contact group in February 2012 to, according to US Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton,
‘support the Syrian people’s right to have a better future’. The Group, sometimes referred to as the ‘Friends of Democratic Syria Group’, now includes about 82 countries, including Australia. It has no official international status; it is rather a group of like-minded countries.

At its first meeting in Tunis on 24 February 2012, the Group demanded that violence in Syria cease and that the Syrian Government allow unfettered access by humanitarian groups. The Group also called for the UN to plan to send a peacekeeping force to Syria when the violence stopped. There was no agreement in the Group on the question of arming Syrian rebels.

The second Friends of Syria Group meeting, in Istanbul on 1 April, issued a stronger ‘final statement’. Besides endorsing the Annan peace plan and calling for a transition to ‘a civil, democratic, pluralistic, independent and free state’, the Group also:

- Recognized the Syrian National Council as a legitimate representative of all Syrians and the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering and stated its support for the activities of the Syrian National Council towards a democratic Syria and noted the Council as the leading interlocutor of the opposition with the international community.
- Committed to render all possible assistance, both technical advice and direct support, to a Syrian-led political process that is peaceful, orderly and stable and to continue and increase, as a matter of urgency, its assistance, including funding and financial support, to meet the needs of the Syrian people.

Representatives from the Syrian National Council, the exile-based umbrella group of the Syrian opposition, attended both meetings. The last Friends of Syria Group meeting was held in Paris on 6 July 2012—a media release issued following the meeting called for stronger sanctions against Syria and expressed ‘support for legitimate measures taken by the Syrian population to protect themselves’. This support was to include ‘communication tools’, allowing the Syrian opposition to communicate more securely with each other and with the outside world.

The expulsion of Syrian diplomats from Western countries

On 29 May 2012 the Australian Foreign Minister Bob Carr announced that the highest ranking Syrian diplomat in Australia, Chargé d’Affaires Jawdat Ali, along with one other diplomat, was being

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expelled in response to the Houla massacre. Over the following 24 hours many Western Governments—including the US, Britain, Italy, Canada, Germany, Spain, Bulgaria, Switzerland, and the Netherlands—likewise expelled the highest ranking Syrian diplomat in their respective countries.

Russia labelled this move by Western countries ‘counterproductive’, arguing that ‘the most important channels’ to provide ‘constructive impact’ on the Syrian Government regarding the implementation of the Annan peace plan had now been closed.

The 30 June Conference on Syria

Following the seeming collapse of UNSMIS, special envoy Annan sought to create a UN ‘Action Group on Syria’, and to hold a multilateral conference to ‘agree on guidelines and principles for a Syrian-led political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people’. There was some controversy over whether Iran would attend the meeting, with the US threatening to pull out if it did so. In the end, the conference was held on 30 June 2012 in Geneva, and attended by the five permanent members of the UNSC—the US, Russia, the UK, France and China—as well as ministers from Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and a representative from the European Union.

The ‘action group’ issued a final communiqué after the meeting, which said, in part:

Action Group members are committed to the sovereignty, independence, national unity and territorial integrity of Syria. They are determined to work urgently and intensively to bring about an end to the violence and human rights abuses and the launch of a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future.


61. AFP, ‘Russia says Iran should be part of Syria summit’, Ahram Online, 26 June 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/0/46265/World/0/Russia-says-Iran-should-be-part-of-Syria-summit.aspx

The key steps in any transition include:

- The establishment of a transitional governing body which can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place. That means that the transitional governing body would exercise full executive powers. It could include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.

- It is for the Syrian people to determine the future of the country. All groups and segments of society in Syria must be enabled to participate in a National Dialogue process. That process must not only be inclusive, it must also be meaningful—that is to say, its key outcomes must be implemented.

- On this basis, there can be a review of the constitutional order and the legal system. The result of constitutional drafting would be subject to popular approval.

- Once the new constitutional order is established, it is necessary to prepare for and conduct free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established.

- Women must be fully represented in all aspects of the transition.  

In the context of Russia’s previous statements on the Syrian uprising, which often emphasised the inadmissibility of foreign interference, the importance of getting Russian agreement on a plan that calls for a ‘transition’ in Syria was noted. However, in the days after the summit there was disagreement between Russia and the West over the interpretation of the document. Following the meeting US Secretary of State Clinton said that ‘it is now incumbent upon them to show Assad the writing on the wall’. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, conversely, highlighted that the plan does not explicitly call for President Asad’s removal and that there would be ‘no attempt in the document to impose on the Syrian people any type of transitional process’. 

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64. ‘Annan sees ‘shift’ in Russia and China positions on Syria’, Al-Arabiya, 3 July 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/03/224213.html
66. HR Clinton (US Secretary of State), Press availability following the meeting of the Action Group on Syria, media release, 30 June 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/06/194328.htm
67. ‘Syria conference leaves open Assad question’, op. cit.
Individual country responses

The manner in which key states have responded to the uprising in relation to the various international initiatives has been discussed above. The following sections document other important statements and moves by key countries.

The US response

Statements

The US did not immediately call for the removal of the Asad regime when the uprising broke out. Between March and August 2011, the US Government’s statements incrementally became stronger and more decisive, and following the Syrian armed forces attacks on Hama and Latakia in July-August 2011, US President Barack Obama explicitly called on 18 August 2011 for al-Asad to step down. The most important US statements are outlined below.

On 29 March 2011, after serious protests broke out in the town of Dera’a and after the Asad Government’s initial reform promises, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton urged Syria to keep its promises:

We're ... waiting and watching to see what comes from the Syrian government.

We support the timely implementation of reforms that meet the demands that Syrians are presenting to their government, such as immediately eliminating Syria's state of emergency laws.

We want to see peaceful transitions and we want to see democracies that represent the will of the people.

It is up to the Syrian government, it is up to the leadership, starting with President Bashar al-Asad, to prove that it can be responsive to the needs of its own people.68

By mid-May 2011, after protests had spread throughout Syria and following what became known as the ‘Siege of Dera’a’, President Obama said ‘the Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Asad now has a choice: he can lead that transition, or get out of the way’.69

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In July, US Government statements continued to come closer to calling for Asad’s ousting. On 11 July 2011, following attacks on the US and French Embassies in Damascus by alleged Asad loyalists, the US issued its strongest condemnation to that point. Secretary of State Clinton stated that President Asad had lost ‘legitimacy’ and:

President Asad is not indispensable and we have absolutely nothing invested in him remaining in power.

If anyone, including President Asad, thinks that the United States is secretly hoping that the regime will emerge from this turmoil to continue its brutality and repression, they are wrong.

Finally, on 18 August 2011, following mass protests and Government attacks on cities in the lead-up to and during Ramadan, the US Government called on President Asad to step down. In a coordinated move with Western European countries (and Australia), President Obama said in a written statement:

The United States has been inspired by the Syrian peoples’ pursuit of a peaceful transition to democracy. They have braved ferocious brutality at the hands of their government. They have spoken with their peaceful marches, their silent shaming of the Syrian regime, and their courageous persistence in the face of brutality—day after day, week after week. The Syrian government has responded with a sustained onslaught.

The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Asad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Asad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Asad to step aside.

The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement. What the United States will support is an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians. We will support this outcome by pressuring President Asad to get out of the way of this transition, and standing up for the universal rights of the Syrian people along with others in the international community.

Since this time the Obama administration has continually called for the UNSC to impose sanctions on the Syrian regime and for President Asad to step down.

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On 9 November 2011 the State Department’s Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs testified before the (US) Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the Syrian uprising and US policy. The Assistant Secretary’s written statement provides significant detail on the US Government’s opinions on the uprising, what the US is trying to achieve, and how it is going about it:

Much has changed both within Syria and in the international response to what is happening inside Syria since the unrest began eight months ago.

... 

The Syrian army has been forced to occupy its own country. Even small towns are continuously occupied by tanks, armored personnel carriers, and battalions of foot soldiers along with plain-clothes intelligence personnel and regime-sponsored armed groups who do much of the dirty work. The pressure is starting to wear on the army. It is not just the fast, unsustainable tempo of operations and unending redeployments ordered to quell every manifestation of dissent — the soldiers of the Syrian army are increasingly rejecting a mission that calls for them to kill and brutally repress their own compatriots, in some cases people from their own tribes and hometowns. Military defections, primarily by conscripts and junior officers, are on the rise, and the pressure on senior officers continues to mount.

...

Turning to the Syrian opposition, one of the more promising recent developments is the establishment of the Syrian National Council, a coalition including secularists, Christians, Islamists, Druze, Alawis, Kurds and other groups from both inside and outside Syria who have joined together to form a united front against the Asad regime. When you consider that for the past forty years, the Syrian people have been prevented from engaging in any political activity or even political discussion, it is truly remarkable that in a matter of just a few months, the SNC has managed to bring together such a broad array of groups into a united coalition, despite the regime’s relentless attempts to thwart their efforts. We have not endorsed any specific opposition group – only the Syrian people can decide who can legitimately represent them. But we take the advent of the SNC very seriously, and we support the broader opposition’s efforts to focus on the critical task of expanding and consolidating its base of support within Syria by articulating a clear and common vision and developing a concrete and credible post-Asad transition plan.

...

While the United States sympathizes with Syrian military defectors and average citizens attempting to protect themselves, we urge them to think strategically about how best to accomplish their goals. We still believe that violent resistance is counterproductive. It will play into the regime’s hands, divide the opposition, and undermine international consensus against the regime. We urge the opposition, and our regional allies, to continue to reject violence. To do otherwise would, frankly, make the regime’s job of brutal repression easier.

...
What we have to say to President Asad can be summed up very briefly: step aside and allow your people to begin the peaceful, orderly transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Bashar al-Asad has proven that he is incapable of reform... We will relentlessly pursue our two-track strategy of supporting the opposition and diplomatically and financially strangling the regime until that outcome is achieved.73

The US Government has also lambasted the two major nominally democratic exercises undertaken by the Syrian Government since the uprising began: the 26 February 2012 constitutional referendum and the 7 May 2012 parliamentary elections.74 The US President’s Press Secretary labelled the referendum ‘laughable’, and a US State Department spokesman stated that the referendum process was just President Asad ‘putting forward a piece of paper that he controls, to a vote that he controls, in an effort to try to maintain control’.75 As the referendum was being conducted on 26 February, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton described the referendum at the Friends of Syria Group meeting in Tunisia as ‘phony’ and ‘a cynical ploy’ by President Asad ‘to justify what he’s doing to other Syrian citizens’.76 Similarly, the US State Department described the parliamentary elections held on 7 May 2012 as ‘bordering on ludicrous’, adding:

It’s not really possible to hold credible elections in a climate where basic human rights are being denied to the citizens and the government is continuing to carry out daily assaults...on its own citizens.77

More recently, following the Asad Government’s acceptance of the six point Annan Peace Plan, the enacting of the cease fire on 12 April 2012 and the deployment of unarmed UN monitors to Syria, Secretary of State Clinton said at a ‘Ad Hoc Ministerial Meeting on Syria’:

[W]e continue to support the monitoring mission, even though we are aware that the increased violence could jeopardize the deployment of the monitors and put their lives at risk. So we’re in a dilemma. We think it’s important to get independent sources of observation and reporting on the ground, but we do not want to create a situation where those who are sent in to do this mission themselves are subjected to violence.

73.  JD Feltman (Assistant Secretary, Near Eastern Affairs, US Department of State), Testimony: US policy on Syria, Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, 9 November 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/176948.htm
Secondly, I think we have to do more to take tougher actions against the Asad regime. We need to start moving very vigorously in the Security Council for a Chapter 7 sanctions resolution, including travel, financial sanctions, an arms embargo, and the pressure that that will give us on the regime to push for compliance with Kofi Annan’s six-point plan.

...

I also believe we have to increase our support for the opposition. I can only speak for the United States. I know that others are pursuing different types of support. But we are expanding our communications, logistics, and other support for the Syrian opposition. And in cooperation with Turkey, we are considering establishing an assistance hub that will try to co-locate Syrian activists and help them coordinate the collection and distribution of assistance to opposition groups inside Syria.78

Meetings with the Syrian National Council (SNC)

Secretary of State Clinton has on a number of occasions met with representatives of the SNC, the most well-known umbrella of Syrian opposition groups, following its formation in September 2011. At a 9 December meeting in Geneva, Secretary Clinton highlighted the US desire to see the Syrian opposition unite into a credible alternative government:

[We will discuss the work that the Council is doing to ensure that their plan is to reach out to all minorities, to counter the regime’s divide-and-conquer approach, which pits ethnic and religious groups against one another. The Syrian opposition, as represented here, recognizes that Syria’s minorities have legitimate questions and concerns about their future, and that they need to be assured that Syria will be better off under a regime of tolerance and freedom that provides opportunity and respect and dignity on the basis of the consent rather than on the whims of a dictator.

And we certainly believe that if Syrians unite, they together can succeed in moving their country to that better future.79

Clinton also met with members of the SNC following the Friends of Syria Group meeting in Tunis on 24 February 2012. Following this meeting, Clinton used her strongest words yet about Russia and China’s actions at the UNSC, while also commenting on how the US views the SNC:

We do view the Syrian National Council as a leading legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful democratic change, and as an effective representative for the Syrian people with governments and international organizations. It’s very important that in the coming days, the full range of opposition groups and individuals inside Syria, including representatives of all ethnic and religious minorities, come together and make their voices heard outside of Syria and inside around a shared vision for the future.

78. HR Clinton (US Secretary of State), Ad Hoc Ministerial Meeting on Syria, media release, 19 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/188147.htm
... 

every one of us would like to see Security Council action. The United States worked very hard to obtain a resolution from the Security Council that was vetoed by Russia and China, although it received support from every other member of the Security Council from Latin America to Africa to Europe to Asia. The entire world, other than Russia and China, were [sic] willing to recognize that we must take international action against the Syrian regime.

... 

I would be willing to go back to the Security Council again and again and again, but we need to change the attitude of the Russian and Chinese governments. They must understand they are setting themselves against the aspirations not only of the Syrian people but of the entire Arab Spring, the Arab Awakening.

... 

It’s quite distressing to see two permanent members of the Security Council using their veto when people are being murdered – women, children, brave young men – houses are being destroyed. It is just despicable. And I ask, whose side are they on? They are clearly not on the side of the Syrian people.80

Finally, Clinton met with the SNC in Istanbul on 1 April 2012, on the sidelines of the Friends of Syria Group meeting. Following that meeting, she told reporters:

I think what you should know is that people have been working very hard to try to figure out ways to help those inside Syria who are bearing the brunt of the brutality of the Asad regime. We are painfully aware of how brutal the actions by the regime have been. And the Syrian National Council has been working hard to organize different Syrians behind a unified approach because, until recently, it was hard to know how to help. There was not the kind of organized effort, and there was no place within Syria that the opposition controlled, which makes it very difficult to assist.

But there is a lot of progress being made in bringing the international community together.

... 

there will be more assistance of all kinds for the Syrian National Council, there will be more humanitarian assistance, that the people inside Syria should know they are not alone.81

80. HR Clinton (US Secretary of State), Press availability on the meeting of the Friends of the Syrian people, transcript, media release, 24 February 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/02/184635.htm

81. HR Clinton (US Secretary of State), Remarks during camera spray following meeting with the Syrian National Council, media release, 1 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/04/187253.htm
The US Embassy in Damascus

In 2010, Robert Ford was appointed US Ambassador to Syria, the first resident ambassador since 2005. In July 2011, Ford visited opposition protestors in Hama and Jisr al-Shughour in Idlib Governorate. Subsequently, the US Embassy in Damascus was attacked by regime supporters, who scaled the embassy walls, raised a Syrian flag, and tried to gain access to the Ambassador’s residence.82

In late October 2011, the US temporarily pulled Ambassador Ford out of Syria, fearing that ‘the kinds of falsehoods that are being spread about Ambassador Ford could lead to violence against him’.83 Ford returned to Damascus in December 2011, with the US justifying its decision by saying that it was important to have an Ambassador there to:

[O]versee the gathering of the information to help us to understand what’s happening, to help us understand how we might best play [a] role in ending the violence, and it’s important for the Syrian people to see the U.S. ambassador is there standing with them at the time they are facing tremendous brutality from their own government.84

On 6 February 2012, the US ‘suspended’ the operations of its embassy in Damascus, saying that the Syrian regime had failed to provide the embassy with sufficient protection.85 The UK, France and some Arab countries have also pulled their diplomatic staff out of Syria.

US Sanctions

Syria has been listed by the US as a State Sponsor of Terrorism since December 1979, and has had numerous rounds of autonomous sanctions applied against it since then.86 Since major protests in Syria began in March 2011, the US has implemented a further series of autonomous sanctions on members of the Syrian Government and security forces. These include:

• prohibition of US companies dealing with the largest bank in Syria (Commercial Bank of Syria) and Syria’s largest telecommunications company (Syriatel)
• asset freezes on many individuals (including the President, the President’s cousin and head of the General Intelligence Directorate, all four branches of the Syrian intelligence service, the Prime

84. JD Feltman (Assistant Secretary, Near Eastern Affairs, US Department of State), Remarks on the return of Ambassador Ford to Syria, media release, 9 December 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/178547.htm
85. US State Department, Suspending Embassy operations in Syria, media release, 6 February 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/02/183352.htm
86. For information on pre-2011 US sanctions on Syria see US trade and financial sanctions against Syria, Embassy of the United States in Damascus website, no date, viewed 3 July 2012, http://damascus.usembassy.gov/sanctions-syr.html
Minister, the Minister of the Interior, the Foreign Minister, the Minister for Defence, Presidential Spokesperson Bouthaina Shaaban, and others) and

- travel bans on many of the same individuals (but not the President, giving him the option of leaving the country)

The US has maintained a ban on most non-food and medical exports to Syria since May 2004. Due to this, US officials have on occasion hinted that US sanctions will not have as much impact as, for example, the EU oil embargo enforced in September 2011.

**Arming the Syrian opposition**

The US Government has stated on a number of occasions that it is opposed to supplying arms to the Syrian opposition. For example, on 14 February 2012 State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland told reporters that ‘we continue to believe that further arms into Syria is not the answer. Silencing the guns is the answer, and that is the trajectory that we are working on’. Likewise, on 30 March 2012 a ‘senior State Department official’ outlined US policy on the issue:

> Our main focus and the focus that we have with our partners is on trying to get the guns silenced, first and foremost, Asad’s guns silenced and then, as Kofi Annan has said, as he takes steps to implement the promises that he made, then Kofi Annan in the first instance, but everybody with influence working with the opposition to make clear that their guns should be silenced as well.

More recently a State Department spokesperson stated that the US was providing ‘non-lethal’ assistance to the Syrian opposition, without stating what this meant or to what groups the assistance was being given, but noted that the US did not support ‘armed groups’. Even more recently, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the US Government of ‘providing arms to the Syrian opposition which are being used against the Syrian government’, and there have been media reports that Central Intelligence Agency operatives are helping to coordinate the flow of weapons through Turkey to members of the armed Syrian opposition.

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89. JD Feltman, *Testimony: US policy on Syria*, op. cit.


The European Union (EU) and UK responses

The EU has maintained a similar policy towards Syria to that of the US: first calling for reforms, before imposing a series of autonomous sanctions, and eventually calling on President Asad to ‘step aside’ in August 2011. It is possible that EU sanctions may be more effectual than US autonomous sanctions because the Syrian economy is more interconnected with European markets than it is with that of the US.

As early as 22 March 2011, EU foreign policy High Representative Catherine Ashton released a statement expressing the EU’s ‘profound concern’ at the situation in Syria, and noting that the EU ‘strongly condemn[ed] the violent repression, including through the use of live ammunition, of peaceful protests’.  

The EU has imposed a progressive set of autonomous sanctions on Syria, which began with an arms embargo and a travel/asset freeze on a number of individuals (including President Asad), and culminated in a ban on the importation of Syrian oil imposed in September 2011. As evidence of the strength of this move, prior to the uprising 95 per cent of Syria’s oil exports went to Europe. In May 2012 it was reported that the oil embargo on Syria was taking a ‘substantial toll’ on the Syrian economy. By June 2012 a total of 16 rounds of EU sanctions had been imposed on Syria. Besides the measures alluded to above, these include:

- a ban on investment in Syria’s oil, gas and electricity production sectors


International responses to the Syrian uprising: March 2011–June 2012

- an asset freeze on Syria’s central bank, and a ban on supplying banknotes or coinage to that institution
- a ban on trade in gold and other precious metals with Syrian public bodies
- a ban on loans or grants by EU-member states to Syria
- an export ban on equipment, technology or software which could be used for monitoring or intercepting internet or telephone communications
- a prohibition on Syrian banks opening new branches within the EU, and a prohibition on EU banks opening new branches or accounts in Syria and
- a prohibition on the export of luxury goods to Syria.99

On 18 August 2011, the same day as President Obama called for President Asad to ‘step aside,’ High Representative Ashton said in a media release:

The EU has repeatedly emphasised that the brutal repression must be stopped, detained protesters released, free access by international humanitarian and human rights organizations and media allowed, and a genuine and inclusive national dialogue launched. The Syrian leadership, however, has remained defiant to calls from the EU as well as the broad international community including Syria’s own neighbours. This shows that the Syrian regime is unwilling to change. The President’s promises of reform have lost all credibility as reforms cannot succeed under permanent repression. The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Asad’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside.100

Since then, the EU has consistently called for President Asad to stand down, has been actively involved in the Friends of Syria Group meetings, and supported the Arab League/Kofi Annan peace plans described above.101

The UK102

Like the US and EU, Britain’s statements on the Syrian uprising became gradually stronger between March and August 2011—initially calling for the Syrian Government to ‘respect their people’s right

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to peaceful protest’, before calling on 18 August for President Asad to ‘step aside’. On 6 February 2012 Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, William Hague, outlined Britain’s policy on Syria in the House of Commons. Secretary Hague stated that Britain would:

- continue to support the Arab League’s mediation efforts (including the appointment of the joint Arab League/UN special envoy then being discussed)
- intensify contacts with the Syrian opposition
- play an active role in the Friends of Syria Group meetings and
- continue to raise the issue at the UNSC.

The British Government has provided small amounts of foreign aid to those affected by the Syrian uprising, and has lamented both the difficulty in delivering aid to those areas most impacted by the uprising and the Syrian Government’s response.

The UK has temporarily suspended the operations of its embassy in Damascus, and in May 2012 expelled the Syrian ambassador to the UK (discussed above). The British Government considers the Syrian National Council to be ‘a legitimate representative’ of the Syrian people. Despite this recognition, the British Government opposes arming the Syrian opposition.

As at the end of June 2012 Britain continued to support the Annan peace plan, arguing that at that time it ‘offer[ed] the best chance to break the ongoing cycle of violence’.

105. Ibid.
Turkey’s response

In the 2000s Syrian-Turkish relations improved following decades of hostility concerning territorial, water, and foreign policy disputes. In 2004, the two countries signed a free trade agreement, and in 2009 conducted joint military exercises.110

Relations soured after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, with Turkey regularly condemning Syrian actions, granting safe passage to Syrian rebels, and championing the cause of the opposition Syrian National Council (which the Turkish Government assisted in setting up).111 During a September 2011 visit to Libya, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan spoke strongly in support of the Syrian uprising:

Those who repress their own people in Syria will not survive. The time of autocracies is over. Totalitarian regimes are disappearing. The rule of the people is coming.112

Russia’s response

Russia, a long time ally and provider of arms to Syria, has appeared reluctant to directly criticise the Syrian regime, and has opposed the application of international sanctions through the UNSC. Russia has also opposed any UNSC resolution that condemns the Syrian Government without also condemning the Syrian opposition.

Russian officials have attempted to explain their position on Syria through a number of statements. Since the beginning of the uprising comments by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have consistently emphasised the need for an end to violence (from whatever source), the inadmissibility of ‘outside interference’, and the need to carry out political reform in Syria. The Russian Government has also regularly expressed a desire to avoid a repeat of the ‘Libya situation’ where, according to


International responses to the Syrian uprising: March 2011–June 2012

Russia, a UNSC Resolution to create a no-fly zone in Libya was used as a means to carry out regime change.\(^{113}\)

In June 2011, for example, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discussed a possible UNSC condemnation of the Syrian Government:

> It is not in the interests of anyone to send messages to the opposition in Syria or elsewhere that if you reject all reasonable offers we will come and help you as we did in Libya... It’s a very dangerous position.\(^{114}\)

Similarly, in August 2011, following the issuing of the UNSC ‘Presidential Statement’ discussed above, a Russian Foreign Ministry media release stated:

> Moscow is convinced that the situation in the country must be resolved by the Syrians themselves without outside interference through an inclusive dialogue, which is the only way to solve the crisis. It is important that this position found reflection in the statement.

> Russia will continue to persist in advocating for accelerating a long-overdue political, economic and social transformation in Syria along the path of deep-going reforms announced by the government of the country on the basis of the inadmissibility of violence, the search for a national consensus and an inclusive political process.\(^{115}\)

The Russian Government has regularly called for a ‘broad based reform program’ in Syria, and has on occasion welcomed the various initiatives announced by the Syrian Government. For instance, in August 2011 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for the:

> [S]wiftest possible launch of a comprehensive responsible and meaningful dialogue to address the pressing domestic political, economic and social problems in the interests of all Syrians, to restore civil harmony and to ensure a stable democratic development of the country.\(^{116}\)

Moscow gave cautious support to the constitutional referendum held in Syria on 26 June 2012, describing it in one statement as ‘an important step towards implementation of the current reformation policy of the Syrian government’ and in another as ‘better late than never’.\(^{117}\)

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116. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Russian MFA Press and Information Department comment on the situation in Syria*, media release, 1 August 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, [http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/a6f2cf5b8636e3e1c32578e0001e0d08!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/a6f2cf5b8636e3e1c32578e0001e0d08!OpenDocument)
Russia ‘welcomed’ the 7 May 2012 parliamentary elections, in which the Ba’ath Party and allied independents won more than 90 per cent of the seats, arguing that it was ‘a step for implementing necessary reforms’.118

Russian officials have at times directly criticised the Asad regime or sought to distance themselves from the Syrian Government. In mid-July 2011 Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said that ‘we need to apply pressure on the leadership of any country where massive unrest, and especially bloodshed, is happening,’ and in early August President Dmitry Medvedev warned Asad of a ‘sad fate’ if he failed to reform, adding that Asad ‘needs to urgently carry out reforms, reconcile with the opposition, restore peace and set up a modern state’.119

Russia has also stated its consistent support for international initiatives by the Arab League and UN/Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan.120 In addition, Russia has on many occasions called for ‘those with influence on opposition groups’ to pressure those groups to desist from violent acts, with Foreign Minister Lavrov arguing in the context of the April 2012 ceasefire:

> It would be better for the United States and other countries with direct access to various Syrian opposition groups not to point at Russia and China, but to set their levers in motion to...force everybody to stop shooting at one another.

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118. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Comment of the Information and Press Department of MFA of Russia regarding the situation in and around Syria, media release, 10 May 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, 

119. ‘Asad orders new Syrian amnesty’, Al-Jazeera English, 21 June 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, 
http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/06/2011621944198405.html; and ‘Medvedev: Syria’s Asad risks sad fate’, Ynet News, 4 August 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, 
http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4104743,00.html

120. For Russia’s stated support for Arab League/UN initiatives see the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, On the decisions of the League of Arab States on Syria, media release, 17 April 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, 
http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bbcb3/6d3ef8e1d3e2ecbc325792d00228fe9!OpenDocument; AK Lukashevich (Official Representative, MFA of Russia), On worsening of humanitarian situation in Russia, media release, 24 February 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, 
http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bbcb3/3892cbccf3b4c01442579ff002b0eaf!OpenDocument
We want once again today to call on all opposition (groups) and all states that have influence on the political and especially the armed opposition to use the influence with the aim of an immediate ceasefire by all sides.\footnote{Quoted in N Astrasheuskaya and T Grove, ‘Russia urges Syria, Annan to step up peace effort’, \textit{Chicago Tribune}, 10 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-04-10/news/sns-rt-us-syria-russiabre8390yy-20120410_1_syrian-opposition-syrian-president-bashar-lavrov}; see also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, \textit{Some aspects of humanitarian situation in Syria}, media release, 28 February 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/a4f134bbefa98efe442579b50048aa04!OpenDocument} and S Lavrov (Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs), \textit{Remarks by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for the mass media upon the visit to Damascus, Syria}, media release, 7 February 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/351373c07624a3be442579a3001dea9!OpenDocument}}

Russia does not take part in the Friends of Syria Group meetings, arguing that the meetings have a ‘one-sided character’ and are ‘contrary to the objectives of the peaceful settlement of the civil conflict’.\footnote{The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, \textit{Answer of Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia M.V. Zakharova to the question of the mass media regarding the second meeting of the so-called “Friends of Syria” Group}, media release, 2 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/67117b99c451c5c2442579d8002cfad!OpenDocument}}

The BBC has estimated that Russia currently has arms contracts worth US$1.5 billion with Syria. It was also reported that at least one major shipload of Russian ammunition was delivered to Syria in January 2012.\footnote{R Gaplin, ‘Russian arms shipments bolster Syria’s embattled Asad’, \textit{BBC News}, 30 January 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16797818}}

\textbf{China’s response}

About a month after the uprising in Syria began, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson outlined China’s policy on Syria at that time:

Syria is a country of major influence in the Middle East Region. China believes that when it comes to properly handling the current Syrian situation, it is the correct direction and major approach to resolve the internal differences through political dialogue and maintain its national stability as well as the overall stability and security of the Middle East.

The future of Syria should be independently decided by the Syrian people themselves free from external interference.\footnote{Jiang Yu (Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson), \textit{Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Jiang Yu’s Regular Press Conference}, media release, 24 May 2011, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://ch.china-embassy.org/ger/fyrth/t825290.htm}}

China’s public position has remained consistent since April 2011. In March 2012 a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson outlined China’s current policy in some detail:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[122.] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, \textit{Answer of Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia M.V. Zakharova to the question of the mass media regarding the second meeting of the so-called “Friends of Syria” Group}, media release, 2 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, \url{http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/67117b99c451c5c2442579d8002cfad!OpenDocument}
\end{itemize}
1. The Syrian Government and all parties concerned should immediately, fully and unconditionally cease all acts of violence, particularly violence against innocent civilians. Various factions in Syria should express political aspirations through non-violent means.

2. The Syrian Government and various factions should bear in mind the long-term and fundamental interests of their country and people, immediately launch an inclusive political dialogue with no preconditions attached or outcome predetermined through impartial mediation of the Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League, agree on a comprehensive and detailed road-map and timetable for reform through consultation and implement them as soon as possible with a view to restoring national stability and public order.

3. China supports the UN’s leading role in coordinating humanitarian relief efforts. China maintains that under the precondition of respecting Syria’s sovereignty, the UN or an impartial body acceptable to all parties should make an objective and comprehensive assessment of the humanitarian situation in Syria, ensure the delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid. China is ready to provide humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. We oppose anyone interfering in Syria’s internal affairs under the pretext of ‘humanitarian’ issues.

4. Relevant parties of the international community should earnestly respect the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and the right of the Syrian people to independently choose their political system and development path, create conditions and provide necessary and constructive assistance for the various political factions of Syria to launch dialogue, and respect the outcome of dialogue. China does not approve of armed interference or pushing for ‘regime change’ in Syria, and believes that use or threat of sanctions does not help to resolve this issue appropriately.

5. China welcomes the appointment of the Joint Special Envoy on the Syrian crisis by the UN and the Arab League and supports him in playing a constructive role in bringing about the political resolution of the crisis. China supports the active efforts made by the Arab states and the Arab League to promote a political solution to the crisis.

6. Members of the Security Council should strictly abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and the basic norms governing international relations. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China is ready to earnestly fulfill its responsibilities, engage in equal-footed, patient and full consultation with other parties on the political solution to the Syrian crisis in an effort to safeguard the unity of the Security Council. 125

In pursuing this policy, China has joined with Russia in vetoing two UNSC Resolutions and has opposed the imposition of international sanctions through the UNSC. The use of the UNSC veto by China has historically been a rare occurrence—some have claimed China’s vetoes concerning Syria

simply represent China’s long-held policy of non-interference, or a reaction to what occurred in Libya, or a means to build on its relationship with Russia.126

Australia’s response

The Australian Government initially called for ‘restraint’ in the Syrian authorities’ response to protests, and called on the Asad regime to implement ‘genuine political and economic reform without delay’.127 From April 2011, Australia applied a rolling set of targeted autonomous sanctions on Syria, which involved financial sanctions on key regime figures, an arms embargo, and restrictions on trade in the hydrocarbon, financial services and telecommunications sectors.128 The most recent round of sanctions was applied on 25 June 2012.129

In June 2011, the then Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd announced that Australia had written to the UNSC asking that body to refer President al-Asad to the International Criminal Court. Australia was one of the first countries to call for this action.130

On 19 August 2011, following similar calls from the US and other Western countries, Australian Acting Foreign Minister Craig Emerson called on President al-Asad to ‘step down’. Emerson added

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130. K Rudd (Minister for Foreign Affairs), Walking together: address to the Gala Dinner to celebrate the legacy of William Cooper, media release, 16 June 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/download/media/pressrel/851336/upload_binary/851336.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%222010s%20syria%20international%20criminal%20court%20minister%20for%20foreign%20affairs%22](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlinfo/download/media/pressrel/851336/upload_binary/851336.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%222010s%20syria%20international%20criminal%20court%20minister%20for%20foreign%20affairs%22)
that ‘the people of Syria must be allowed to engage in peaceful political activity and be given the chance to determine their own future’. 131

On 15 February 2012 Foreign Minister Rudd gave a statement on Syria and Iran in the House of Representatives. It provides a summary of Australia’s policy in relation to the Syrian Government and the uprising:

The regime has been emboldened by lack of action by the United Nations Security Council. The attacks in Homs are ongoing. And a humanitarian crisis of tragic proportions is unfolding.

... We cannot stand by and watch this violence continue to unfold. Last week I called in the Syrian Chargé, Mr Jawdat Ali, to underline the Australian Government’s grave concerns about the worsening crisis in Syria and ongoing bloodshed. I underlined that the Asad regime had lost its legitimacy when it started deploying arms against its own people and that it was time for Asad to leave. I said this view was now virtually universal – as demonstrated not only by the United Nations Security Council vote where 13 of the Council’s 15 members voted in support of the proposed resolution, but more importantly, by the collective position of the Arab League.

... The Arab League has been actively pursuing efforts to bring peace to Syria and end the bloodshed – despite the lack of support by some members of the UN Security Council. Members of the Arab League most recently met on 12 February in Cairo to discuss next steps [and approved the Arab League peace plan cited above].

... I have signalled in the past, including in this place, Australia’s strong support for the efforts of the Arab League. It has shown resolve and leadership to see an end to the appalling bloodshed in Syria and to help lift the hand of oppression of the regime from its people. We owe it to them, and to the Arab League, to likewise maintain our resolve and support.

... Russia and China need to reconsider their commitment to the Syrian people. 132


The current Australian Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, has basically continued Rudd’s approach. In early April, Carr announced that Australia would provide $5 million ‘to meet humanitarian needs in Syria’. Of this, $2 million was to go to the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and $3 million to the World Food Program. Carr also voiced the Australian Government’s support for the Annan Peace Plan and the UNSC’s support for that plan, and has condemned the suicide bombings in Syria.

As was noted above, Australia expelled the highest ranking Syrian diplomat, Chargé d’Affaires Jawdat Ali, on 29 May 2012, a move that was followed by many other Western countries. In another significant move, on 16 June 2012 Foreign Minister Carr met with the newly elected President of the Syrian National Council, Abdulbaset Sieda. Carr said of this meeting that ‘we support efforts to coordinate and organise opposition parties and to provide a voice for the Syrian people in the international domain’.

Conclusion

Over the 16-month Syrian uprising, the position of Western countries has slowly evolved from calling for democratic reforms, to calling for the ousting of the President Bashar al-Asad, to more recently providing some support for the (armed and unarmed) Syrian opposition. Russia and China’s positions have remained more stagnant, although the final communiqué issued after the 30 June 2012 UN Conference on Syria might indicate some shifting in the position of both those countries.

The various international initiatives attempting to halt the violence or to find a solution to ‘the Syrian crisis’ have largely failed, and violence in June 2012 was probably as high as at any stage over the last 16 months. It remains to be seen whether the agreement which resulted from the UN Conference on Syria will contribute to ending the crisis, or whether it will go the same way as international initiatives that preceded it.

133. B Carr (Minister for Foreign Affairs), Foreign Minister meets Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on Syria, media release, 10 April 2012, viewed 3 July 2012, http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/1558251/upload_binary/1558251.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22syria%20%202010s%20minister%20for%20foreign%20affairs%22