

Syria and the United Nations

Events: The conflict in Syria escalated quickly after the Syrian Army was deployed to suppress demonstrations against the regime of President Bashar Assad, which had started in March 2011 and were linked to the wider Middle Eastern protest movement known as the Arab Spring (see p. 211). Within months, the conflict developed into a highly complex and intractable civil war, involving at least four main elements. The Syrian Army was supported by the Shabiha, pro-government militias drawn largely from Assad's Alawite minority group, and, after 2013, the Lebanon-based, Shi'a Islamic militant group, Hezbollah. The loose-knit, western-backed Free Syrian Army constituted the chief opposition force, but foreign al-Qaeda-linked militants gradually assumed an increasingly prominent role, while Syrian Kurds, long-time opponents of the Assad regime, established semi-autonomy in the northeast of the country. For over two years, the United Nations was effectively sidelined as the Syrian civil war turned into the bloodiest conflict of the twenty-first century to date. Nevertheless, following the sarin nerve gas attack on a suburb of Damascus in August 2013, the UN Security Council voted the following month to eliminate Syria's entire stockpile of chemical weapons by mid-2014, although the resolution did not threaten automatic punitive action against the Assad government if it did not comply.

Significance: The lack of effective UN intervention to end Syria's civil war, or to reduce the scale of the bloodshed (accepting that the decommissioning of the Syria's chemical weapons will not, in itself, accomplish either of these goals), can be explained by one key factor. This was the absence of a consensus in the UN Security Council over Syria, a situation that once again underlines the extent to which the UN is a creature of the Security Council's veto powers, as well as the capacity of disagreement within the Security Council to paralyse the organization. While the USA, France and the UK broadly aligned themselves with the Syrian rebels, in the hope that the fall of Assad would usher in a regime that is pro-western, democratically-based and less hostile to Israel, Russia and China consistently backed the Syrian government, blocking any draft resolution that condemned its part in the conflict, proposed that Assad should step down or threatened to impose sanctions on Syria. Russia's relations with Syria are



particularly significant in this respect. Syria is Russia's key ally in the Middle East, having close military, economic and political ties that date back at least to the Assad family's seizure of power in 1971.

The chemical attack near Damascus in August 2013 nevertheless created circumstances that resulted in the UN taking a more prominent role in Syria, through the Security Council resolution on chemical weapons and its implementation by UN weapons inspectors. However, this development was by no means automatic or inevitable. The USA's initial reaction to the chemical attack, supported by France and, initially, by the UK, was to threaten to carry out a 'limited and tailored' military strike against the Syrian government, indicating that it would be willing to carry out this attack without Security Council approval. Such action threatened to further sideline the UN, in a manner reminiscent of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and to seriously damage US–Russian relations. The turnabout in the situation occurred when, in early September, Russia called on Syria to divest itself of its chemical weapons, initiating weeks of intense diplomacy between Russia and the USA, through which the text of eventually-successful Security Council resolution was negotiated. Acting through the mechanism of the UN in these circumstances satisfied Russia's desire to prevent military action being taken against the Assad regime, as well as the USA's wish to respond to the chemical attack without carrying out an intervention that would have had uncertain political, military and strategic outcomes.