



In Brief: Syria

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• Sanctions

The EU sanctioned 13 Syrian officials with asset freezes and travel bans on 17 May, extending the list to include president Bashar al-Assad himself and nine more government officials on 23 May. On 24 June, the EU sanctioned members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard for its alleged involvement in supporting the Assad regime, and added some Syrian companies close to the regime. In August, further names from the regime were added to the [EU sanctions list](#) and on 2 September the EU agreed to ban imports of Syrian oil, with the ban coming fully into force on 15 November. New individuals and entities were added in September, October and November, including Syriatel and the Commercial Bank of Syria.

The US and the EU have moved broadly in step in imposing sanctions on the Syrian regime and companies and individuals associated with it.

• Arab League

On 30 October the Arab League presented a peace plan which called on the Syrian government to withdraw security forces from the streets and allow peaceful protest, release prisoners detained since February and allow the Arab League to send monitors. The plan also called for negotiations with the opposition, although details, such as who would be included in any negotiations, were not specified.

The Syrian government announced on 2 November that it would comply with the plan. Although some prisoners were released, the armed forces did not withdraw and killing continued. As the [United Nations announced](#) that the number of dead had passed the 3,500 mark, the Arab League warned Syria that it would not sit by and watch the violence continue.

On 12 November, the group suspended Syria and discussed the possibility of sanctions against Syria. It was another sign, after the League's unprecedented support for international intervention in Libya, that the traditional caution of the bloc has been jettisoned. Analysts say that this is because the Arab rulers are themselves worried about pressure at home and want to be counted on the side of the popular protests rather than support oppressive regimes. Also important is the fact that both Qaddafi and al-Assad were isolated from the Sunni Arab mainstream.

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- **United Nations**

After prolonged negotiations on the wording, France, with the support of the UK, Germany and Portugal, drafted a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian government but not mentioning sanctions. That was put to the vote on 3 November but was vetoed by Russia and China. Brazil, India, Lebanon and South Africa abstained.

On 22 November, the UN General Assembly [passed a resolution](#) “strongly” condemning “the continued grave and systematic human rights violations by the Syrian authorities.” The resolution did not mention violence on the part of the protesters and called on the Syrian authorities to implement the Arab League’s peace plan. The vote was 122 in favour to 13 against, with 41 abstentions including Russia and China. The resolution has no legal force.

- **Damascus increasingly isolated and threatened?**

Syria’s main advocates in recent months have been China and Russia, but the two powers appear to be distancing themselves somewhat. Russia criticised the Arab League’s suspension of Syria but has called on Damascus for restraint and met the leader of the opposition Syrian National Council. On 15 November, China urged Syria to implement the Arab League’s plan. Both Russia and China remain strongly opposed to any military intervention. King Abdullah of Jordan was the first Arab leader to call openly, on 14 November, for al-Assad’s resignation.

Turkey has established friendly relations with Syria and there are strong economic ties between the two countries. The unrest in Syria is causing that relationship to break down. On 22 November, Turkish Prime Minister [Erdogan told al-Assad to stop torturing](#) and shedding blood, and called on al-Assad to learn from what happened to Hitler, Ceaucescu and Qaddafi. There has been discussion of the imposition of a buffer zone in northern Syria, patrolled by Turkish troops, to protect civilians. For Turkish troops to enter Syria would, however, be a high-risk strategy. Other possibilities might include arming the opposition or imposing economic sanctions.

France withdrew its ambassador on 16 November, then French foreign minister Alain Juppé met representatives of the opposition Syrian National Council on 23 November and announced the recognition of the SNC as the legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. Juppé said that EU countries should consider establishing humanitarian protection zones or corridors. He said that a no-fly zone was not on the agenda because “[an armed reaction could provoke a real civil war](#)”. The leader of the Free Syria Army has called for air strikes on “[strategic targets](#)” to hasten the regime’s demise.

- **Conflict moving towards civil war?**

Syria has often described rebels as armed criminals or terrorists, comments which have been dismissed by critics. However, rumours of external funds and arms reaching the rebels are persistent. The scale of defections from the armed forces is difficult to measure but significant, and many think that the fate of the regime will depend on the loyalty or otherwise of the security forces.

On 16 November, an Air Force intelligence base near Damascus famous for holding and torturing opposition activists was attacked, in a clear sign that the Free Syrian Army was gaining in confidence. The group’s leadership is based in Turkey and claims to have some 10,000 defected soldiers around Syria. However, a fully-fledged armed conflict would be unlikely to lead quickly to the fall of the regime, which is well-armed and has considerable

support. After the attack, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the situation was increasingly like a civil war: “[violence is not only coming from authorities.](#)” A US State Department official said that the escalation of violence was not helpful: “[Certainly, it plays into Assad’s hands – this idea that there’s a civil war.](#)”

- **A pawn in the broader regional contest?**

At the beginning of the protests, the Assad regime blamed foreign intervention for provoking them. This was generally taken to be propaganda. As the crisis deepened and promises of reform turned out to be empty, the regime’s propaganda has increasingly come true and the conflict is in danger of becoming part of the Sunni/Shia conflict that splits the region into enemies and friends of Iran and the United States respectively. For some, particularly in the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel, al-Assad’s potential fall would be welcomed because it might weaken the anti-Israel Shia group Hizbollah, which al-Assad supports, and would deprive Iran of its chief regional ally.

Others have suggested that such people should be careful what they wish for. A political transition in Syria would be massively complicated by any conflict on Syria’s borders involving Israel, Hizbollah or Iran and any more fuel on Syria’s sectarian fires could be disastrous. Also, a democratic and Sunni-dominated government in Syria might turn out to be worse for Israel than the present regime which, despite its rhetoric, has maintained a cold peace.