A bleak balance sheet:  
The second anniversary of Syria's civil war

Abstract

While the international community remains unable to solve the two-year-old Syrian crisis, the humanitarian crisis grows: the number of refugees who have fled to neighbouring countries stands at one million. Internally displaced people number three million, and the dead 70 000 — not to mention the damage wrought on cities and villages, including many of great historical and cultural significance. What began as a small pro-democracy protest has evolved into a civil war complicated by sectarian strife. The Syrian opposition lacks unity and includes jihadist elements. So long as the international community also remains divided — and so long as Russia, Iran and Iran’s ally Hezbollah continue to unconditionally support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad — the conflict’s grim statistics are bound to worsen. The EU, which cannot claim to have acted more decisively or righteously than its partners at the UN, is assuming a leading role in delivering humanitarian assistance to the victims of the war within Syria and in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. Any military intervention is excluded — at least for the time being — but efforts to find a political solution will require cooperating intensively with Russia — a significant challenge, but one that can no longer be set aside.
1. **The situation on the ground deteriorates seriously**

As the second anniversary of Syria’s civil war approaches, the tally of Syrian refugees who fled the country now stands at more than one million — 5% of Syria’s population — according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR). The number is expected to rise further as the political and humanitarian situation in the country deteriorates. Reports suggest that children are suffering disproportionately, recruited by armed groups and used as human shields. Fighting still rages in different regions, particularly in the northern province of Aleppo. Each day, an estimated 8,000 Syrians cross the border into neighbouring countries.

The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has also risen and now stands at three million. According to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, the death toll in Syria is ‘probably now approaching 70,000’. An estimated 10,000 people have died since January 2013. What began as a spontaneous pro-democracy protest has turned into an all-out civil war, complicated by evidence of sectarian strife.

The International Community has tiptoed around the Syrian crisis since the outbreak of violence in March 2011. Syria’s pivotal regional role and the complexity of foreign powers’ stakes have rendered it impossible to replicate the sort of international efforts that were devoted to Libya. Apart from Qatar and Saudi Arabia, international stakeholders are reluctant to supply arms to the Syrian opposition, and Russia and Iran have relentlessly supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In February 2013, the United States allocated an additional USD 60 million in non-lethal aid to the opposition. This will be used to help local councils provide basic goods and services and ‘fulfil administrative functions including security, sanitation and education services’. Although the United States does not provide arms to the opposition, US Secretary of State John Kerry has supported the policies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia and expressed confidence that weapons supplied by them have reached the hands of moderate groups within the Syrian opposition.

The United Kingdom has decided to step up its assistance to Syria's

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2 UNOCHA, as of 26/02/2013 (It is likely that this figure, estimated by the Syrian government, is an underestimation as no IDP registration has been carried out.)
5 U.S. Government Assistance to the Syrian People (Fact Sheet 4 March 2013) http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/205623.htm
opposition by providing armoured vehicles, body armour and other non-lethal equipment for 'moderate, democratic forces'.

2. An asymmetric civil war

Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint UN-Arab League envoy, expressed his mounting concern in December 2012 that, if the crisis continued, Syria would face 'Somalisation' and evolve into a failed state. Brahimi has warned that as many as 100,000 people could die by the end of 2013. Today, three months after this grim projection, Syria's future looks even bleaker.

Brahimi presented an international plan to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in January 2013 to end the Syrian civil war. The plan calls for an open-ended ceasefire between rebels and government troops, and for the formation of a transitional government, to be followed by elections. Brahimi called on the Security Council to support a democratic transition in Syria. Yet diplomatic efforts have failed to keep up with the situation on the ground, and rebels have consolidated their hold on the northern and eastern areas of the country. The regime remains strong along a north-south axis from Damascus through Homs, Hama, Latakia and what are called the 'Alawite mountains'.

In Aleppo and its surroundings, several areas have slipped out of the regime's control. To fill this security and political vacuum, the opposition has established 29 unofficial provincial civilian and military councils. In opposition-held areas in Aleppo, the first of these governing council structures will be charged with civilian affairs. Yet these developments have limited significance as long as the Assad government controls Damascus and much of the most populated areas.

The Syrian opposition has grown increasingly frustrated with 'international silence' — what is perceived as an international reluctance to offer any support other than humanitarian and non-lethal aid. In effect, a protracted conflict can only benefit President Assad, who, despite several defections over the past two years, relies on a loyal and well-equipped military force underwritten by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The military situation could be locked into a stalemate for quite some time —

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There are fears of a growing jihadist influence within the opposition.

At the same time, the opposition remains divided, despite improvements under the leadership of the Syrian National Council Chair Moaz al-Khatib. Radical Jihadist elements are becoming more powerful every day. The recent kidnapping of 21 UN peacekeepers by Syrian rebels in the Golan Heights provides further evidence of the wide religious and ideological spectrum within the opposition. Even jihadists such as Jabhat al-Nusra who wishes to turn Syria into an Islamic state, are part of the opposition.

Refugees cause mounting tensions in neighbouring countries

International stakeholders pledged USD 1.5 billion in humanitarian aid during the high-level International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria held in Kuwait on 30 January 2013. Even this, however, will not suffice for neighbouring countries to cope with the high influx of refugees crossing their borders every day. According to the UNHCR, the total number of registered refugees and individuals awaiting registration was one million as of 28 February 2013. The three countries most affected by the civil war are Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. There are also sizeable refugee populations in Iraq and Egypt.

Reports from UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), indicate that an estimated 400,000 Palestinian refugees are in need of humanitarian assistance within Syria, while 4,600 have fled to Jordan and approximately 32,000 to Lebanon.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total population of host country</th>
<th>Syrian refugees (including those awaiting registration)</th>
<th>Palestinian refugees coming from Syria</th>
<th>Refugees, as a percentage of host population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
<td>327,000</td>
<td>32,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>6,500,000</td>
<td>314,000</td>
<td>4,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>80,000,000</td>
<td>185,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>31,200,000</td>
<td>107,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>83,700,000</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>205,400,000</td>
<td>976,000</td>
<td>36,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While neighbouring countries have maintained an open border policy throughout the crisis, their resources are now severely stretched. Lebanon has opted for a 'no camp' policy, and has largely absorbed refugees into local communities, although the capacities of hosting families are being stretched.

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http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=1671
Syria’s crisis has further divided political factions in Lebanon.

Turkey fears repercussions in its own Kurdish regions.

Iraq fears sectarian confrontations.

Jordan is wary of yet another influx of Palestinian refugees.

tested. The country is deeply divided between anti-Assad and pro-Assad political forces, although the government has maintained a neutral position towards Syria in order to defuse internal tensions. In 2012, deadly confrontations in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli served as a warning that the Syrian crisis might affect the entire region. A bomb attack in Beirut that killed Wissam al-Hassan, head of Lebanon’s Internal Security Force (ISF), on 19 October 2012 has been blamed on the Syrian regime. The Lebanese opposition accused governing Hezbollah, a steadfast supporter of Assad, of facilitating the operation and called for the government to resign.

Turkey has both ratcheted up its dialogue with President Assad and decided to host members of the opposition and the Free Syrian Army on its territory. Tensions between Ankara and Damascus peaked when Syria shot down a Turkish jet fighter, and Turkey asked NATO to deploy Patriot missiles from its border with Syria. In a bid to destabilise its neighbour, Assad has allocated the control of three districts in northern Syria to an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, fuelling Turkish worries that the Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria could serve as a base to launch attacks in Turkish territory.

Syria’s crisis could also affect Iraq. Iraq’s position has been relatively neutral, though far from disinterested: Prime Minister Maliki recently conceded his concern that Syria’s civil war could trigger sectarian strife in Iraq.

Due to its porous borders, Jordan has been the victim of planned Islamist attacks that may be linked to Jihadists fighting in Syria. Jordan’s demographic balance has long been fragile, as the country has absorbed a great many Palestinians over the past decades. The added strain of those from Syria has apparently proved too much: last year Jordan closed its borders to Palestinians fleeing the conflict in Syria. It has been reported that while Syrian refugees are granted entry into Jordan, Palestinians have been ‘arbitrarily detained in a holding centre without any options except to return to Syria’.

Israel, which regarded Assad as a dangerous enemy and sponsor of terrorist groups — Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Yet Israel, favouring the ‘devil it knows’, also fears the establishment of an Islamist regime in Syria and a radical change in the region’s balance of

4. Arab countries isolate Assad

On 6 March 2013, the League of Arab States officially offered its Syrian seat to the Syrian National Council until elections for a new government are held in Syria. The League invited the SNC to choose a representative to attend the League’s summit in Doha on 26-27 March 2013. The move followed the November 2012 decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its six member states to recognise the SNC as the Syria’s legitimate representative. With the exception of Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, the Arab League followed suit and also recognised the SNC.

The offer of the Syrian seat to the SNC by the League sent a clear signal to Assad’s allies that the Syrian regime is increasingly isolated. Yet the international community as a whole remains cautious, and most foreign powers refuse to launch a military intervention to support the opposition for fear of creating sectarian rifts beyond the Syrian border. Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah may well react badly to a change in the region’s political dynamics caused by the establishment of a Sunni-led government in Damascus backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. To prevent a new Syrian government from assuming power, Russia and China have wielded their veto in the United Nations Security Council. As a result, the efforts of Special Envoy Brahimi to bring the opposition and the government to the negotiating table have led to naught.

5. Policy outlook

The EU advocates a political solution to the crisis and supports the Syrian National Council politically but not militarily.

The EU insists on a political solution to the crisis and has maintained an arms embargo. Individual Member States may provide the Syrian opposition with non-lethal equipment and technical support if this assistance is intended to protect civilians.

The European Parliament’s resolution of 16 February 2012 reaffirmed support for a democratic transition in Syria. It praised efforts by the Syrian opposition to unite, the resolution called on the EU to establish a black list of ‘companies that deliver arms to Syria’. The Parliament urged Vice President of the Commission/High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) Catherine Ashton to do her utmost to secure the adoption of a UNSC resolution, to work with both Russia and China and to discuss establishing a humanitarian corridor at the Syrian-Turkish border with the Turkish authorities and Syrian opposition.

The EU has been most efficient with its extensive humanitarian assistance. The Union is by far the largest provider of such aid to the Syrian people,

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17 Lebanon disassociated itself from the resolution, and Iraq and Algeria expressed serious reservations.

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Humanitarian assistance should be kept separate from political actions.

International donors’ contributions should be effectively coordinated.

Tensions in Lebanon must be defused.

Some EU Member States have been open to offering more support to the opposition.

The Assad regime is increasingly isolated...

those within Syria and those in neighbouring countries. The EU has committed more than EUR 400 million, and its total humanitarian assistance will amount to EUR 600 million. ECHO funds account for one third of the total, Member States’ for roughly two thirds.

It is essential to keep the humanitarian and political tracks distinct to facilitate access to those in need. The number of humanitarian organisations authorised to provide assistance inside Syria should be increased. To respond to the growing needs throughout the country, in opposition-held and regime-controlled areas, the communication channels must remain open with both the rebel-led forces and the regime.

Donors’ assistance must be optimally coordinated. The Syrian Humanitarian Forum plays an essential role in this, gathering together humanitarian actors, international agencies, regional organisations, donor countries and non-governmental agencies to share information and mobilise support.

Of all Syria’s neighbours, Lebanon is the most vulnerable to spillover from across the border. Lebanon has received the greatest number of Syrian refugees, both in absolute and proportional terms (see table above). The European Union, fully committed to supporting Lebanon’s sovereignty and stability, decided on 5 March 2012 to provide the country an additional EUR 30 million to help cope with influx of refugees19.

European Union foreign ministers met on 11 March 2013 with UN-Arab League Mediator Brahimi to discuss political solutions to the crisis. HR/VP Ashton emphasised that only a political solution would put an end to the conflict. There is a general consensus among Member States that military intervention is not an option. However, the decision to not intervene carries its own risks.

To respond to the deteriorating situation in Syria, EU ministers have begun to consider redefining the EU arms embargo. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius has suggested that the ‘question ... will need to be put on the table again very quickly because it is inadmissible to allow such an imbalance to lead to the massacre of an entire population”20. The UK Foreign Minister William Hague has also said that in the absence of a political solution, support for the opposition should be stepped up.

At the same time the pressure placed on Assad through economic and political sanctions should continue. To date, nine EU Member States (France, Spain, Denmark, Italy, Luxembourg, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium) have recognised the Syrian National Council as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The EU should also

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…but not entirely.

A political solution to the crisis will require a change in Moscow. The EU should work with Russia to open negotiations between the regime and the opposition.

work closely with Turkey and the Arab League to support the opposition and better prepare it to assume political power in a post-Assad Syria.

A protracted conflict benefits President Assad, who has every intention of pursuing the war. Assad will not negotiate with the opposition — much less step down — so long as he enjoys support from Russia and Iran. The EU should therefore intensify its dialogue with Russia, even if the country is unlikely to shift its position any time soon. Moscow has everything to lose if Assad falls, not least its image as an antipode to the western world. Yet Russia can also be instrumental in unlocking the diplomatic stalemate, and no political solution is possible without its involvement. The EU and Russia should work together to facilitate contacts and negotiations between officials from the SNC and President Assad’s regime.