Briefing

The UN Security Council Divided:
Syria in Crisis

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The UN Security Council has been deeply divided over how to respond to the Arab Spring crisis in Syria. Since the uprising began in Syria in March 2011 the Syrian Government has responded with extreme violence against civilians and civilian areas to suppress protests. In the face of escalating violence, the Security Council has experienced protracted deadlock. Divisions on how to interpret the situation in Syria left the Security Council unable to find consensus on issuing a non-binding Presidential Statement for the first five months of the crisis. Subsequent disagreement on what measures to take to address the violence has led to two vetoed resolutions on the divisive issues of sanctions and regime change. The vetoes occurred in October 2011 and in February 2012, vetoed by both Russia and China. More than a year into the crisis the Security Council authorised a team of unarmed UN military observers to be deployed in Syria in a rare moment of consensus on this issue. However this lowest-common-denominator response was quickly suspended due to high levels of violence against UN observers. Throughout the stalemate in the Security Council violence against Syrian civilians continued to escalate.

On the Ground in Syria

The escalation point for the uprising in Syria was the arrest and torture of fifteen school children for spray painting anti-government graffiti on a wall.

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in Daraa. Borrowed from other Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, they painted ‘the people want to topple the regime!’ People of Daraa protested demanding that the children be released and when they were released their bodies showed evidence of torture, which led to more protests. On 18 March 2011 Syrian security forces reacted to the protests in Daraa with violence, opening fire on protesters, and Daraa became a flashpoint with protests occurring daily.

From this escalation point protests and increasingly violent repression spread to other marginalised towns and cities throughout Syria. A cycle evolved with protests occurring each week after Friday prayers. Protests and funerals were regularly targeted with indiscriminate gunfire from Syrian security forces. Cities with strong opposition bases have been particularly targeted by security forces, and Homs, Hama, Daraa, Latakia and Idlib have been under sustained attack. By mid 2011 the Syrian regime were using their security forces to attack civilian areas using tanks and snipers in cities across Syria.

Violence continued to escalate throughout 2011 and into 2012. Key characteristics of the violence were; the use of heavy weapons against civilian areas, massacres, extensive use of torture and targeting of children. From the start of February 2012 the city of Homs came under siege by the Syrian army with heavy weapons used on civilian areas over a period of weeks. From March 2012 there were increased occurrences of massacres linked to pro-government militias. A major massacre occurred in May 2012 in Houla near Homs where 108 people were killed including 49 children. Torture has also been a predominant feature of the repression conducted by the Syrian regime. Human Rights Watch have documented an extensive network of detention facilities across Syria where people have been subjected to extreme torture methods and deprivation.

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