

UN MISSION TO SYRIA: The UN Security Council Battleground

UN Observer Mission Needs to Learn from Arab League Observer Report

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I-Security Council Authorizes UN Observer Mission

At a stakeout for journalists on Saturday after the vote on Security Council Resolution 2043, Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin explained that the text was carefully worded to signal all, including the opposition, to refrain from violence and to support the implementation of Special Envoy Kofi Annan's 6 point plan. This resolution (S/2012/2043) provides the authorization for up to 300 UN observers to be sent to Syria for a period of up to 90 days. (1) The resolution states that the "mandate of the Mission shall be to monitor a cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties and support the full implementation of the Envoy's six-point proposal."

Differences about some of the provisions of the resolution had been resolved by changes made to the draft resolution in a 3-1/2 hour consultation held by Security Council members on Friday evening. Ambassador Churkin expressed satisfaction that the Security Council resolution he had initiated provided the basis for the resolution approved by the Security Council on Saturday in a unanimous vote of all 15 members.

II-Statements After the Vote

Statements made by several of the members of the Security Council after the vote help to shed light on the situation the UN observer mission can expect to encounter in Syria. In his statement, South African Ambassador Baso Sangqu referred to a letter to the Security Council members received earlier in the week. In that letter, the UN Secretary General reported that the Syrian government had welcomed the Advance Team of the observer mission, and that "despite some challenges, the Advance Team has enjoyed freedom of movement and has not observed major military concentrations or conflict."

"We welcome the news," Ambassador Sangqu said, "that the advance team has been able to visit hotspots of the conflict, including Homs and that they have observed calm and an end to major hostilities." He noted that, "The deployment of the advance team has already proven to be a calming influence as violence has decreased during its presence. This marked decrease in violence should now be sustained."

In his statement after the vote, Indian Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri thanked the Russian delegation for introducing the resolution. "This is a significant step in the Council's collective support for the efforts of the joint Special Envoy, Mr. Kofi Annan," said Ambassador Puri.

The Indian Ambassador observed, “it is a matter of satisfaction that Mr. Annan’s efforts over the last seven weeks have resulted in an improvement in the situation in Syria. Even though there have been reports of violations, the ceasefire that came into force on 12 April has been observed by all parties in a large part of Syria.” Ambassador Puri called for an expeditious deployment of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) which the Security Council had just authorized.

China’s Ambassador Li Baodong expressed the hope that, “the Supervision Mission will fully respect Syria’s sovereignty and dignity, act in strict accordance with the authorization of the Security Council, adhere to the principles of neutrality, objectivity and impartiality, and play an active and constructive role in pushing for a sustained cessation of violence in Syria.”

In his comments after the vote, Ambassador Churkin, expressed his view that, “The resolution establishes a clear framework of responsibilities for all parties to end the Syrian violence and for the need for cooperation with the UN observer mission and the Special Envoy.” He called upon the “external players involved in the Syrian question” to behave “responsibly” and to act in accordance with the provisions of resolutions adopted by the Security Council. In that regard, he pointed to the fact that the UN Security Council is the body which holds primary responsibility for matters of international peace and security. Other formats like the “groups of friends” that met in Tunis, Istanbul or Paris, should follow the resolutions of the Security Council and not undermine its work, he said. Similarly, he expressed the sentiment that “the Libyan model of action should remain forever in the past.”

While other delegations on the Security Council like those of Portugal, Pakistan, and Morocco pointed to the obligations of all in the Syrian conflict to honor the cease fire and cease violent acts, the US Ambassador Susan Rice focused her criticism solely on what she referred to as the “Assad regime.” And she threatened that if the Syrian government did not provide for “full freedom of movement for UN personnel” and other demands that she enumerated, the US would “pursue measures against the Syrian government.”

The text of the resolution, however, contains no provision for “full freedom of movement for UN personnel” to be provided, as Ambassador Rice demanded. To the contrary, the resolution calls on the Syrian government to ensure the effective operation of UNSMIS by ensuring that unimpeded and immediate freedom of movement and access as necessary “to fulfill its mandate.” The mandate is not open ended but is specifically written. The mandate is “to monitor a cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties and support the full implementation of the Envoy’s six-point proposal.”

After all Council members who had asked to speak had been called on, the Syrian Ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari made a statement to the Council. He noted that there were statements made in the Security Council session in support of the resolution and statements contrary to it. He pointed to the fact that there was no reference in the resolution to the “Assad regime” as the US Ambassador had mischaracterized the Syrian government. Similarly, he noted the mischaracterizations of the violence in Syria. He pointed out that such mischaracterization had been critiqued in the Arab League Observer Report. (para 30 Arab League Observer Report)(2)

Examples presented in the Report provided convincing evidence that there were armed militants carrying out violent acts in Syria. Also the Arab League Observers noted in their

Report that while they were in Syria, peaceful opposition protests that they observed had not been disrupted by the Syrian government. (para 71 Arab League Observer Report)

Ambassador Jaafari characterized as topsy turvey blaming crimes by armed insurgents on the Syrian government. He hoped that the UN Observer Mission would help to dispel the media misinformation about the situation on the ground in Syria, as the Arab League Observer Mission Report had done.

III-Safety Issues and Lessons from Arab League Observer Mission

During the stakeout held by the Russian Ambassador after the Security Council meeting, one journalist asked a question referring to the danger of sabotage of the UN Observer Mission as had happened with the Arab League Observer Mission. This earlier mission was discontinued just as it documented the actual existence of an armed insurgency that was responsible for substantial violence in the Syrian conflict.

The Russian Ambassador acknowledged that the UN observers going to Syria would be facing a “daunting task.” He was concerned for their safety and noted that Russian observers would be part of the UN Mission. It would be their duty to report objectively, he explained, and he hoped that the international community would support their objective reporting.

In the Security Council process of planning for this Second Observer Mission to be sent to Syria, there appears to have been little attention paid to building on the lessons described in the Arab League Observers Report. The Report of the Arab League Observers was included as Enclosure Number 4 in the document S/2012/71 (p. 11-46) distributed at the January 31, 2012 meeting of the Security Council. In the Report, problems of the insufficiency of transportation and communication equipment were particularly noted, as was the need to make available adequate “administrative and logistic support” and “media and political support to create an appropriate environment that will enable it to fulfill its mandate in the required manner.” (Para 83) (See Also Para 64, 65,68 and 69, VIII)

The Report describes the experience of the Arab League Observers, both their successes and the problems they faced. In so doing it provides a basis to predict what problems will need to be solved and what difficulties can be expected for the UN Observer Mission to Syria. Ambassador Churkin and several other members of the Security Council recognized the challenges that the UN Observer Mission will face, but the frequent distractions presented by those governments that are hopeful they can bring about regime change in Syria appear to hinder the needed consideration in the Security Council of how to build on the lessons of the Arab League Observer Mission.

IV-Netizen Comments

In an online discussion of a report on RT (Russia Today TV and streaming video) about the most recent Security Council Resolution authorizing the UN to provide for the observer mission in Syria, one netizen pointed to the problem of foreign support for the armed insurgency in Syria. (3) As part of a longer comment, this netizen criticized the UN saying:

“The UN has failed in its duties to protect Syria from outside interference by remaining silent on the continued arming/funding of the ‘opposition’ by the US/UK/Israel/Turkey and their Arab allies.” (Anon, April 22. 00:08)

Another netizen commenting on the need for accurate reporting about the role of the armed insurgents wrote:

“Let’s hope the monitors have the guts to tell the UN the role that the terrorist opposition plays in the mayhem. Unlike Ban-Ki-Moon, who blames it all on the govt. forces.” (CON, April 21. 2012. 19:49)

A netizen comment on the irony represented by media reports which are in sharp contrast to the reality on the ground:

“Despite the UN’s ‘peace plan’ being fully rejected by both the Syrian rebels and their Western and Arab League backers who have openly pledged cash, weapons, and support for them to continue fighting in full violation of the proposed cease fire, the Western media has instead accused the Syrian government of failing to meet its obligations....” (Tony Cartalucci, April 21, 2012. 23:12)

Yet another netizen pointed to the lack of logic of much of Western reporting about the armed insurgents in Syria:

“It is absurd to try to enforce a cease fire, when only (the) Government has signed the accord. The militants did not bother. And in the meantime, all Western governments are concerned about is the “right of Syrians to protest.” Fantastic. Let them just get in the streets, so that the bombers can blow them up and blame the Government. Militants are giving interviews in (the) Western press - Der Spiegel - about their executions of civilians suspected of supporting (the) regime!... If anywhere on (the) planet such armed extremists try to take over neighborhoods, the entire force of that country will be brought to bear on them, and nobody would shed a tear if they all get blasted into oblivion. But in Syria, we glorify them? And why? I am not sure, but it seems to me that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf do not like the fact that in Syria EVERYBODY can practice openly any religion - and is safe....” (Bianca, April 22, 2012. 06:54) (4)

Responding to such comments, another netizen wrote,

“...I salute the discerning readers of this thread.” (Igor, April 22, 2012. 13:38)

Such extracts from comments of netizens discussing the UN Security Council activities demonstrate that the situation in Syria is of concern to people around the world.

Security Council Resolution 2043, some of the statements made in the Security Council after the vote, and the Arab League Observer Mission Report paint a more accurate than usual picture of the crisis in Syria. Considered in light of sample netizen comments and other articles (5) on the Internet critiquing mainstream media coverage of this crisis, a more accurate view of the crisis emerges which will be needed if the means is to be found to resolve the conflict.

Notes

1)S/RES/2043 (2012)

“The situation in the Middle East”

http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/unsc_resolutions12.htm

The draft resolution was S/2012/245

<http://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/306/08/pdf/N1230608.pdf?OpenElement>

2)The Arab League Observer Report

<http://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/219/03/doc/N1221903.DOC?OpenElement>

“Letter dated 24 January 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, Enclosure 4. League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria “Report of Head of the League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria for the period from 24 December 2011 to 18 January 2012,p. 11-22.”

Another copy of the Arab League Observer Report is online. The url is:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/s2012-71ArabLeagueObserverMission.pdf>

3) <http://rt.com/news/un-security-council-monitors-syria-635/comments/>

4) “Ulrike Putz, “An Executioner for Syria’s Rebels Tells his Story,” Der Spiegel, March 29, 2012

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,824603,00.html>

5) A couple of other recent articles documenting media misrepresentations of what is happening in Syria include:

<http://english.al-akhbar.com/blogs/sandbox/surprise-video-changes-syria-timeline>

<http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-security-council-unsc-increases-observers-607.html>

<http://tunisianquestfortruth.wordpress.com/2012/02/06/samples-of-media-distortion-of-facts-about-syria-1-fake-pictures/> (contains some disturbing images)

A version of this article appears on the netizenblog at

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/04/23/unsc-approves-90-day-observer-mission-to-syria/>

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