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Crisis Update: Massacre in Syria renews calls for immediate action to halt violence

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Massacre in Syria renews calls for immediate action to halt violence *Large-scale attacks in Houla spark international outrage and response*

On 25 and 26 May, 108 civilians, including 49 children, were
[killed](#)

in the town of Houla, many
[executed at close range](#)
and in their own homes. As
[reported](#)

by the UN News Centre on 26 May, the head of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), Major-General Robert Mood, stated that the circumstances for the attack were not yet known and declared that “t
his indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force is unacceptable and unforgiveable”.

□ *United Nations (UN) Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous*
[reported](#)

to the press on 29 May that UN monitors traveled to the site on 26 May to assess the death toll,

but that they did not have the forensic experience needed to conduct a formal investigation. The international community, including the UN, regional organizations and individual governments responded with outrage, but the Syrian government [denied responsibility](#) for the killings, and [blamed](#) the violence on “terrorists”. Soon after, on 30 May, thirteen bodies were [discovered](#) east of Deir al-Zor with signs that they had been shot at close range with their hands tied behind their backs in what was [called](#) an “appalling and inexcusable act” in a statement from the head of UNSMIS. Meanwhile, as of 30 May government forces [continued](#) to bomb rebel-held areas of Homs.

UN bodies and officials swiftly condemn violence and call for accountability

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan swiftly responded on 26 May, and issued a [joint statement](#) condemning the “brutal crime”, which they called a “flagrant violation of international law and of the commitments of the Syrian Government”. Annan, who had been previously scheduled to travel to Syria for his second visit, [arrived](#) on 28 May to speak directly with government officials including Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Joint Special Envoy [urged](#) al-Assad to take “bold steps” to stop violence if the peace plan is to be successful and noted the “grave concern of the international community about the violence in Syria.”

The UN Security Council (UNSC)

[held](#) an emergency Council session on 27 May, during which they were briefed by Ladsous. The UNSC issued a [press statement](#) the same day unanimously condemning the attacks, including artillery and tank shelling of residential neighborhoods by government forces, though stopping short of blaming the government for the massacre. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay [stated](#) on 27 May that the “indiscriminate and possibly deliberate” massacre may amount to crimes against humanity, and Rupert Colville, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [said](#)

, "What is very clear is this was an absolutely abominable event that took place in Houla, and at least a substantial part of it was summary executions of civilians, women and children". In her [statement](#)

released 28 May, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, welcomed the UNSC press statement while condemning in the "harshest terms the killing of 49 children...all of whom were under the age of 10" and calling for perpetrators to be held accountable. Following a request submitted by the Ambassadors of Qatar, Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Denmark and the European Union and then signed by 21 Member States and 30 observer States, the Human Rights Council [announced](#)

on 30 May that it will convene its fourth Special Session on the crisis in Syria to be held on 1 June.

Regional organizations and governments respond rapidly and denounce attack on civilians

Regional organizations and individual governments also responded rapidly to denounce the killing of civilians. European Union High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission Catherine Ashton

[condemned](#)

on 27 May the "

heinous act perpetrated by the Syrian regime against its own civilian population, despite the agreed ceasefire and presence of UN observers".

The Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation issued a

[statement](#)

on 27 May expressing his "strongest condemnation of the barbaric massacre that claimed the lives of scores of children, women and men", called for perpetrators to be held accountable and noted that the "basic responsibility of the Syrian government [is] to preserve the security and safety of the Syrian people". Individual governments launched a diplomatic campaign against Syria as Turkey, Japan, Spain, Italy, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, Belgium, Bulgaria and Australia all

[expelled](#)

the highest-level Syrian diplomats in their countries.

On 26 May, United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

[condemned](#)

in the "strongest possible terms" the massacre in Houla and reiterated the call for increased pressure on the Assad government to halt violence. British foreign secretary William Hague and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov

[held](#)

a joint press briefing on 29 May and reminded that both government forces and armed opposition were responsible for the violence. However, where Hague

[said](#)

on 29 May that the expulsion of Syrian diplomats would send a "stark message" to Assad to let him know that time was running out, a spokesperson for Russia

[stated](#)

on 30 May that such action was "counterproductive".

Meanwhile, some states are considering stronger action in Syria. [The Italian foreign ministry stated](#) on 28 May that it would support humanitarian corridors if included in future UN resolutions on Syria, and the Turkish foreign ministry [warned](#) on 30 May that it would follow the expulsion of Syrian envoys with additional measures, but did not elaborate. French President François Hollande [stated](#) on 30 May that, "an armed intervention is not excluded on the condition that it is carried out with respect to international law, meaning after deliberation by the United Nations Security Council." However, a United States spokesperson [stated](#) on 29 May that the government did not support military intervention, and that further militarization "would lead to greater chaos, greater carnage." Russia and China's foreign ministries [indicated](#) on 30 May that they would not support outside intervention.

Civil society calls for UN investigation and for perpetrators to be held accountable

Civil society organizations reacted immediately to the massacre with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based out of the United Kingdom, and Syrian-based organizations [condemning](#) the massacre on 26 May and calling for the UNSC to hold an emergency session. In a 28 May press release [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) called for the Joint Special Envoy to push the Syrian government to grant the UN Commission of Inquiry access into the country in order to investigate the massacre. HRW also urged other countries to support a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The same day, [Amnesty International](#) (AI) also demanded that the UN refer the situation to the ICC for investigation. The Global Centre for R2P, in a 30 May [statement](#), declared that the Syrian government is failing to uphold its Responsibility to Protect its population and called on the UNSC to respond by implementing measures including an arms embargo and the strengthening of the human rights component of UNSMIS.

Violence threatens peaceful resolution of conflict

The massacre in Houla is the latest in the 15-month-long crisis. The uprising in Syria has

[spilled](#)

over the border into Lebanon, with increased reports of arms smuggling.

[Clashes](#)

between pro- and anti-Syrian government groups broke out on 20 May after a prominent anti-Syrian government cleric and his bodyguard were shot by Lebanese soldiers after they had supposedly failed to stop at a checkpoint. □ The northern Lebanese city of Tripoli also saw clashes between pro- and anti-Syrian government groups spurred by the crisis in Syria during the week of 14 May.

Within Syria, UNSMIS head Major-General Robert Mood,

[reported](#)

on 18 May that observers had an “immediate calming effect” in areas where they had been deployed.

However, during a press conference on 28 May, Hervé Ladsous

[stated](#)

that

the mission was almost at full deployment - as of 29 May 2012, UNSMIS

[reported](#)

that 286 out of the 300 planned observers were on the ground in addition to almost 100 civilian staff - but that

there were many accounts of monitors being targeted by pro-government and opposition gunmen.

□ *With the ongoing brutality bringing forth concerns from the international community regarding the feasibility of the peace plan,*

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

[warned](#)

on 22 May that the Syrian peace plan was at a “pivotal moment” and expressed his concern of impending all-out civil war. Two days later, he

[stated](#)

that there was no “plan b” if the peace plan were to fail.

The Commission of Inquiry in Syria established by the UN Human Rights Council in August 2011

[updated](#)

the UNSC on 24 May to on incidents that occurred since March 2012. The Commission has not yet received access to Syria, but reported that government and pro-government forces are responsible for unlawful killings, torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and violations of children’s rights. While the majority of attacks have been committed by these forces, the Commission also noted that armed opposition groups are responsible for the kidnapping, torture and extra-judicial execution of members of army and security forces and suspected pro-government individuals. The Commission also reported with concern the increasing displacement of civilians and their limited access to necessities including food, water and medical care.

1. Statement on the Houla Massacre

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

30 May 2012

The 25 May killing of 108 people in Houla demonstrates that the Syrian government continues to commit crimes against humanity and is manifestly failing to uphold its

Responsibility to Protect

(R2P). According to reports, following the military's shelling of Houla, paramilitary "shabiha" attacked homes and committed summary executions. According to the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 49 of the dead were children under the age of 10.

Killings such as those in Houla are part of a larger pattern of widespread and systematic attacks against civilians throughout the country that have been carried out for over fourteen months. The violence has now claimed over 10,000 lives and triggered clashes in Lebanon.

Despite claims by the government to be implementing reforms and adhering to a ceasefire, the use of excessive force and deliberate targeting of civilians continue. President Assad has failed to fully implement any of the six terms of the plan of the UN-Arab League Special Envoy, Kofi Annan. Yesterday Annan warned that the crisis is at a "tipping point." Civilian populations in Syria continue to face crimes against humanity perpetrated by the state. It is imperative that the international community, in keeping with **R2P**, use all available leverage to demand the Syrian government end its crimes.

States have taken steps to uphold their **Responsibility to Protect**. These include the enactment of targeted sanctions and the recent expulsion of Syrian diplomats from several capitals. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) has passed two resolutions condemning the violence in Syria, while the Human Rights Council (HRC) has adopted four resolutions and mandated the Commission of Inquiry. (...)

These efforts, however, are hindered by states that continue to provide critical support to the Syrian government. Russia continues to provide arms, while Venezuela has shipped fuel to circumvent the effect of international sanctions. Iran has, by its own admission, sent troops into Syria to aid in the crackdown. These actions undermine efforts aimed at bringing an end to the mass atrocity crimes perpetrated by the Syrian government.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the appropriate body for responding to threats to international peace and security. Divisions within the UNSC have emboldened the Assad government in its crimes. Russia must now display leadership in upholding its commitment to the **Responsibility to Protect** and preserve international peace and security. With each passing day the range of options diminishes. The UNSC must break the current impasse and protect the people of Syria.

The UNSC should: • Call upon the Syrian government to uphold its Responsibility to

Protect, cease all attacks and allow the Commission of Inquiry access to all affected areas;

- Impose an arms embargo and individual targeted sanctions;
- Refer the situation to the ICC;
- Strengthen the human rights component of the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria.

Read the [full statement](#) . 2. Swift UN action needed on Syria after Houla assault Amnesty International 28 May 2012 The United Nations Security Council must move beyond condemnation of Friday's attack that killed scores of civilians in the Syrian town of Houla and immediately refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC), Amnesty International said. (...)

“As the killings escalate, the UN observer mission to Syria must have its scale and mandate enhanced, and the Syrian government must allow the Independent International Commission of Inquiry set up by the UN Human Rights Council to enter the country to investigate allegations of abuse by both sides to the conflict.”

Amnesty International has received the names of more than 1,300 people killed in Syria since the start of a UN observer mission on 14 April. (...)

On Sunday, Syria's state-run news agency SANA released a statement attributing the deaths in Houla to “al-Qa'idah-linked terrorist groups”.

Also on Sunday, a spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that a “judicial military committee” had been established to investigate the events.

“The history of previous internal investigations that the Syrian authorities say they have set up gives no cause to expect a meaningful outcome from this one,” said Philip Luther.

“We do not know of a single suspected perpetrator of abuses by the regime's forces having been brought to justice throughout these 14 months of protest and unrest.”

The UN Security Council on Sunday condemned the Houla attacks, which it said “involved a series of government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood”.

But it has yet to take concrete action to stop similar attacks from taking place.

“Russia must stop obstructing the UN Security Council from taking decisive action to end the suffering in Syria,” said Philip Luther.

“Most importantly, it should support the transfer of the situation in Syria to the ICC.” (...) **Read the [full article](#)**

3. UN Inquiry Should Investigate Houla Killings

Human Rights Watch

28 May 2012

Kofi Annan should push Syria's government to allow the UN-appointed Commission of Inquiry access into the country to investigate the May 25, 2012, killing of at least 108 Houla residents, Human Rights Watch said today ahead of an impending visit by the UN envoy to Damascus. The Syrian government has so far refused entry to the UN-mandated commission. Human Rights Watch also reiterated its call to the UN Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Following a May 26 visit to Houla, a region made up of several villages about 20 kilometers northwest of the restive city of Homs, UN monitors confirmed the killings and condemned the "brutal tragedy." (...) According to survivors that Human Rights Watch interviewed and local activists, the Syrian army shelled the area on May 25, and armed men, dressed in military clothes, attacked homes on the outskirts of town and executed entire families.

All of the witnesses stated the armed men were pro-government, but they did not know whether they were members of the Syrian army or a pro-government militia, locally referred to as shabeeha. (...) At a press conference on May 27, a spokesman for the Syrian Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Ministry categorically denied the army's responsibility for the killings and announced that the government had formed a military judicial committee to conduct an investigation.

"There's no way a Syrian military commission can credibly investigate this horrendous crime when so much evidence suggests pro-government forces were responsible," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Annan should insist that Syria grant access to the UN commission of inquiry to investigate this and other grave crimes." (...)

Human Rights Watch also urged other countries to join the calls for accountability by supporting a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria. (...)

Read the
[full press release](#)

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4. Enough Talking, Kofi

James Traub

Foreign Policy

25 May 2012

James Traub is a fellow of the Center on International Cooperation.

Fourteen years ago, Kofi Annan, then the U.N. secretary general, embarked on a desperate mission to Baghdad to persuade Saddam Hussein to allow U.N. weapons inspectors back in the country. Miraculously, he succeeded. (...)

Annan is of course in the midst of another such mission, this time as U.N.-Arab League special envoy to Syria, where he has presented a six-point plan to President Bashar al-Assad in the hopes of ending the mass killing of civilians. In recent weeks, Assad had made Annan look like a naïve devotee of peace-at-any-price by first accepting the plan and then systematically trampling on its terms. And then, last Friday, government forces and local militias systematically slaughtered more than 100 civilians, most of them women and children, in Houla, a group of villages in the province of Homs, proving beyond any doubt that Assad has been cynically using Annan to buy time for his own plan, which is to kill and terrorize his opponents. The time has come to thank Kofi Annan for his services and send him back home to Geneva. (...)

Annan is no pacifist. In the late 1990s, he championed the doctrine that came to be known as "the **responsibility to protect**," which stipulates that when states fail to act to stop atrocities, other states have an obligation to do so. But Annan does believe that sometime atrocities can be halted, or prevented, with diplomacy rather than with force. (...)

When I asked Ahmad Fawzi, a former U.N. official who serves as the spokesman for the mission in Syria, why Annan was still shuttling between capitals even as Assad's forces continued to shell civilians, he said, "It's the only game in town at the moment." Fawzi made only the most modest claims for the mission's success: Violence goes down while inspectors occupy a given space, though often returns to previous levels once they leave; civilians might "start having faith in the presence of the observers." But it was still better than the alternative -- even more killing.

Houla has vividly demonstrated how very little the 260 or so observers can do to prevent violence where they are not physically present, but the mission grinds on, with another 40 observers still to be added to the force. (...)

The question is: When do you stop pursuing this low-probability game? When, if at all, do the risks of action become greater than the risks of inaction? (...) The United States and the EU have allowed Annan to decide when and whether his mission has ceased to be useful; but Annan's faith in diplomacy may wind up serving Assad's interests more than those of the Syrian people. (...)

Fawzi says that no Plan B is on offer, but the fact is that an impromptu Plan B appears to be taking shape: Turkey will provide its territory for the training and organization of the Free Syrian Army, the United States will provide logistical and command-and-control assistance, and Gulf states will supply the hardware. Everyone, including Annan and the U.N., will labor mightily to keep the Syrian National Council, the political organ of the opposition, from collapsing into utter chaos, as it now threatens to do, and to persuade the SNC, the rebel army, and the Local Coordinating Committees inside Syria to work together.

We mustn't delude ourselves about Plan B's likelihood of success. The air war that destroyed the Qaddafi regime in Libya was relatively swift and thoroughly decisive, but Libya now teeters on the edge of anarchy. Syria hardly looks more encouraging. (...) Syria poses such a terrible problem because it is not about finding the political will to do the right thing, but rather trying to find some way of doing more good than harm. (...)

Read the
[full opinion](#)

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5. Syria: What's next?

Tim Dunne

The Interpreter

18 May 2012

*Tim Dunne is the
Director of Research at the Asia-Pacific Centre for R2P based at University of Queensland.*

(...) By characterising the situation as a 'stalemate' after 14 months of fighting and up to 9000 deaths, [Anne-Marie Slaughter's] intervention echoes recent statements by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to the effect that the fighting should be characterised as an 'armed conflict'. The significance of declaring parts of Syria to be in a state of organised conflict is that it requires the application of international humanitarian law (IHL); breaches of IHL are classified as war crimes.

This view of Syria as a civil war may well be shaping Slaughter's recommendation for a shift in UN policy. We should not now, she argues, frame the war of being one between a brutal government and a peaceful opposition; rather, we should see it as being a contest between violence and non-violence.

Slaughter then recommends three key strategies for delegitimising the use of force in Syria, each worthy of consideration but not without problems.

First, by condemning violence itself rather than pursuing the Government as its source, what is being suggested is a return to the value of impartiality that underpinned many failed peacekeeping missions in the 1990s.

Second, Slaughter wants to widen the circle for civilian activists. Instead of the Kofi Annan plan of inserting 300 monitors, Slaughter says all non-violent citizens should become monitors, using social media sites to bear witness to brutality. This poses an obvious risk for individuals who find themselves in extreme danger by taking on this monitoring role.

Third, Slaughter advocates a novel

R2P

strategy. Members of the UN ought to de-recognise Syria and recognise, instead, those municipalities committed to non-violence. While she is correct that a government committing atrocities loses its legitimacy, there are currently no provisions to recognise alternative sub-state public authorities as being the rightful heirs to a failing state.

It is highly unlikely such an argument will find traction in the UN General Assembly; that said, all three strategies are welcome contributions to deliberations about 'what next' for Syria.

Read the

[full opinion](#)

and Anne-Marie Slaughter's opinion, “

[*Three ideas to end the stalemate in Syria*](#)**”**

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Thank you to Amelia Wolf for compiling this listserv.