



By Kyle ORTON

# UNITED NATIONS IN SYRIA

At best, the United Nations has been impotent as Syria was destroyed. But when the U.N.'s role is examined more closely it looks more like a collaborator, than a bystander, to that destruction.

Throughout the first nine months of the Syrian uprising, when it consisted mostly of peaceful demonstrations, the U.N.'s most significant act was documenting the carnage. The U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHCR)—a body that would condemn Syria in late 2011 but to which

Syria was nearly appointed months earlier—established the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (IICI-SAR) in August 2011 with a mandate to “investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law since [the uprising began in] March 2011” and, “[i]f possible, to publicly identify those who appear responsible for these atrocities”.

In December 2011, the U.N. reported that 5,000 people had been killed by Bashar al-Assad's regime. The same month, the first report of IICI-SAR was released. “The substan-



tial body of evidence gathered by the commission indicates that these gross violations of human rights have been committed by Syrian military and security forces," IICI-SAR wrote. "The commission is gravely concerned that crimes against humanity have been committed". The report documented disappearances, torture, rape, and murder by the regime—not just against the opposition but against wholly innocent people. "Children were also tortured, some to death," recorded IICI-SAR, and prisoners "witnessed a 15-year-old boy being raped in front of his father".

In August 2011, with 2,700 people dead, the Syria file moved to the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Originally, the Western powers had proposed a resolution that threatened sanctions if Assad did not cease the crackdown on peaceful protesters. Russia and China made clear they would veto the resolution, so by late September a second draft was circulated that merely condem-

ned Assad's regime. While many non-diplomats might consider the resolution "weak" and "meaningless," said France's then-ambassador to the U.N., Gerard Araud, "in our world it will be a significant first step. It will be the first time there has been a resolution against Syria". That step never came. On 4 October 2011, Moscow and Peking vetoed the enfeebled resolution. Eleven more times Russia would shield Assad with a veto at the UNSC, almost always joined by China.

For the next six months, the U.N. was essentially absent from Syria. The Arab League sent observers to Syria on Boxing Day 2011, an enterprise that was quickly enveloped in scandal when it transpired that the delegation's leader, General Mohammad Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi, was one of the creators of the Janjaweed militia that the Sudanese regime of Umar al-Bashir had used to repress the Darfur region of the country. The campaign in Darfur, directed by Khartoum and carried out by

the Janjaweed, involved crimes that led to al-Bashir being indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide. The Arab League mission collapsed in ignominy in late January 2012 when Assad continued killing and rejected all possibility of compromise with the gathering rebellion. The Arab states turned back to the United Nations.

At the end of February 2012, Kofi Annan, a former U.N. secretary-general, was appointed as the joint U.N.-Arab League envoy for the Syria question. That Moscow consented to this should have been a warning sign, as indeed should Annan's entire career.

It was Annan who botched the U.N. peacekeepers' response as the Rwandan genocide was prepared in plain sight, leading to the massacre of more than 800,000 people. Annan was involved in the U.N.'s total failure to end the bloodshed in Bosnia, which was only halted after the U.S.—working around the U.N.—initiated airstrikes after the Srebre-



nica atrocity. By late 1997, the tenuous ceasefire signed with Saddam Husayn after his expulsion from Kuwait was unravelling; having forced a U.S. remobilisation in 1994 with renewed threats to Kuwait, every indication was that the U.S. was finally going to finish the war Saddam had started in August 1990. It was Annan, as overall leader of the U.N., who journeyed to Baghdad in February 1998 to rescue Saddam. After smoking cigars with dictator, Annan came away with a paper promise to allow weapons inspectors back in. The deal broke down ten months later, necessitating Operation DESERT FOX to degrade Saddam's capacity to threaten his neighbours and subjecting Iraq to five more years of a despotism that laid the groundwork for misery in its aftermath. Once Saddam's archives were broken open, the extent of the U.N.'s corruption became clear: the oil-for-food program that was meant to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people had become an instrument by which Saddam paid those who furthered his political goals, particularly the removal of the sanctions. Annan's own son was caught up in this racketeering.

Annan announced a six-point plan for peace on 21 March 2012: (1) a political process to create a more inclusive, legitimate government; (2) a ceasefire if possible, at a minimum an end to the movement of troops and the use of heavy weapons in the cities; (3) humanitarian pauses to allow aid deliveries; (4) the release of political prisoners by the regime and providing lists of who remained in custody; (5) freedom of access and movement for journalists; and (6) the regime to allow "respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed".



This was after, for example, point (2) had been trespassed in the Homs district of Babr Amro, which the regime shelled to ruins with artillery, and point (5) had been so flagrantly violated with the targeted murder of journalists Marie Colvin and Rémi Ochlik. Still, the Assad regime claimed to accept the Annan peace proposal, and Annan accepted Assad's good faith. The Geneva process was begun and U.N. peacekeepers were deployed to Syria in June 2012—to be withdrawn two months later having failed to alter the course of the war even slightly. Between the time of Annan's appointment and his resignation in August 2012, the death toll in Syria jumped from 10,000 to 20,000 people.

This period in mid-2012 was when options were still available for resolving the Syrian crisis: an insurgency dominated by nationalist forces controlled large swathes of the country, Assad's army was falling apart, the Iranian involvement on the ground was not as extensive as it would become, and the Russian involvement was militarily indirect and mostly political. The United Nations used up that time; more precisely it bought time for the killers.

By early 2013, Islamists were beginning to surpass the seculars in the insurgency and this trend was reinforced when Iran intruded openly through Hizballah at Qusayr, brin-

ging sectarian tensions to unprecedented heights. After the U.S. stood back from enforcing its own "red line" on chemical weapons in August 2013, the extremists who had said all along that they were a more reliable friend for the opposition than the West stole a march. The U.N.'s only statement on the matter was that it would be better if the U.S.'s wilfully ineffective efforts to support the moderate opposition were eliminated entirely.

The U.N. re-entered the Syrian fray after the Ghouta chemical atrocity to carry out the disarmament agreement that Obama had allowed the Russians to lead him into to spare Assad retaliation for his use of weapons of mass destruction. The U.N. mission failed, as it was always bound to do; Moscow would not have agreed to it if it could have succeeded and rendered their client unnecessary as a partner in disarmament. Even so, the U.N. was able to add some flourishes of its own to this failure.

When passing UNSC resolution 2118 that formalized the U.S.-Russian deal, the secretary-general said this was not "a license to kill with conventional weapons", betraying his very bad conscience about providing exactly that to Assad. As the regime gained in confidence thanks to this new lease on life in November 2013, it pushed, with its usual indiscriminate atrocities, into Safira, ostensibly to secure a WMD production facility the regime had heretofore denied possessing, and Qalamun, apparently to clear the roads to the coast so the chemicals could be shipped out of Syria. The U.N. ratified the regime's propaganda that rebels were at fault for delays in implementing the resolution and approvingly cited Assad's offensive

operations as "taking steps" toward disarmament.

In 2015, the Russians would tread the path the Obama administration prepared for them and intervene directly in Syria to support Assad as his regime slipped in the face of the insurgency. The United Nations had no response as Russia racked up war crimes against Syria's population. Various international efforts at "freezes", "cessations of hostility", and ceasefires came to nothing. The regime and Russia remorselessly played this game to allow the decrepit pro-Assad forces to concentrate their resources on one front at a time. Observers could be forgiven for forming the impression that the U.S. was willingly playing along as the pro-Assad coalition sequenced its war by sequentially violating these agreements, bombarding U.N. aid convoys and eventually crushing the final urban bastion of the rebellion in Aleppo city in December 2016.

The U.N. hardly had troops to prevent the unmerciful carnage Assad, Iran, and Russia inflicted on Aleppo, but it did have some moral authority to shape how that was viewed. The U.N. special envoy Staffan de Mistura chose to condemn those resisting the regime coalition while the killing was going on and then tell the Syrian opposition and population at large that they must accept that Assad has prevailed. This is a regime the U.N. itself accuses of "extermination" and multiple other crimes against humanity.

De Mistura tried to include Iran in the Geneva process, the actor that perhaps above all is responsible for the devastation in Syria by providing the muscle for Assad's maximalist dreams. This was only blocked by widescale protest from

Syria's opposition, but De Mistura himself has maintained an unseemly closeness with the Islamic Republic.

The U.N. is bound by the doctrine of sovereignty to allow the Assad regime to prevent it delivering aid to areas it has placed under starvation-sieges. The U.N. has not just accepted this, but taken great efforts to air drop aid to regime areas under siege and U.N. operations in Damascus have provided tens of millions of dollars to the regime, atop the aid itself that is freely distributed in regime areas, alleviating the need for Assad to feed the population and effectively subsidising the regime's killing machine.

Nothing changed when Assad turned his sights on East Ghouta in February this year: a UNSC resolution was passed agreeing to a ceasefire that the West enforced as best it could on the rebels and the pro-Assad forces used as cover for a military offensive that liquidated a long-besieged, tenacious pocket of resistance, in a two-month campaign that killed 2,000 people, with everything from airstrikes to poison gas, and before deporting the survivors.

The United Nations stopped counting the dead in Syria in July 2013 when the total was estimated at 100,000. More than 500,000 people are now dead in Syria. Some credit must go to the U.N. agencies that document war crimes and those who try to get supplies to the needy. But it cannot be avoided that on the political level where it counts, Assad has been able to wage a war that has threatened global peace and stability, while perpetrating crimes of a kind and on a scale with few precedents against the Syrian population, and the U.N. has utterly failed. ■