

What the United States Should Press for on Syria at the United Nations Security Council

The Obama Administration is understandably frustrated by the repeated obstruction of multilateral efforts to end the Syria crisis from Russia and China at the United Nations Security Council. Nonetheless, the August 21 gas attacks, which mounting evidence suggests were carried out by the Assad regime, have brought heightened international attention to the conflict and changed the circumstances in which a new consideration of the Syria crisis by the Council will take place.

Intense and concerted diplomatic efforts led by the president and the secretary of state over the past few weeks, backed up by the credible threat of the use of military force by the United States, have created new opportunities for multilateral diplomatic action through the Security Council. While skepticism about the Russian and Syrian governments' willingness to fully cooperate with international efforts to prevent the Assad regime from any further use of chemical weapons is in order, these diplomatic efforts represent new opportunities for achieving policy outcomes that will best serve U.S. interests and could have some chance of ending the widespread violations of human rights in Syria that have proliferated over the last two years.

This week's suggestion from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Russia would urge the Syrian government to place its stockpiles of chemical weapons under international control for its eventual destruction opens the way for the Security Council to consider a new resolution. Human Rights First welcomes the fact that the administration is taking the Russian proposal seriously and working with fellow members of the Council to prepare a resolution.

The administration should support a resolution in the U.N. Security Council that would:

- Condemn the Assad regime for its use of chemical weapons.

- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court so that the war crimes, mass atrocities, and crimes against humanity, including the August 21 gas attacks, can be investigated and those responsible held accountable.
- Require that the Syrian government turns over its stockpiles of chemical weapons to international control for their eventual destruction within a short period of time, and submit to rigorous international inspection to ensure compliance.
- Authorize the use of all necessary measures, including the use of force, should the Syrian government fail to comply.

The passage of a resolution including all these elements by the Security Council would be a diplomatic victory that would represent strong multilateral action to reaffirm the international norm on the prohibition of chemical weapons, and to hold accountable those responsible for their use on August 21.

If the United States and its allies again face obstruction at the Security Council from Russia or China, or if the Syrian government were to fail to comply with the resolution then the use of military force by the United States and its allies could again be considered as an option. However, at this time, the President should fully explore the new diplomatic opportunities that have opened before resorting to the use of force.

The heightened global attention to the situation in Syria also presents an opportunity for the administration to bring new life to negotiations designed to bring an end to the Syria conflict under the auspices of the joint U.N. and Arab League Special Representative, Lakhdar Brahimi. The administration should work towards a second resolution at the Security Council calling on all parties to the conflict to declare an immediate ceasefire and to participate in renewed peace negotiations under the Geneva II framework.