

# March 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

## Syria

### Expected Council Action

In March, Council members expect to receive briefings on the humanitarian and political situation in Syria as well as on the use and production of chemical weapons.

### Key Recent Developments

Efforts persisted to establish a mechanism to monitor the nation-wide ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey that started on 30 December 2016. Following 23-24 January talks in Astana, Turkey and Russia, joined by Iran, decided to establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire. At a 31 January briefing by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, Council members welcomed the talks, but some expressed concerns over the risk of having a parallel political process if there was not adequate coordination with the UN's mediation efforts. At the request of some of these members, a press statement drafted by Russia, released after the Council meeting, included language regarding ceasefire violations and the continued need to secure safe and unimpeded humanitarian access across Syria.

A technical meeting to establish the mechanism to monitor the ceasefire took place in Astana on 6 February with the participation of Russia, Turkey and Iran. The US and Jordan also participated, and UN representatives did so in an advisory role. A second meeting on 16 February also included representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups. After the meeting, the guarantor countries agreed to a concept note for a joint group as part of the trilateral mechanism to observe the ceasefire, share information regarding the investigation of violations and promote confidence-building measures such as the release of detainees and abductees.

The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), a Riyadh-based opposition umbrella group, announced a 21-member unified opposition delegation comprising representatives of political and armed groups, as well as one representative each from the opposition groups based in Cairo and Moscow (which are tolerated by the Syrian government). However, these groups refused to be part of the HNC delegation and participated separately. Despite the circulation by Russia of a draft constitution for Syria at the first meeting in Astana, de Mistura has repeatedly stressed that the agenda for the Geneva talks is [resolution 2254](#), which provides for the establishment of credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, and sets a timeline and process for drafting a new constitution and holding free and fair elections within 18 months. At press time, the parties were expected to start discussing the issues of substance after a few days focusing on procedural matters.

Although the ceasefire is largely holding, several violations have taken place since it went into effect. Government airstrikes against rebel-held areas, including in the vicinity of Damascus, persisted despite a formal request by Russia to the government of Syria to “silence the skies” in the areas covered by the ceasefire during the Geneva talks. Despite the overall improvement in the security situation, OCHA head Stephen O’Brien stressed in a 22 February Council briefing how the ceasefire has not resulted in an increase in humanitarian access. According to a 16 February report by the Secretary-General, not a single inter-agency cross-line humanitarian convoy planned for January was deployed that month.

Turkey’s Operation Euphrates Shield has continued its counter-terrorism operations, with support from Russia and the US, against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), taking control over the northern town of al-Bab on 23 February. The presence of terrorist groups such as ISIL and Tahrir al-Sham (the latest iteration of the Al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Nusra Front), which are considered legitimate targets by the terms of the ceasefire, has been claimed to justify government attacks in places such as Dara’a, Idlib and Homs. The Syrian Democratic Forces (which include the Kurdish armed group YPG) have made progress against ISIL’s stronghold Raqqa, but it remains unclear whether the US will continue providing the same level of support to their operations under the new administration.

On 24 February, the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Kim Won-soo, and the head of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), Virginia Gamba, briefed Council members on efforts to re-establish the full operational capacity of the JIM, which is expected to be reached in March, four months after the renewal of its mandate.

Since mid-December 2016, led by France and the UK, Council members have been negotiating a draft resolution seeking to impose sanctions on individuals and entities associated with the Syrian government and linked to the use of chemical weapons against its own population in three cases where responsibility was established by the JIM. In early January, Russia circulated another draft resolution noting the decrease of allegations of use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government and placing emphasis on their use by non-state actors. Following the release of a report by Human Rights Watch claiming that coordinated chemical attacks occurred in rebel-controlled parts of Aleppo in November and December 2016, France said on 14 February that it was time for the Council to act on this issue. At the consultations on 24 February, France and the UK, joined by the US as a co-penholder, announced that they were aiming at putting the draft to a vote before the end of the month. Russia, which has repeatedly opposed punitive measures against the Syrian government, reiterated its scepticism regarding the conclusions presented by the JIM, questioned the body of evidence on which they were based and announced that it would veto such a draft. On 28 February, the draft was put to a vote, receiving nine votes in favour, three abstentions and three against (including from veto-wielding Russia and China).

## **Human Rights-Related Developments**

During its 34th session in March, the HRC is set to hold a high-level panel discussion on the human rights situation in Syria as mandated by HRC resolution 33/23. It will also hold an interactive dialogue with the Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria to discuss its most recent report (A/HRC/34/64).

### **Key Issue**

Six years since the start of a war that has exacted a death toll approaching half a million, left 640,000 living under siege and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.86 million refugees, the essential issue for the Council is to exert effective leadership in supporting a cessation of hostilities and efforts to reach a political solution.

### **Options**

The Council has many tools at its disposal—such as imposing an arms embargo or targeted sanctions, referring Syria to the International Criminal Court or authorising a no-fly zone to deter Syria from using its aerial capacity—but P5 divisions have made it impossible for the Council to fulfil its role in maintaining international peace and security in the case of Syria.

Council members could, both individually and collectively, step up efforts to ensure that the government guarantees humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

Council members may organise an Arria-formula meeting with the Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

### **Council and Wider Dynamics**

Council members' engagement in the Syrian political negotiations has been limited to following the lead taken by key actors outside the Council. This was the case with the adoption of resolution 2336 on 31 December 2016, which was tabled by Russia and Turkey. In this context, Council members have made efforts to ensure that the initiative by Russia and Turkey reinforces and does not undermine the UN mediation, which is guided by resolution 2254 and the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, endorsed in resolution 2118. Some Council members have expressed doubts about the Syrian government's willingness to compromise in peace talks on a genuine transitional governing body, given its recent military victories.

Some Council members questioned the timing of the vote on the draft resolution imposing sanctions for the use of chemical weapons. However, the P3 stressed that efforts to ensure accountability should not undermine a political process, even when it was clear that the draft would be vetoed.

Following public expressions of support for the establishment of safe zones by the new US administration, on 3 February, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, stressed that the current situation does not allow for the planning of zones safe enough for the protection of civilians and the return of refugees; he emphasised that the investment of international efforts should be focused on reaching a political solution. Syria has also rejected this proposal. So far, no discussion in this regard has taken place in the Council.

### **UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA**

## Security Council Resolutions

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31  
December  
2016  
[S/RES/2336](#)

Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.

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17  
November  
2016  
[S/RES/2319](#)

Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.

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27  
September  
2013  
[S/RES/2118](#)

This resolution was adopted unanimously by the Council and required the verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, called for the convening of the Geneva II peace talks and endorsed the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers.

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18  
December  
2015  
[S/RES/2254](#)

This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.

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## Secretary-General's Report

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16 February  
2017  
[S/2017/144](#)

This was on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

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## Security Council Letters

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30 January  
2017  
[S/2017/86](#)

This was the monthly OPCW report.

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16 January  
2017  
[S/2017/45](#)

This was an update by the OPCW fact-finding mission on a 2 August 2016 incident and its 2016 activities.

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## Security Council Meeting Record

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22 February  
2017  
[S/PV.7888](#)

This was on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

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## Security Council Press Statement

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31 January  
2017  
[SC/12701](#)

This welcomed the International Meeting on Syria held in Astana, Kazakhstan, and took note of the joint statement adopted at the meeting by Iran, Russia and Turkey.

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