

April 2018 Monthly Forecast

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Posted 29 March 2018

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In April, the Council expects to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria and on the use of chemical weapons.

Key Recent Developments

Despite the unanimous adoption of [resolution 2401](#) demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria, the conflict entered its eighth year amidst a marked intensification of violence. Soon after the resolution was adopted on 24 February, the unwillingness of the government to implement the resolution became clear as it continued to justify its military actions as counter-terrorism operations. On 28 February, the Council [received](#) an early assessment of the implementation of resolution 2401 by the Under-Secretaries-General for Humanitarian and Political Affairs, Mark Lowcock and Jeffrey Feltman, respectively. Lowcock said that there had been no improvement in the humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta since the passage of the resolution. In a 4 March statement, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, Panos Moutmtzis, said: “Instead of a much needed reprieve, we continue to see more fighting, more death, and more disturbing reports of hunger and hospitals being bombed. This collective punishment of civilians is simply unacceptable”.

On 7 March, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and OCHA Director Lisa Doughten briefed Council members in consultations at the request of France and the UK. Doughten told the members that, despite the readiness of the UN and its partners to deploy humanitarian convoys to Eastern Ghouta, the lack of security on 5 March had prevented the complete offloading of the first convoy that had made it into Eastern Ghouta since November 2017. Some of the critical humanitarian supplies that could not be delivered then were unloaded in Eastern Ghouta on 9 March, despite renewed shelling that was in breach of “assurances of safety from parties including the Russian Federation”, according to the Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria, Ali al-Za’tari.

On 12 March, Secretary-General António Guterres [briefed](#) the Council on the implementation of resolution 2401. He said that there had been no cessation of hostilities and that violence had continued not only in Eastern Ghouta but also in Afrin, Idlib, and Damascus and its suburbs. The delivery of humanitarian aid had not been safe, unimpeded or sustained, and no sieges had been lifted. He also underscored that efforts to combat terrorist groups did not supersede those humanitarian obligations.

Throughout March, the government's military offensive in Eastern Ghouta persisted. It first succeeded in dividing rebel-held territory into three areas and has resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians.

The separation of armed groups from terrorist organisations has been a key issue in the discussions on Eastern Ghouta. Resolution 2401 distinguished between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Qaida, Al-Nusra Front, and other terrorist groups designated by the Council—which would not be protected by the cessation of hostilities—and other armed groups that would be. After resolution 2401 was adopted, three armed groups in Eastern Ghouta (i.e. Jaish al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham) expressed their commitment to abide by the terms of the resolution and to expel Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Al-Nusra Front's latest iteration. The evacuation of civilians was a direct result of Russia's engagement with these armed groups.

On 16 March, de Mistura briefed the Council on “developments of substantial gravity on the ground” in Eastern Ghouta. He also briefed the Council on his ongoing political efforts to bring about a constitutional committee. He reiterated that the government continued to refuse to engage on the committee's formation, and in consultations he raised the possibility of establishing interim arrangements and timelines to begin its work. He also told Council members about the limited progress made by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons despite concrete proposals made by the UN ahead of a 15 March foreign minister-level meeting in Astana.

On 19 March, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, was scheduled to brief the Council on the human rights situation in Syria. The meeting was requested by France with the support of the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Sweden, the UK and the US. However, a procedural motion called for by Russia on whether to convene the meeting failed to receive the nine votes necessary for approval. Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan and Russia voted against the motion, while Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia abstained. In lieu of a formal meeting, that afternoon Al Hussein was asked to brief members in an Arria-formula format organised by the countries that had requested the meeting.

At the initiative of the Netherlands, Council members held an informal interactive dialogue on chemical weapons in Syria on 20 March with the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, and the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Ahmet Üzümcü. Nakamitsu and Üzümcü discussed with Council members the elements contained in a 23 February report of the OPCW, conveyed to the Council on 1 March. The report raised concerns regarding the limited cooperation of the Syrian government in addressing the gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies identified by the OPCW in Syria's initial declaration. They also briefed Council members on the arrangements currently being negotiated by the OPCW and the UN Office for Project Services with the Syrian government for the planned destruction of two stationary, aboveground chemical weapons production facilities and how this process would unfold.

Despite the demand for cessation of hostilities, the Turkish military offensive in the town of Afrin continued in March. In late March, Turkey took full control of the region. On 25 March, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that the offensive would continue towards YPG-held Tal Rifaat in northern Aleppo. Throughout the offensive in Afrin, the UN expressed alarm at its impact on civilians, threatened by airstrikes and ground-based attacks and prevented from escaping by Kurdish forces.

On 27 March, Lowcock briefed the Council on the lack of implementation of resolution 2401. At the meeting, many Council members expressed concerns at the situation in Eastern Ghouta. Kuwait and Sweden emphasised that evacuations must be voluntary, that the dialogues on evacuations between armed groups and Russia need to also include the participation of civilians, and that the conditions of the shelters receiving civilians need to be improved.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 2 March, the Human Rights Council (HRC) voted 25 to four (with eight abstentions) to hold an urgent debate on the situation in Eastern Ghouta, at which the High Commissioner for Human Rights made a statement. On 5 March, the HRC adopted by 29 votes to four (with 14 abstentions) resolution 37/1 on the deteriorating situation of human rights in Eastern Ghouta. (Security Council and HRC member Ethiopia abstained while China voted against the resolution.) The resolution welcomed Security Council resolution 2401 and condemned the sustained denial of humanitarian access, the indiscriminate use of heavy weapons and aerial bombardments against civilians, and the alleged use of chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta. It also requested the Commission of Inquiry on Syria to urgently conduct a comprehensive and independent inquiry into the events in Eastern Ghouta and to provide an update followed by an interactive dialogue on the situation to the HRC at its 38th session in June.

On 13 March, the HRC held an interactive dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry to discuss its latest report ([A/HRC/37/72](#)), covering 8 July 2017 to 15 January 2018. The report concluded that civilians had been deliberately targeted through unlawful means and methods of warfare, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual and gender-based violence. There had been repeated attacks on medical facilities, schools and markets, and humanitarian aid has been used as a weapon of war. The report also highlighted the high cost to civilians of offensives to defeat ISIL, saying that the international coalition failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects.

On 15 March, the Commission released a report on sexual and gender-based violence in Syria, covering March 2011 to December 2017 and based on 454 interviews ([A/HRC/37/CRP.3](#)). According to the report, sexual and gender-based violence against women, girls, men and boys has been used by parties to the conflict as a tool to instil fear, humiliate and punish or, in the case of terrorist groups, as part of their enforced social order. It recommended that the Security Council include regular briefings by the Commission as part of its formal agenda, including on the use of sexual violence.

On 23 March, the HRC voted 27 to four (with 16 abstentions) to extend the mandate of the Commission for one year ([A/HRC/RES/37/29](#)).

Key Issues and Options

During the seven years of the war, P5 divisions have limited the options at the disposal of the Council. Council members could hold an informal, unscripted and forward-looking meeting at the ambassador-level to discuss how to increase pressure on the parties to the conflict and seek a compromise that is both realistic and agreeable to all.

The stewardship of the humanitarian penholders in negotiating resolution 2401 illustrates the potential role of elected members in the Council. However, the lack of implementation also shows that no progress will be made without the buy-in of the parties and their supporters. Given the politicisation of the discussions on the humanitarian situation, the Council faces the challenge of maintaining unity as it addresses the failure of the parties to cease hostilities.

The Council has struggled to find a mutually acceptable formula for replacing the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM). If reaching an agreement proves impossible, Council members could request options from the Secretary-General to devise such a mechanism, taking into account the positions expressed by Council members in the failed negotiations to renew the JIM.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council dynamics on Syria are characterised by increased polarisation. This is now apparent in the discussions on the humanitarian situation, as well as on the political process and responsibility for the use of chemical weapons. Beyond the different perspectives among Council members regarding the meaning and implementation of

resolution 2401, Council meetings have reflected differing views about the credibility of key humanitarian actors. At the 12 March Council briefing, Russia questioned the figures and sources cited in the Secretary-General's report.

At the 12 March briefing, US Ambassador Nikki Haley warned “any nation that is determined to impose its will through chemical attacks and inflicting inhuman suffering” that the US “remains prepared to act if we must”. It circulated a draft resolution imposing a cessation of hostilities on Eastern Ghouta and Damascus that appeared to be unacceptable to Russia. Members of the Syrian Negotiation Commission, which represents opposition groups, made several calls for unilateral action at an Arria-formula meeting that same day. The meeting, titled “Implementing Syria's Cessation of Hostilities: Syria's Opposition Speaks”, was sponsored by France, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK. Several Council members expressed reservations about pursuing any action that would undermine the framework established by resolution 2401, whether from inside or outside the Council. In an attempt to increase pressure on Russia and Syria, the US along with France, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Sweden and the UK sent a letter on 16 March to the Council president. The letter said that if there is no implementation of 2401, “it is imperative that this Council immediately pursue decisive action to achieve a full cessation of hostilities throughout Syria, to facilitate humanitarian access, and to protect the Syrian people”.

The issue of chemical weapons remains contentious among Council members. On 23 January, Russia circulated a draft resolution to establish a new investigation mechanism to replace the JIM that expired in November 2017. Although Council members met twice to discuss the draft, Russia did not modify it to address any of the issues raised by other Council members and put it in blue in early March. A vote has yet to be scheduled. The US has held several meetings with Council members on an alternative draft. Given current Council dynamics, it does not seem that either of these drafts could be adopted.

Kuwait and Sweden are the penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

24 February 2018 <u>S/RES/2401</u>	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
19 December 2017 <u>S/RES/2393</u>	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.
18 December 2015 <u>S/RES/2254</u>	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.

27 September 2013 <u>S/RES/2118</u>	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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Secretary-General's Reports

20 March 2018 <u>S/2018/243</u>	This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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1 March 2018 <u>S/2018/182</u>	This was the monthly report of the OPCW, which raised concerns regarding the limited cooperation of the Syrian government in addressing the gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies identified.
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Security Council Letter

16 March 2018 <u>S/2018/234</u>	This was a letter signed by France, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Sweden, the UK and the US expressing concern about the lack of implementation of resolution 2401.
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Security Council Meeting Records

19 March 2018 <u>S/PV.8209</u>	This was a meeting at which the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, was expected to brief the Council in the open chamber on the human rights situation in Syria. The meeting was requested by France, with the support of the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Sweden, the UK and the US. However, the meeting did not take place, following the failure of a procedural motion to convene the meeting. Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan and Russia voted against the motion, while Cote d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia abstained on it.
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16 March 2018 <u>S/PV.8206</u>	This was a briefing by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura on the political situation in Syria.
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12 March 2018 <u>S/PV.8201</u>	This was a meeting at which Secretary-General António Guterres briefed the council on the situation in Syria and the implementation of resolution 2401.
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28 February 2018 <u>S/PV.8195</u>	This was a briefing by Lowcock and Feltman.
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