

Syria: Briefing by Special Envoy

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What's In Blue

Posted Thu 15 Mar 2018

Tomorrow (16 March), the Security Council is expected to receive a briefing by Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura (via VTC), followed by consultations.

Council members are expected to be interested in the role of de Mistura's team in supporting the implementation of resolution 2401 of 24 February, which demands that all parties cease hostilities without delay and engage immediately to ensure full and comprehensive implementation of a durable humanitarian pause of at least 30 consecutive days throughout Syria. They will most likely want to know his assessment of dynamics on the ground after the bleak picture portrayed by Secretary-General António Guterres during his briefing to the Council on Monday (12 March). In particular, de Mistura may brief Council members on the ongoing attacks on Eastern Ghouta, where the government offensive continues, as illustrated by today's takeover of the town of Hamouriyah.

The initiatives to separate armed groups from terrorist organisations are expected to feature prominently in the briefing. This is a key issue, because resolution 2401 distinguished between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Qaeda and 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 which would be. Council members might want to hear more about de Mistura's engagement with the three armed groups in Eastern Ghouta that expressed their commitment to abide by resolution 2401 (i.e., Jaish al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham) and to expel Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, al-Nusra Front's latest iteration.

Briefing the Council on 12 March, Guterres explained how de Mistura's team had observed meetings between Jaish al-Islam and Russian officials in the outskirts of Eastern Ghouta. Since then, there have been reports of evacuations as a result of this dialogue. Council members may inquire about the conditions in which this dialogue and the evacuations are taking place, as well as the efforts to facilitate a dialogue between the two other armed groups (Failaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham) and Russia. The offensive on Hamouriyah, which was held by Failaq al-Rahman, has resulted in the displacement of some 10,000 civilians.

De Mistura is likely to present his assessment of the ministerial meeting being held in Astana by the three guarantors of the de-escalation agreements (Iran, Russia and Turkey) that the Deputy Special Envoy Ramzy Ramzy is attending. Council members may be interested in whether the guarantors are expected to mobilise assets on the ground to monitor the cessation of hostilities, as resolution 2401 calls on "all relevant Member States to coordinate efforts to monitor the cessation of hostilities, building on existing

arrangements”. Council members may also be interested in the discussion on detainees, abductees and missing persons, which has seen little progress since a working group on this issue was created in December 2017.

Briefing the Council on 7 March, de Mistura told Council members that the government had refused to engage on the establishment of a constitutional committee. Council members may inquire whether there has been any change in this regard, and they may ask de Mistura what they can do bilaterally or collectively to press for progress. Council members may also inquire whether de Mistura is considering holding a new round of intra-Syrian talks in Geneva and whether there is any indication that the current impasse could be overcome.

Since the briefing occurs as the conflict enters its eighth year, de Mistura may share with Council members his view of the overall trajectory of the conflict. Members may note that the ongoing offensive in Eastern Ghouta and the reports of recent airstrikes over Daraa, in the Southwestern de-escalation zone, in addition to the lack of engagement on the political front, demonstrate that the government is not heeding calls to refrain from pursuing a military solution. Council members may ask how to increase pressure on the parties to the conflict and find a compromise that is both realistic and agreeable to all, building on unanimous Council [resolutions 2254](#) and [2401](#).

Tomorrow’s meeting takes place at a time when Council dynamics on Syria continue to be highly contentious, with the US recently circulating a draft resolution on Eastern Ghouta that appears to be unacceptable to Russia. At the 12 March meeting, US Ambassador Nikki Haley warned “any nation determined to impose its will through chemical attacks and inhuman suffering” that the US “remains prepared to act if we must”. At press time, it remains unclear how the Council will proceed with regard to the US draft and what implications the polarised positions among permanent members on Syria will have for the Council’s consideration of this issue.

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