

March 2018 Monthly Forecast

 securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-03/syria_52.php

Posted 28 February 2018

Download Complete Forecast: [PDF](#)

MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In March, the Council expects to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria, as well as an additional briefing on the implementation of resolution 2401. Council members are also expected to hold an informal interactive dialogue on the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Key Recent Developments

The conflict in Syria enters its eighth year in March amidst a marked intensification of violence. In a 10 February statement, Secretary-General António Guterres characterised the current moment as “one of the most violent periods in nearly seven years of conflict”. Mentioning deadly airstrikes leading to civilian casualties in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein said the same day that “[t]he term ‘de-escalation area’ is becoming all too reminiscent of the so-called ‘safe areas’ in Bosnia, which proved anything but safe”.

On 6 February, the Humanitarian Coordinator and other UN representatives in Syria had called for a cessation of hostilities of at least one month to improve the humanitarian situation. That statement had drawn attention to the dire humanitarian situation in several parts of the country. It outlined the various areas where the situation is most critical for civilians: Afrin, where military operations by Turkey and the reported blockage of exit points by other forces had trapped many civilians; Raqqa, with the scourge of unexploded ordnance and the lack of services; Idlib, which is densely populated and is being subjected to ongoing military operations by the Syrian government; Eastern Ghouta, where medical evacuations continue to be urgently needed in the midst of continuous besiegement and airstrikes by the government and its allied forces; Foua and Kafraya, which are besieged by armed groups; and the Rukban camp, which remains inaccessible to the UN’s Damascus-based humanitarian team.

In response to this call, Kuwait and Sweden (the humanitarian penholders on Syria in the Council) asked for a briefing from Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock under “any other business” on 8 February. At the briefing, Lowcock elaborated on the urgent need for an immediate cessation of hostilities of at least one month to enable the delivery of humanitarian aid and services, the evacuation of the critically sick and wounded, and the alleviation of people’s suffering. With this objective in mind, Kuwait and Sweden circulated a draft resolution on that same day.

As Council members negotiated the draft, the humanitarian situation in Syria continued to deteriorate. In a statement on 21 February, with the military offensive on Eastern Ghouta resulting in more than 1,200 civilian casualties since early February, High Commissioner Ra'ad Al Hussein asked: “[h]ow much cruelty will it take before the international community can speak with one voice to say enough dead children, enough wrecked families, enough violence, and take resolute, concerted action to bring this monstrous campaign of annihilation to an end?”. On that same day, the Secretary-General reminded all parties, particularly the guarantors of the Astana agreements—Iran, Russia and Turkey—of their commitments regarding de-escalation areas.

On 21 February, Kuwait and Sweden put the draft resolution into blue. Right after that, Russia requested a public meeting on Eastern Ghouta in order to allow all sides to “present their vision, their understanding of the situation and come up with ways of getting out of this situation”, according to its ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia.

At a 22 February briefing, Lowcock told Council members: “You can still save lives in eastern Ghouta—and elsewhere in Syria. I urge you to do so. Millions of battered and beleaguered children, women and men depend on meaningful action by this Council.” At the meeting, Russia, which highlighted the presence of terrorist groups in Eastern Ghouta, announced the circulation of amendments to the draft in blue for the consideration of the Council. Russia’s amendments were related to the role of the Council regarding the cessation of hostilities and the details of its implementation, including timing.

Intense negotiations ensued, and the Council was able to unanimously adopt resolution 2401 on Saturday, 24 February. The resolution demands that all parties cease hostilities without delay and engage immediately to ensure full and comprehensive implementation of this demand by all parties for a durable humanitarian pause of at least 30 consecutive days throughout Syria. The resolution also demands that, immediately after the start of the cessation of hostilities, all parties allow safe, unimpeded and sustained access each week to the humanitarian convoys of the UN and its implementing partners, including to hard-to-reach and besieged locations. At the same time, the UN and its implementing partners are to be allowed to undertake safe, unconditional medical evacuations, based on medical need and urgency. Military operations against the Council-designated terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Qaeda and Al-Nusra Front are not covered by the cessation of hostilities. At press time, violence had persisted in Syria, including indiscriminate attacks in Eastern Ghouta and the use of chemical weapons.

In addition to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, several factors—increased tensions between Israel and Syria, deadly clashes between the US-led coalition to counter ISIL and pro-government forces, Turkey’s offensive against Kurdish forces in Afrin and the incursion of pro-government forces into Afrin to repel the offensive—have further intensified tensions among member states involved in Syria.

On 14 February, UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura briefed the Council on his efforts to bring about a constitutional committee, including to define the mandate and terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure, and selection criteria for its composition. The establishment of a constitutional committee was the main outcome of a conference of Syrians hosted in Sochi on 29-30 January by Russia, along with Iran and Turkey, which had been boycotted by key opposition groups. Earlier that day, the government of Syria questioned the legitimacy of such a committee. At the Council meeting, Russia reiterated the coherence between its initiative and the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, announcing that it had circulated the final communiqué of the Sochi meeting as an official document of the Council.

Reports regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria continue. In addition to alleged attacks in January, at least three additional ones have reportedly taken place in February (in Idlib on 4 February, in Afrin on 16 February and in Eastern Ghouta on 25 February). Briefing the Council on 5 February, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu highlighted how the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) continues to believe that there are gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies with the initial declaration of the Syrian government that have not been addressed. At press time, the OPCW fact-finding mission was expected to submit to the Council a report on allegations of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the majority of which involve the use of toxic chemicals, such as chlorine, in areas not under the control of the government.

The polarisation among Council members on the issue of chemical weapons continues. On 23 January, Russia circulated a draft resolution to establish a new investigation mechanism to replace the OPCW-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM). By press time, Council members had met twice on the draft, but Russia had not addressed in a new draft any of the issues raised by other Council members.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a 6 February [statement](#), the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria expressed deep concern over the further escalation of violence in Idlib governorate and in Eastern Ghouta. Since the beginning of the year, the increase in violence in Idlib has resulted in another upsurge of internal displacement with over a quarter of a million civilians fleeing the fighting, according to reports received by the Commission. The Commission has also received multiple reports, which it is now investigating, that bombs allegedly containing weaponised chlorine have been used in the town of Saraqeb in Idlib and in Douma in Eastern Ghouta, the statement added.

In a 10 February [statement](#), High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein called for “urgent international action after a week of soaring violence and bloodshed, mostly caused by airstrikes, in the opposition-held Eastern Ghouta and Idlib regions”. According to the statement, the UN Human Rights Office received reports indicating that at least 277 civilians were killed between 4 and 9 February—230 of them in airstrikes by the Syrian Government and its allies—with a further 812 civilians injured, bringing the total number of civilian casualties during the first week of February to around 1,089. “The no-holds-barred nature of this assault is evidenced by reports that at least nine medical facilities, six of them in Idlib and three in Eastern Ghouta, were hit by airstrikes”, the High Commissioner said. “Even by Syria’s atrocious standards, these are exceptionally deplorable developments—and a cruel irony given that both have been declared ‘de-escalation areas’”.

The Human Rights Council (HRC) will hold an interactive dialogue to discuss the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria ([A/HRC/37/72](#)) during its 37th session in March. There will also be a high-level panel discussion about violations of the human rights of children in Syria, as requested in HRC [resolution 36/20](#).

Key Issues and Options

During the seven years of the war, P5 divisions have limited the options at the disposal of Council members. In order to mark this anniversary, Council members could hold an informal, unscripted and forward-looking meeting at ambassador-level to discuss the concrete steps that the Council could take unanimously to alleviate suffering on the ground, build trust among the parties, and reinvigorate the political process.

Most of the Council’s attention to Syria has been spent hearing the conflicting narratives put forward by different member states rather than engaging in active diplomacy able to make a difference on the ground. In this context, the efforts of the humanitarian penholders to respond to Lowcock’s call and demand a cessation of hostilities shows the potential role of elected members in the Council. In order to amplify the messages and receive specific suggestions from those affected by the recent wave of violence, Council members could organise a formal or informal meeting to hear these voices.

Following the circulation of the Russian draft to establish a new mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapons, Council members could negotiate in a genuine effort to achieve consensus. 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, including with regard to humanitarian matters. The 10 February statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator in Syria and other UN officials highlighted how “[t]he humanitarian response has become a hostage to fighting and competing politics” in Syria and characterised this as a “shame for all”.

In addition to the difficulties in agreeing to resolution 2401, this dynamic was also made evident in the negotiation of a presidential statement circulated by Kuwait and Sweden in January. The draft, which responded to a request by Lowcock after his first visit to Syria, could not be adopted, as the differences among members in two rounds of negotiations could not be overcome. Russia challenged the prioritisation of five areas identified by Lowcock as needing progress and questioned the need for such a statement by the Council. The penholders, which had minimised references to particular locations in Syria to bypass Council divisions, proposed not to specifically outline in the statement the five areas mentioned by Lowcock, nonetheless urging progress on them. The P3 argued that the language used in the statement was not strong enough, and that the efforts to make it palatable to Russia and others had diluted its substance.

It remains to be seen whether Council members will be able to preserve space for compromise on the Syria humanitarian track in the future.

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.

Secretary-General’s Report

20 February 2018 This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
S/2018/138

Security Council Letters

14 February 2018 This was the final statement of the conference held in Sochi.
S/2018/121

1 February 2018 This was a letter transmitting the OPCW report on progress in the
elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
S/2018/84

Security Council Meeting Records

24 February 2018 This was the meeting at which resolution 2401 was adopted.
S/PV.8188

22 February 2018 This was a briefing by Lowcock on Eastern Ghouta.
S/PV.8186

14 February 2018 This was a briefing by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura on the political
process in Syria.
S/PV.8181

5 February 2018 This was a briefing by Nakamitsu on the destruction of Syria's chemical
weapons arsenal.
S/PV.8174
