

April 2016 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

Council members will continue to monitor the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, how the cessation of hostilities is holding and humanitarian access to hard-to-reach and besieged areas in Syria.

Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura is expected to brief in mid-April in what is now the monthly update on the implementation of resolutions [2254](#) on the political process and [2268](#) on the cessation of hostilities. Council members will also receive their regular monthly briefings on the chemical weapons and humanitarian tracks in Syria.

Key Recent Developments

On 14 March, the UN-facilitated intra-Syrian proximity talks began, after having been abruptly suspended in early February due to the government's Aleppo offensive, backed by Russian airstrikes. Subsequently, intense diplomatic activity between Russia and the US had culminated in the agreement on a cessation of hostilities that was endorsed by the Security Council in resolution [2268](#).

Russia's military activity in Syria helped the government consolidate its control of territory from Damascus north through Homs to the Latakia coastal plain ahead of peace talks. On the same day that talks in Geneva began, Russia announced a drawdown of its forces from Syria. The timing of Russia's announcement appeared to be a clear message to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad that Russian military support was not open-ended and that the only way forward was to engage in the peace talks. On the other hand, the drawdown preserves Russia's capabilities for rapid redeployment, maintains its capacity to strike armed opposition groups in Syria, and does not weaken its posture vis-à-vis NATO in the Mediterranean.

Russian air support for the government offensives against ISIS is ongoing and Palmyra was recaptured by 28 March. This effort is distinct from that of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. ISIS has lost 40 percent of their territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria.

Also on 14 March, de Mistura briefed Council members via video teleconference from Geneva after the first day of talks. He reported that the cessation of hostilities had lowered overall levels of violence, and characterised the Russian drawdown as a significant development that would have a positive impact on the negotiations. On the issue of aerial bombardment, de Mistura said that the Syrian minister of defence had assured his Russian counterpart that Syria would not arbitrarily use weapons. In November 2015, de

Mistura had reported a similar commitment made by the government directly to his office. However, that commitment was in fact a letter denying the government's arbitrary use of weapons, saying it would never do so.

Regarding the participation of Syrian Kurdish groups, particularly the Democratic Union Party (PYD), in the intra-Syrian talks, it seems that de Mistura sought Council members' guidance on whether to include the PYD. The issue has gained increasing prominence in light of the 17 March decision by Kurdish groups to establish a federal system of governance in areas they control along the northern border. Even prior to this decision, the PYD's participation has been resisted by Turkey, which opposes any Kurdish separatist movements along its border. The Riyadh-based umbrella Syrian opposition group, the High Negotiations Committee, which controls much less territory, has signalled the need for de-centralised governance, but does not support a federal structure. Meanwhile, the Syrian government has rejected the concept and is frustrated by Russia's support of a federal structure for Syria.

The first round of talks ended on 24 March. As with previous rounds of talks in 2012 and 2014, the UN mediator hit an impasse over the issue of political transition and the fate of Assad. Addressing the issue of presidential elections within 18 months, as endorsed in resolution [2254](#), was not acceptable to the government, which continues to argue that discussion of presidential elections is premature. In an unusually strong statement, de Mistura said that what premature means for Syria means imminent as far as the UN is concerned.

Unlike in 2012 or 2014, Russia and the US have invested more political capital in the success of these talks. US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on 24 March. There was general agreement that both Russia and the US would use their influence with the parties to support the cessation of hostilities, expand humanitarian access, stop attempts to gain additional territory, and work toward the release of detainees. On the issue of Assad, Kerry said he believed Russia would help Assad make the right decision and commit fully to the talks and a genuine transition. Lavrov was more circumspect, commenting that the process should end with Syrians agreeing on how they want to see their country. The next day, Russia's deputy foreign minister said that Russia and the US had agreed that the issue of Syria's president should not be on the agenda at this stage. De Mistura's [24 March paper that describes commonalities between the parties](#) references elections, but there is no specific reference to presidential elections.

The issue of political transition is expected to be the focus of the second round of talks, set to resume on 9 April. Some media reports indicate there might be a delay, to 14 April, the day after the parliamentary elections which were announced by the regime on 22 February, hours after Russia and the US had agreed on the cessation of hostilities.

On the humanitarian track, Jan Egeland, who is de Mistura's adviser to the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) humanitarian task force, has stressed the need for the government to permit access to the remaining six of 18 besieged areas. On 23 March, Egeland announced that the government had given verbal assent to access to three to four

more areas, but not to Darayya and Douma near Damascus, both besieged by government forces and believed to be in very dire straits. In addition, he stressed that getting medical relief into these areas, even if other aid was permitted, remained the single most difficult access issue.

OCHA head Stephen O'Brien briefed the Council on 30 March, presenting the latest Secretary-General's report that described improving access and reiterating the goal for aid to reach 1.1 million people by the end of April. He also focused on the work of the ISSG humanitarian task force and how it coordinates with the UN.

On the chemical weapons track, Acting UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Kim Won-soo briefed Council members on 23 March.

Key Issue

The essential issue for the Council—entering the sixth year of a war that has exacted a death toll of 470,000, injured one million and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.8 million refugees—is to build on the momentum of resolutions 2254 and 2268, and exert effective leadership in supporting a cessation of hostilities and efforts to implement a political solution.

Options

The ISSG and resolutions 2254 and 2268 have identified roles for the Council in the event that talks in 2016 produce concrete results towards a national ceasefire and a parallel political process, including elections. How such a ceasefire and elections would be monitored would require more consideration by the Council. In the near term, however, the options for the Council are limited as the day-to-day oversight of resolutions 2254 and 2268 has been outsourced to the ISSG broadly, and P5 members Russia and the US in particular.

Council Dynamics

When resolution 2268 was adopted a little more than an hour before the cessation of hostilities went into effect on 27 February, it was unclear to many Council members whether it was a pivotal moment in the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, or whether the momentum would falter. A month later, Council members are cautiously optimistic, observing that the cessation of hostilities has lowered overall levels of violence, allowed increasing flows of humanitarian aid, and created a more conducive environment for a political process.

Nevertheless, divisions remain. Russia's position has consistently sought for the US to (1) be less vocal about Assad's departure from power; and (2) increase cooperation on counter-terrorism efforts with Moscow, resulting in de-facto coordination with Damascus. On Assad, some Council members are of the view that the Russian and the US positions have quietly moved closer together, in that Assad would have a role in the transition but would not stand for re-election. It remains unclear whether Iran shares that position. The US has been more resistant to direct coordination of counter-terrorism efforts in Syria. This dynamic was demonstrated when Council members were unable to reach agreement

on a draft press statement on the government's defeat of ISIS in Palmyra. The P3 wanted to expand the statement to include other victories against ISIS made by the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria, but that was rejected by Egypt, Russia and Venezuela.

Most outcomes on the Syria political track are agreed between Russia and the US prior to agreement by the Council, as was the case with resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#). Egypt, New Zealand and Spain lead on humanitarian issues.

UN Documents

Security Council Resolutions

26 February 2016 S/RES/2268	Endorsed the cessation of hostilities and called for the resumption of political talks.
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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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Security Council Meeting Records

30 March 2016 S/PV.7660	This was the regular monthly humanitarian briefing by OCHA.
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Secretary-General's Reports

22 March 2016 S/2016/272	This was the Secretary-General's monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
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26 February 2016 S/2016/196	This was the 29th OPCW report on chemical weapons.
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