

April 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

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

Key Recent Developments

The fourth round of the intra-Syrian talks was held between 23 February and 3 March in Geneva. Following the parameters set out in [resolution 2254](#), Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura proposed to discuss three “baskets” of issues in parallel: governance, constitution and elections. Following a request by the Syrian government delegation to add a fourth “basket” to discuss counter-terrorism, de Mistura proposed that this also tackles issues related to security governance and confidence-building measures. The Council welcomed this announcement [in a press statement](#) as “a clear agenda for future negotiations”. The fifth round of the intra-Syrian talks started on 23 March with the intention of discussing all four baskets with all delegations.

Russia, Turkey and Iran established a joint group as a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire. Efforts to operationalise the ceasefire received a setback when the opposition delegation refused to participate in a meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, on 14 March, citing repeated violations of the ceasefire by the Syrian military.

Despite a new ceasefire announced by Russia, the ongoing military offensive by the government against besieged areas east of Damascus intensified and further worsened the living conditions for civilians by cutting off informal routes used to smuggle in basic items. Two suicide attacks in Damascus in early March, claimed by Tahrir al-Sham (a grouping that includes the latest iteration of the Al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Nusra Front), left dozens of people killed. After years of siege, in mid-March the last rebel-held enclave of Homs, Al-Waer, started its evacuation following a local truce. (The opposition has repeatedly referred to such deals as forced population transfers.) In mid-March, the towns covered by the September 2015 “four towns agreement” (two besieged by armed opposition and two by government and Hezbollah militias) received some humanitarian aid after six months without access to basic items. On 29 March a truce allowing for their evacuation was reportedly brokered by Iran and Qatar. At press time, OCHA head Stephen O’Brien was scheduled to brief the Council on 30 March.

On 2 March, the Syrian military took control of Palmyra, which had been under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) since December 2016. On 21 March, armed opposition groups, fighting alongside Tahrir al-Sham, launched an offensive against government-held areas north of Hama. During March, several US strikes targeting ISIL resulted in a heavy toll of civilian casualties in Syria as well as in Iraq. In a significant development, Israeli jets that were conducting operations against a convoy of military supplies for Hezbollah in Syria were attacked on 17 March by Syrian anti-aircraft missiles.

In northern Syria, a spate of violence between the forces of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield and the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia that is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), resulted in the killing of 71 YPG soldiers in the first week of March according to Turkey's military. On 22 March, a Turkish soldier was killed by a YPG sniper. Efforts to defuse tensions included the handover of some towns from the SDF to the Syrian government to act as a buffer zone, and the deployment of Russian forces and US marines to SDF-held positions in Afrin and Manbij to prevent attacks by Turkish military. On 8 March, the US announced the deployment of several hundred marines to participate in the SDF-led offensive towards ISIL's stronghold Raqqa.

On 28 February, a draft resolution establishing a sanctions regime, a committee and a panel of experts to ensure accountability for the use and production of chemical weapons in Syria, with an appended list of individuals and entities to be targeted, was vetoed by China and Russia, also receiving the negative vote of Bolivia and the abstentions of Egypt, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan. The draft—presented by France, the UK and the US—would have imposed sanctions on a number of individuals and entities associated with the Syrian government linked to cases where responsibility was established by the OPCW-UN JIM: in Talmenes on 21 April 2014 and in Qmenas and Sarmin on 16 March 2015. In explaining its veto, Russia reiterated previously expressed concerns regarding the conclusions presented by the JIM and questioned the body of evidence on which they were based. China questioned the timing for the draft as the Geneva talks were under way. On 20 March, the EU imposed bilateral sanctions on four senior Syrian officials involved in the use and production of chemical weapons in Syria.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 14 March, the Human Rights Council (HRC) held a high-level panel discussion on the human rights situation in Syria. In a statement, the High Commissioner for Human Rights labelled the conflict in Syria and its consequences “the worst man-made disaster the world has seen since World War II,” in which the country has become a “torture-chamber” for its population. The High Commissioner criticised repeated vetoes in the Security Council as holding back efforts to end the conflict and to refer crimes to the International Criminal Court (ICC), adding that his office was “moving as fast as possible” to set up the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, as stipulated by the General Assembly resolution [71/248](#). A number of other panelists emphasised that a lack of political will was the main issue preventing progress. On the same day, the HRC also held an interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to discuss its latest report on Aleppo ([A/HRC/34/64](#)), which covers the period from 21 July to 22 December 2016. The report concluded that serious violations of international human rights law and war crimes were committed by all parties in the battle for Aleppo, including daily airstrikes by Syrian and Russian forces, the use of chlorine bombs by Syrian forces in residential areas, indiscriminate attacks on civilians by “Syrian and/or Russian forces” through the pervasive use of cluster munitions, and indiscriminate attacks by armed groups. The report attributed the 19 September airstrike on a humanitarian convoy, which killed 15 aid workers and destroyed much-needed aid supplies, to the Syrian military. It characterised it as one of the most “egregious” attacks and an attempt by Syrian forces to “deliberately obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid.” On 24 March, the HRC adopted by 27 votes to 7 (with 13 abstentions) resolution 34/37 on the human rights situation in Syria, extending the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry for one year. The resolution recommended that the General Assembly submit the Commission’s reports to the Security Council and that the Commission continue to brief members of the Security Council.

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 almost 5 million refugees, the essential issue for the Council is to exert effective leadership in enforcing the ceasefire and promoting 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 ICC or authorising a no-fly zone to deter the Syrian government from using its aerial capacity—but P5 divisions have made it impossible for the Council to fulfill 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 could also hold an Arria-formula meeting with the HRC’s Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council members welcomed the fourth round of the Geneva talks, where de Mistura succeeded in keeping the parties engaged throughout and reaching agreement on an agenda based on [resolution 2254](#). Language regarding the fragility of the ceasefire and examples of continuous violations by the government were not included in the 10 March press statement given the opposition of some Council members, including Russia. Briefing Council members on 8 March, de Mistura appealed to the guarantors of the ceasefire to urgently address spoiler acts and escalatory steps in contested areas. Failure to deliver on the ceasefire commitments could have a negative impact on the intra-Syrian talks.

Despite the public display of divisions in the [28 February vote](#), and the criticism repeatedly expressed by some Council members, especially Russia, the JIM is still expected to investigate instances of the use of chemical weapons as identified by the OPCW's fact-finding mission. Furthermore, in a briefing on non-proliferation on 16 March, Russia reiterated a proposal that the JIM investigates reports of non-state actors gaining access to chemical weapons also in Iraq. [Resolution 2118](#), adopted on 27 September 2013 and drafted by the US and Russia, decided to impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in the event of non-compliance, including any use of chemical weapons in Syria. Nevertheless, Russia has continued to oppose any punitive action against the government. On the 24 March HRC vote, Bolivia and China voted against and Egypt and Ethiopia abstained.

On 23 March, at a meeting of the Global Coalition to counter ISIL, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the US will work to establish interim zones of stability through ceasefires, to allow refugees to return to Syria and Iraq. However, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, and other humanitarian actors have stressed that the situation on the ground does not allow for the planning of zones safe enough for the protection of civilians and the return of refugees.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

31 December 2016 S/RES/2336	Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.
17 November 2016 S/RES/2319	Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.
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.

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.
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Secretary-General's Report

22 March 2017 <u>S/2017/244</u>	This was on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Security Council Letters

28 February 2017 <u>S/2017/172</u>	This was a draft resolution on chemical weapons.
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27 February 2017 <u>S/2017/175</u>	This was a report by the OPCW on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Record

28 February 2017 <u>S/PV.7893</u>	This was the meeting at which Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution establishing a sanctions regime for the use and production of chemical weapons in Syria.
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Security Council Press Statement

10 March 2017 <u>SC/12749</u>	This welcomed announcement by de Mistura of a clear agenda for future negotiations as indicated by resolution 2254.
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Human Rights Council Document

2 February 2017 <u>A/HRC/34/64</u>	This was a report of the HRC's Commission of Inquiry on Aleppo.
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