

# Syria: Ministerial Meeting and Possible Adoption of a Resolution on a Political Solution

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## What's In Blue

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This afternoon (18 December), the Security Council will hold a ministerial-level meeting chaired by US Secretary of State John Kerry. At press time, it was unclear whether agreement would be reached in time to adopt a resolution on the need for a political solution in Syria. Foreign ministers of Angola, China, France, Jordan, Russia and the UK will attend. Syria will also participate. This morning, the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which includes the P5 as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia, are meeting in New York. No statement is expected from this meeting in light of the possible adoption of a resolution by the Security Council later in the day.

Many Council members have been expecting such a Council meeting this month since the ISSG met on 14 November. At that meeting it set an ambitious timeframe to prepare for a parallel ceasefire and political process by 1 January 2016, that would lead to credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance within six months. This would be followed by the drafting of a constitution and elections within 18 months.

Over the course of the last month, preparatory work to forge a unified opposition as well as to identify which among the armed groups should be identified as terrorists was facilitated by Saudi Arabia and Jordan respectively. Russia's public comments about its dissatisfaction with both of these preparatory processes cast doubt on whether the ISSG, let alone the Council, would be in a position to convene on 18 December. Today's events were agreed during Kerry's visit to Moscow on 15 December to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

### ISSG Meeting

The ISSG meeting is a forum to discuss the UN's provisional arrangements to facilitate talks between government and opposition delegations in early 2016. Some Council members expect that if agreement is reached, the first round of such talks may be proximity talks that may initially eschew the harder political issues and focus solely on negotiating a ceasefire.

At this morning's meeting, Saudi Arabia will present the final communiqué of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces that was agreed at a meeting held in Riyadh on 9 and 10 December. Jordan will update on the ongoing work in Amman to determine which actors in Syria should be identified as terrorist groups in addition to those already designated by the Security Council, such as Al-Qaida, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and Al-Nusra Front. Such groups would be barred from participation in political talks and could be targeted by counter-terrorism operations.

One of the most powerful armed Islamist opposition groups inside Syria, Ahrar al-Sham, has been pivotal in both the Amman and Riyadh processes. On the counter-terrorism track in Amman, there has been no agreement reached yet on which armed groups should also be identified as terrorists, but it seems that Russia is insisting that Ahrar al-Sham be included on that list. Meanwhile, on the opposition track in Riyadh, the opportunity for opposition groups to form a unified bloc was nearly lost when Ahrar al-Sham almost abandoned the conference. It seems that Ahrar al-Sham's commitment to the larger political process with the Syrian regime remains uncertain and their signature of the communiqué in Riyadh may be resisted by some of their commanders on the ground—especially in the absence of a firm timetable for President Bashar al-Assad's departure.

### Draft Resolution

Although the draft resolution currently being negotiated is not under Chapter VII, many Council members will view it as a significant achievement if it is adopted. If agreement is reached, it will signal the first time the Security Council adopts a resolution with a *raison d'être* focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. Previous resolutions have addressed the counter-terrorism, humanitarian and chemical weapons dimensions of the conflict.

The draft resolution, which was drafted by the US and negotiated among the P5, had not been circulated to the entire Council membership at press time. Further negotiation by the P5 at ministerial-level was expected this morning. The elected Council members generally accept that the high-level discussions between Russia and the US, followed by P5 negotiations, will determine the substance of the draft resolution and whether it will be adopted this afternoon.

While the draft resolution has not been shared, members are aware that the draft would enshrine the sequence of events envisioned in the 14 November ISSG statement: UN-mediated political talks to begin on 1 January, a national ceasefire and a 2-year timeline to achieve a Syrian political transition. It would acknowledge the Riyadh conference of opposition groups and recognise the efforts of Jordan, expressing hope that a list of which armed groups should be identified as terrorists could be put forward. In addition, the draft would signal the Council's continued engagement by asking the Secretary-General to submit to the Council options for ceasefire monitoring as well as for further confidence building measures, and to report back to the Council on the progress of a UN-facilitated political process.

In addition, the draft resolution would demand all parties cease attacks against civilians and civilian objects; call on all parties to allow humanitarian access; underscore the need to build conditions for the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons; and call on member states to prevent and suppress terrorist acts in Syria.

It is unclear how these elements will be reflected in a final draft if agreement is reached. It seems that during P5 negotiations several issues emerged. One issue within the P3 was the US willingness to use "political settlement" in an operative paragraph, versus the French and UK preference for "political transition" which would more clearly allude to the need for Assad's eventual departure from power. In another operative paragraph, Russia

did not want any language that would be seen as Council recognition of the opposition bloc's High Negotiations Committee based in Riyadh. Russia has publicly stated that a group based in Riyadh cannot speak on behalf of the entire Syrian opposition and suggested that meetings of the Syrian opposition in Cairo, Damascus and Moscow be included in the UN facilitated talks.. An ongoing issue raised by Russia is moving forward with the draft resolution and political talks before there is an agreed list of terrorists.

It seems that another issue during P5 negotiations was how to reference the statements from the multilateral talks on Syria in Vienna on 30 October and 14 November in relation to the 30 June 2012 Geneva Communiqué. While not minimising the importance of the Vienna statements, the P3 believed it was important to keep the focus on the Geneva Communiqué as the guiding framework for a political transition in Syria. Unlike the Geneva Communiqué, the Vienna statements do not reference the need for a transitional governing body, protection of civilians or accountability.

Several Council members believe that Russian military involvement in Syria, the surge of Syrians seeking refuge in Europe, and the expanding reach of ISIS (whether real or perceived) make up the series of events that may have tipped the conflict toward a political solution. The contours of what that solution might look like will be partially answered if the Council adopts the draft resolution today. However, the answer to the fundamental question that has divided the P5 since the beginning of the Syrian conflict will likely remain intentionally ambiguous—the role of Assad in any political transition. It is not clear whether the shift in position by the P3 and some regional states that Assad's exit from power does not have to be immediate will be sufficient for Russia and Iran to modify their positions. These two countries prefer a power-sharing arrangement (rather than a transitional government), sequencing such power-sharing only within the context of a united effort against “terrorism”, and elections that do not exclude Assad.

Looking ahead, the Security Council will meet on the Syria humanitarian situation on Monday (21 December). The humanitarian leads, Jordan, New Zealand and Spain, have been negotiating a draft resolution to renew the authorisation in resolution 2191 for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access in Syria that expires on 10 January 2016. However, negotiations have been difficult, with Russia insisting on including language on terrorism and suggesting that cross-border aid has been used to assist ISIS. It seems Russia has held firm to its position, and agreement on the humanitarian draft resolution will probably only be reached following today's ministerial-level meeting on the political track.

**(Post-script:** *On 18 December, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254, the first resolution on a Syrian political solution. The text was only agreed by the P5 hours before the ministerial-level meeting.*)

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