

February 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In February, Council members expect to receive the regular monthly briefings on the humanitarian and political situations in Syria. Council members will be following closely the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, scheduled to be held in February.

On chemical weapons, Council members will consider the next report of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), which is due in mid-February. At press time, it was unclear if a draft resolution, circulated by France and the UK, to impose sanctions on the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons against its own population, would be put to a vote. Similarly, it was unclear what the next steps might be regarding a Russian draft resolution that focuses on chemical weapons use in Syria by non-state actors and terrorists.

Key Recent Developments

Following the December fall of eastern Aleppo to government forces, the Council adopted [resolution 2336](#) on 31 December 2016 welcoming Russia and Turkey's efforts to end violence in Syria and jump-start a political process. Resolution 2336 also included the Council's view that the 23-24 January Astana talks between the Syrian government and representatives of armed opposition groups should be considered a step toward the resumption of intra-Syrian talks under UN auspices in February. On 29 December 2016, Russia and Turkey had circulated several [documents](#) summarising their agreement on the ceasefire, including a monitoring mechanism for violations. Both in the negotiations and in explaining their votes on the resolution, several Council members raised concerns regarding the terms of the ceasefire, the lack of clarity on the monitoring mechanism and the risk of having a parallel political process if there was not adequate coordination with the UN's mediation efforts.

On 20 January, Council members were briefed by Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman on the preparation for the Astana talks. Ahead of the meeting, it was apparent that the government and opposition had differing objectives for the talks. The opposition's platform was to consolidate the ceasefire, get humanitarian aid flowing to besieged areas and seek the release of detainees from government prisons. The government viewed the talks as an opportunity to consolidate the ceasefire by seeking the separation of rebel groups from cooperation with Al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra and excluded from the terms of the ceasefire, and to

lay the groundwork for more “local reconciliation” deals with armed groups, which are generally seen as surrender agreements after years of government bombardment and siege of rebel-held areas.

The opposition’s delegation was led by Mohammad Alloush of Jaish al-Islam, a group that is a part of the High Negotiations Committee, a Riyadh-based opposition umbrella group. In April 2016, Russia had unsuccessfully proposed placing Jaish al-Islam on the Al-Qaida/ISIL sanctions list. However, in a 29 December press release by the Russian Ministry of Defence, Jaish al-Islam was described as a moderate opposition group. In another apparent shift, Russia agreed to Turkey’s request that the Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes the Kurdish armed group YPG, not be invited to the Astana talks.

At the conclusion of the Astana talks, Turkey and Russia, joined by Iran, signed a joint communiqué deciding to establish a trilateral mechanism to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire, prevent any provocations and determine all modalities of the ceasefire. At press time, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura was expected to brief Council members on 31 January on how the Astana talks can feed into preparations for the Geneva talks in February.

The ceasefire is largely holding, except for the vicinity of Damascus where government airstrikes have continued. In particular, fighting in Wadi Barada between rebel groups and the government-allied Lebanese Shi’a militia Hezbollah has severely restricted the flow of water to Damascus since late December, with both sides trading accusations over who is responsible for it. Fighting also continues in rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, which has been besieged by the government for almost four years.

Idlib, which is under the control of armed groups, has been receiving evacuees from Aleppo and other municipalities. Tension among armed groups has been rising, with Jabhat Fateh al-Sham attacking the headquarters of Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib on 19 January. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which is designated by the Security Council as a terrorist group, has been targeted by Syrian, Russian and US airstrikes.

On 26 January, OCHA, the World Food Programme and the World Health Organisation updated the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria, which continues to be critical. On 16 January, the head of OCHA and four other UN agencies issued a statement appealing for immediate, unconditional and safe access to reach those still cut off from humanitarian aid across the country. According to the statement, there are 15 besieged areas where up to 700,000 people, including an estimated 300,000 children, remain trapped. Nearly five million people, including more than two million children, live in areas that are extremely difficult to reach with humanitarian assistance due to fighting, insecurity and restricted access. Bureaucratic delays imposed by the government continue to limit the ability of the UN to reach those most in need. On 15 January, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched a major offensive against government-held Deir ez-Zor and captured the drop zone for humanitarian supplies, interrupting the town’s only lifeline.

Briefing the Council on 4 January, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Kim Won-soo briefed Council members on efforts to re-establish the operational capacity of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) following its renewal with the adoption of [resolution 2319](#) on 17 November 2016. The JIM's previous four reports have concluded that of the nine cases investigated, the Syrian regime used chlorine gas against its own population in three cases and ISIL used mustard gas in one case. There was insufficient evidence to make a determination in the remaining five cases.

Since mid-December 2016, France and the UK have led negotiations on a draft resolution seeking to impose sanctions on the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons against its own population. In early January, Russia circulated another draft resolution noting the decrease of allegations of use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government and placing emphasis in their use by non-state actors. On 12 January, the US imposed unilateral sanctions on 18 senior officials of the Syrian government connected to the country's weapons of mass destruction program and identified several branches of the government involved in the production and use of chemical weapons.

On 29 December 2016, the OPCW issued a [report](#) stating that the destruction of 24 of 27 chemical weapons production facilities declared by the Syrian government in 2014 had been verified. However, the OPCW believes that Syria's initial declaration remains incomplete.

Following the adoption of resolution [71/248](#) by the General Assembly on 21 December 2016, the Secretary-General, with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, developed the terms of reference for a mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of international crimes committed in Syria. The Secretary-General is expected to report on the operationalisation of this mechanism in late February.

Key Issue

Nearly six years since the start of a war that has exacted a death toll approaching 500,000, left 700,000 living under siege after the evacuation of eastern Aleppo and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.86 million refugees, the essential issue for the Council is to exert effective leadership in supporting a cessation of hostilities and efforts to reach a political solution.

Options

While 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 Syria from using its aerial capacity—P5 divisions have made it impossible for the Council to fulfil its role in maintaining international peace and security in the case of Syria.

Regarding accountability, Council members could:

- hold an informal interactive dialogue with the Board of Inquiry to discuss its findings in relation to the 19 September 2016 attack on a humanitarian convoy outside of Aleppo; and

- organise an Arria-formula meeting with the Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Regarding chemical weapons, if the Council is able to determine that Syria has violated resolutions [2118](#), [2209](#) and [2235](#), it has the option to pursue the threat of sanctions implicit in all three resolutions.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council members' engagement on the Syrian political negotiations has been limited to following the lead taken by key actors outside of the Council. This was the case with the adoption of resolution [2336](#) on 31 December 2016 which was tabled by Russia and Turkey. In this context, Council members have made efforts to ensure that the initiative by Russia and Turkey does not undermine the UN mediation which is guided by [resolution 2254](#) and the June 2012 Geneva Communique, endorsed in resolution [2118](#). Some Council members have expressed doubts over the government's willingness to compromise in peace talks on a genuine transitional governing body, given its recent military victories, particularly in Aleppo.

It remains unclear if a draft resolution to impose sanctions against Syria over its use of chemical weapons, penned by France and the UK, will be put to a vote. After several rounds of negotiations, and given Russia's rejection of the draft, Council members expect that it will be vetoed if it does proceed to a vote. It seems some Council members preferred to postpone such action in order to assess the degree of continuity in US policy on Syria between the new administration and the previous one.

So far, Council members have not taken any initiative to promote accountability for the 19 September 2016 attack on a humanitarian convoy outside of Aleppo. A [summary](#) of the report of the UN Board of Inquiry was shared with the Council on 21 December. Even though the Board had received reports that Syrian forces were highly likely to have perpetrated the attack, the Board was not given access to the required data or to the attack site to determine responsibility.

Relations between Turkey and Russia, strained since the downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 by Turkish forces, became closer over the summer of 2016 and culminated in the brokering of a new ceasefire in late December. Since August 2016, Turkey's priority in Syria has been its Operation Euphrates Shield, which has created a de facto buffer zone in areas previously held by ISIL, effectively preventing Kurdish control of contiguous areas in Syria along the Turkish border. In January, Turkey and Russia conducted their first joint airstrikes against ISIL targets in the town of al-Bab. The US-led anti-ISIL coalition has also conducted airstrikes around al-Bab in support of Operation Euphrates Shield, but not in coordination with Russia.

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
[S/RES/2254](#)

This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.

Secretary-General's Reports

20 January
2017
[S/2017/58](#)

This was on the humanitarian situation.

29
December
2016
[S/2016/1131](#)

This was on chemical weapons.

Security Council Meeting Record

26 January
2017
[S/PV.7870](#)

This was on the humanitarian situation.

Security Council Letters

16 January
2017
[S/2017/45](#)

This was an update by the OPCW fact-finding mission on a 2 August 2016 incident and its 2016 activities.

29
December
2016
[S/2016/1133](#)

Was from Russia summarising the agreement reached with Turkey on a ceasefire and political talks for Syria.

21
December
2016
[S/2016/1093](#)

Was a summary of the UN Board of Inquiry report on the 19 September 2016 attack on a humanitarian convoy outside of Aleppo.

Security Council Press Statement

20 January
2017
SC/12690

This condemned the destruction of cultural heritage by ISIL in Syria following reports of the destruction of the tetrapylon and parts of the theatre of Palmyra.