

Syria: Special Envoy to Brief after Lausanne Talks

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What's In Blue

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On Monday (17 October), Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura will brief Council members in consultations on the political process which has been stalled since April. The chances of political talks between the government and opposition resuming any time in the near future now seem even more remote following the rupture of the cessation of hostilities, agreed between Russia and the US on 9 September, and the massive military escalation by the Syrian government and Russia against opposition-held eastern Aleppo.

De Mistura's briefing will be Council members' first meeting on Syria since 8 October, when the Council voted on two competing draft resolutions, both focused on the situation in Aleppo. Russia cast its fifth Syria-related veto on a draft resolution tabled by France and Spain, demanding an end to all aerial bombardments. Russia's draft resolution, which prioritised the counter-terrorism aspects of the Syrian conflict, in particular separating Al Nusra from other armed opposition groups, received only four positive votes from China, Egypt, Russia and Venezuela, and was not adopted.

Council members expect de Mistura to discuss his "Aleppo initiative" and any further development in his thinking since he last briefed on the initiative, at Russia's request, on 7 October, the day before the votes on the competing draft resolutions. During that briefing, de Mistura reiterated the need for an immediate and total halt of the bombing of eastern Aleppo followed by the evacuation of Al Nusra fighters, underscored the need to keep the local administration intact, and called for some sort of international presence.

Council members might want to know more about the views of other armed opposition groups regarding his initiative. There may also be questions regarding the security guarantees that would be needed for such an evacuation of Al Nusra fighters, not only for eastern Aleppo but also presumably for Idlib, where fighters from other surrendered towns have been forced to relocate. Some Council members have expressed concern that Idlib may be the next theatre for a military escalation if the government succeeds in retaking Aleppo. Finally, Council members will be interested in an update on the actual number of Al Nusra fighters in eastern Aleppo. At the 7 October briefing de Mistura had set the number at a maximum of 900, but other analysts estimate the number of Al Nusra fighters in eastern Aleppo may be as low as 200.

Many Council members are skeptical about the feasibility of implementing de Mistura's "Aleppo initiative". However, some have noted that it has managed to slightly shift the dynamic by calling attention to Russia's and Syria's use of Al Nusra's limited presence in eastern Aleppo as a justification for the assault that has had such a devastating toll on civilians.

Monday's meeting will also provide the Special Envoy with an opportunity to update Council members on the outcome from tomorrow's ministerial-level talks in Lausanne. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry agreed to meet, along with regional actors Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, in an attempt to broker a truce for Aleppo.

Some Council members have noted that Saturday's meeting in Lausanne comes at a time when a return to a diplomatic approach to resolve the crisis has become even more urgent amidst signs that the conflict could see further military escalation. Today US President Barack Obama is meeting with his National Security Council to discuss options for Syria, including military ones, though no Council member expects the US to exercise such an option. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin has ratified an agreement with Syria for indefinite use of its Hmeimim air base, and announced plans for a permanent naval base in Tartous. Media reports indicate that Russia has moved significant air defense capabilities to Syria.

Most Council members are doubtful about the possibility that there will be any major breakthrough at Lausanne and anticipate a subsequent intensification of activity at the UN to maintain pressure towards a diplomatic solution to resolve the Syria crisis.

Shortly after last Saturday's veto of the French-Spanish draft, and non-adoption of the Russian draft, New Zealand circulated a draft resolution on Wednesday (12 October) that also seeks to stop aerial bombardment, to get humanitarian aid flowing and to address the need to separate terrorist fighters from other armed opposition groups. The draft is currently under negotiation, although timing for a possible vote remains unclear. Most Council members think the outcome of the Lausanne meeting over the weekend may determine next steps in the Council.

Separately, yesterday (13 October) Canada requested that the President of the General Assembly convene a plenary meeting on Syria, on behalf of 69 member states, including the P3 and elected Council members Egypt, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain, Ukraine and Uruguay. The letter noted the failure of the Security Council to carry out its responsibilities for the maintenance of peace and security in Syria, and that the General Assembly also has responsibilities in that regard. While not confirmed at press time, it seems that such a meeting of the General Assembly is most likely to be held next Thursday, with the intention of assisting member states in determining whether to call for an emergency special session as a possible next step.

Looking ahead, on the chemical weapons track, the mandate of the UN-Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), the body instructed to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, ends on 31 October, with a final report due on 21 October. Preliminary conclusions in previous JIM reports, and the determination by the OPCW's Director-General that Syria's declared chemical weapons arsenal cannot be considered accurate and complete, means that the Council will soon be in a position to consider whether Syria is in breach of resolutions 2118, 2209 and 2235, and whether the Council should pursue "further measures", commonly understood to mean sanctions. However, most Council members feel certain that if such a draft resolution were tabled for a vote it would be vetoed by Russia.

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