

Syria: A Council Divided

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What's In Blue

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The Security Council's engagement on Syria during the past week has represented one of the body's most divisive periods in the post-Cold War era, triggered by an alleged chemical weapons attack on the city of Douma, in Eastern Ghouta, on 7 April. Following three draft resolutions that failed to be adopted on 10 April (Tuesday)—one because of a Russian veto and two that did not have the minimum nine votes for adoption, including the negative votes of the P3—, meetings were held on Syria on 12 April (Thursday) and 13 April (Friday) without any headway made in addressing the use of chemical weapons in the country. A fourth draft resolution tabled by Russia and condemning airstrikes conducted on Friday by France, the UK and the US on chemical weapons storage and production facilities in Syria, failed to be adopted on Saturday following a meeting on the airstrikes.

The series of meetings began on Monday (9 April) when the Council met for a briefing by Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura and the Deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Thomas Markram. The next day (10 April) was the vote on the three draft resolutions. Two of the three drafts that failed to be adopted were competing ones (by Russia and the US) aimed at establishing a UN Independent Mechanism of Investigation (UNIMI) regarding the use of chemical weapons. The third was a Russian draft resolution regarding the investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into the reported use of chemical weapons in Douma. (*For more information, please see the following What's In Blue stories: [Briefing on Alleged Chemical Weapons Attack](#) and [Vote on Competing Drafts](#).)*

The Council then met on Thursday (12 April) at the request of Bolivia, supported by China and Russia, amidst concerns that the US was planning to respond militarily. In requesting the meeting, which took place under the agenda item “maintenance of international peace and security”, Bolivia cited the recent escalation of rhetoric regarding Syria and the threat of the use of unilateral actions as the reason for holding the meeting.

At the meeting, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs ad interim, Tayé-Brook Zerihoun, briefed Council members in consultations on the content of a letter circulated by Secretary-General António Guterres to Council members the day before ([S/2018/333](#)). In the letter, Guterres expressed his “deep disappointment that the Security Council was unable to agree upon a dedicated mechanism to attribute responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria”. He appealed to the Council to not give up on efforts to agree upon a dedicated, impartial, objective and independent mechanism for attributing responsibility, and conveyed his readiness to support such efforts.

During the meeting, the divisions in the Council were clear. Some Council members expressed concern at the risk of unilateral actions and the threats made over the previous days, while others focused on the government's violation of international humanitarian law, particularly through the use of chemical weapons. A third group of Council members emphasised the importance of exhausting diplomatic means and respecting the UN Charter.

The next day (Friday, 13 April), at the request of Russia, Guterres briefed the Council under the agenda item "Threats to international peace and security: the situation in the Middle East". At the meeting, Guterres said that "the cold war is back with a vengeance" and warned that "the mechanisms and safeguards to manage the risks of escalation in the past no longer seem to be present". He stressed that "increasing tensions and the inability to reach a compromise in the establishment of an accountability mechanism threaten to lead to a full-blown military escalation". The same Council dynamics seen during the consultations the day before were on display during the public meeting.

Over the week there were suggestions that these Council meetings might serve to de-escalate the situation in spite of the increasingly vitriolic tone of some members' statements. However, on Friday night, the US, along with France and the UK, carried out more than a hundred airstrikes against Syria military facilities, reportedly involved in the storage and production of chemical weapons.

Following the attack, Russia requested a briefing by the Secretary-General the next morning (Saturday, 14 April). There was considerable discussion during the session of the responsibilities of states under international law. Guterres reminded member states of their obligation to act consistently in line with the UN Charter and international law in general, and he urged member states to show restraint and to avoid military escalation. The views expressed by Council members fell into three distinct categories. Some members (Bolivia, China, and Russia, among others) criticised the airstrikes as a violation of the sovereignty of a member state, referring to them as a violation of the UN Charter. For example, Russia in its statement said that: "the US and its allies continue to demonstrate blatant disregard for international law." It further denied that the chemical weapons attack in Douma took place and argued that the airstrikes undermined the Council.

Other Council members justified the airstrikes (the P3 and Poland), with at least one member characterising them as understandable (the Netherlands) because of the use of chemical weapons. France stated that Syria had violated international law with regard to the use of chemical weapons, that the "UN Charter was not designed to protect criminals", and that the airstrikes were in line with the goals and values of the Charter. The UK stated that the legal basis for the use of force was humanitarian intervention, noting that it is hard to believe that it can be within the purposes of the UN Charter to use or condone the use of chemical weapons. The UK further argued that, in its view, it cannot be illegal to use force to prevent the killing of so many innocent people. The US declared that it remained ready to enforce its red line should the government continue to use chemical

weapons against its own people. The third group of Council members emphasised the importance of abiding by the principles of the UN Charter and international law, but did not address directly the legality of the airstrikes.

The Russian draft tabled at the end of the meeting condemned the “aggression” against Syria by the US and its allies in violation of international law and the UN Charter. The draft was not adopted, failing to garner nine votes and receiving negative votes from all P3 members. Only three Council members voted in favour of the draft (Bolivia, China and Russia) and four abstained (Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan and Peru). The remaining Council members voted against the draft.

Given the clear polarisation of the Council, the way forward seems unclear, although some Council members continue to search for a way to break the impasse. Ahead of the 12 April meeting, Sweden circulated a new version of elements of a draft resolution that they had shared with the Council on 9 April. The draft included a request to the Secretary-General to immediately dispatch a high-level disarmament mission to Syria to address “all outstanding issues on the use of chemical weapons once and for all on its territory”. While Syria submitted an initial declaration of its chemical weapons stockpile in 2013, the OPCW considered it incomplete. The Swedish draft also built on the Secretary-General’s willingness to support efforts to establish a new mechanism by inviting him to submit to the Council, within 10 days, a proposal reflecting the views of Council members. While the draft remains on the table, Council members have not engaged seriously on it. The retreat of Council members with the Secretary-General in Sweden this weekend may provide an opportunity for a frank and unscripted discussion on Syria and the way forward for the Council.

As announced during the 14 April briefing, France, the UK and the US circulated a draft resolution incorporating elements on all the three Syria dossiers—chemical weapons, humanitarian, and political—in an attempt to chart the way forward. The first round of negotiations took place yesterday. It is unclear if this draft will be put to a vote in the near future. If positions remain unchanged, this would most likely result in yet another failed resolution on Syria.

Meanwhile, this afternoon the Council will receive a briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Russia requested the meeting with the objective of discussing the situation in Raqqa and in the Rukban camp, which shelters tens of thousands of internally displaced persons in the berm. Russia has repeatedly called the Council’s attention to the destruction of Raqqa by the US-led coalition to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. It has also criticised the US for the difficulties of ensuring access to civilians in Rukban, given the camp’s proximity to the US military base of Al-Tanf.

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