Committee: Security Council

Topic: The Situation in the Middle East” (Syria)

Goal: De-escalation of the Offensive in South-West Syria

Chairs: Mihai-Bogdan Puscas (Sweden), Nadejda Karpenko (Sweden)

Place of Conference: Austria, Vienna – United Nations Headquater

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1. Introduction

Under the Charter, the Security Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has 15 Members, and each Member has one vote. Under the Charter, all Member States are obligated to comply with Council decisions.

The Security Council takes the lead in determining the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression. It calls upon the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means and recommends methods of adjustment or terms of settlement. In some cases, the Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorize the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security.

The Security Council also recommends to the General Assembly the appointment of the Secretary-General and the admission of new Members to the United Nations. And, together with the General Assembly, it elects the judges of the International Court of Justice.¹

On October 24, 1945, the victors of World War II — China, the U.S.S.R., France, the United Kingdom, and the United States — ratified the UN Charter, creating the Security Council and establishing themselves as its five permanent members with the unique ability to veto resolutions. Originally there were six temporary members, rotating every two years and distributed on an equitable geographic basis. That rule was more explicitly defined in 1965, when the number of temporary members was increased to ten (five from Africa and Asia, one from Eastern Europe, two from Latin America and the Caribbean, and two from Western Europe). The first temporary members were Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Poland.

The Charter also established the purpose of the Council, to “investigate any dispute, or any situation which might lead to international friction or give rise to a dispute, in order to determine whether the continuance of the dispute or situation is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security” and to act accordingly, by:

- Investigating any situation threatening international peace;
- Recommending procedures for peaceful resolution of a dispute;

¹http://www.un.org/en/sc/
• Calling upon other member nations to completely or partially interrupt economic relations as well as sea, air, postal, and radio communications, or to sever diplomatic relations;
• Enforcing its decisions militarily, if necessary.

On January 17, 1946, the Security Council met for the first time in London. The first UN peacekeeping mission was deployed in 1948 to the Middle East; there have been 50 more. Over the last 60 years, the Security Council has taken action to defuse innumerable international crises, the most recent of which include those in North Korea, Iran, and Lebanon. 

Article 27 of the UN Charter, and rule 40 of the Provisional Rules of Procedure, concern voting in the Security Council. Most Security Council resolutions are adopted by vote. In general, to be adopted, a draft resolution on a non-procedural matter must have the affirmative vote of nine members of the Council, including the concurring votes of the five permanent members: China, France, Russian Federation, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America.

A draft does not pass:
• if the draft fails to win nine votes, or
• if a permanent member casts a negative vote (veto)

Following a vote, the President of the Security Council announces the result. The way the vote result is announced indicates whether a veto was exercised (emphasis added).

**Adopted**

"There were 14 votes in favour and one abstaining. The draft resolution has been adopted as resolution 2244 (2015)."

**Vetoed**

"There were 11 votes in favour, 1 vote against and 3 abstentions. The draft resolution has not been adopted, owing to the negative vote of a permanent member of the Council."

**Not adopted**

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"There were 8 votes in favour, 2 votes against and 5 abstentions. The draft resolution has not been adopted, having failed to obtain the required number of votes."

Procedural matter

"There were 10 votes in favour, 4 votes against and 1 abstention. The provisional agenda has been adopted."³

2. Backgrounds

Since the conflict erupted in March 2011, Syria has witnessed unprecedented devastation and displacement. More than 5 million Syrians have fled the country and 6 million are internally displaced. With more than 13 million people in need of assistance, the conflict has caused untold suffering for Syrian men, women and children.

- Conflict, in its eighth year, has produced more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees and 6.1 million internally displaced people (as of March 2018).

³http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/voting
• At the end of 2017, more than half the country’s hospitals, clinics and primary health care centres were only partially functioning or had been damaged beyond repair.

UN Action at a Glance

• The Security Council takes the lead on political action on Syria. In 2017, the 15-member body discussed Syria 33 times – the most frequent topic – in informal consultations. Since 2012, the Council has adopted 23 resolutions on Syria or largely related to Syria.

• UN has convened 8 rounds of intra-Syrian talks since 2016 to find a political solution to the conflict.

• In 2017, UN-led humanitarian convoys reached 820,200 people inside Syria.

Key players and regional dynamics

Iranian forces and Hizbollah have fought in Syria in support of the Assad regime since 2012. Israel viewed these developments by its regional adversaries with concern, particularly since Russia’s 2015 military intervention turned the war in the Syrian regime’s favour. The Israeli leadership is convinced that this will tilt the balance of power in the entire region in Iran’s favour, and could alter the character of the strategic threats it is facing for the worse.

Since late 2017, Israel has launched, at an increasing pace, strikes against suspected Iranian assets in Syria that appear to aim at disrupting the build-up of Iranian military infrastructure. The most significant Israeli operation occurred on 10 May, when it carried out “Operation House of Cards” against tens of purported Iranian facilities across Syria. The operation came in response to what Israel claimed was a barrage of missiles launched by Iranian forces at military installations in the Israeli-occupied Golan, and was later described in media reporting as retaliation by Syria for earlier Israeli strikes against Madinat Baath.

Threats emerging from Iran-supported militias near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights are a particular concern for Israel. A south-western ceasefire, negotiated and announced by the U.S., Russia and Jordan, went into effect in July 2017, the first step towards a broader de-escalation agreement. A month later, the three states agreed to establish the “Amman Monitoring Centre” in Jordan to jointly supervise the ceasefire. On 8 November, the three concluded a memorandum formalising the deal’s terms (though neither the original ceasefire agreement nor subsequent memorandum has been made public). The de-escalation silenced the Syrian war’s southern front, freezing the south west’s frontlines and establishing a buffer zone to be free of “foreign forces and foreign fighters”. Within the de-
escalation zone, the buffer is supposed to extend five kilometres from the current line of contact between the Syrian regime and opposition forces and ten kilometres from the Jordanian border and armistice line demarcating the Israeli-occupied Golan; the parties to the de-escalation discussed expanding the five-kilometre buffer to 20 kilometres, but arrangements were never finalised. By mid-2018, the ceasefire agreement was in danger of collapse, as Syrian military forces massed on the edges of opposition-held areas in preparation for an offensive to retake them. Yet the regime’s ambition has been tempered by the risk of triggering an Israeli response and prospects for a negotiated resolution.4

3. Resolution 2401 and Latest Agreements

The latest resolution on Syria has been adopted unanimously on 24 February 2018. Resolution 2401, which was drafted by Kuwait and Sweden, demands that all parties cease hostilities without delay and engage immediately to ensure full and comprehensive implementation of this demand for a durable humanitarian pause of at least 30 consecutive days throughout Syria.

Resolution 2401 also demands that, immediately after the start of the cessation of hostilities, all parties allow safe, unimpeded and sustained access each week to the humanitarian convoys of the UN and its implementing partners, including to hard-to-reach and besieged locations.

According to the resolution, the UN and its implementing partners are to be allowed to undertake safe, unconditional medical evacuations, based on medical need and urgency. However, no medical evacuations have taken place since the resolution’s adoption. The government continues to remove medical supplies from humanitarian convoys, preventing treatment.5

The alleged 7 April chemical weapons attack in Douma led to one of the Council’s most divisive periods in the post-Cold War era. In an effort to address the Council’s polarisation, Syria was added to the agenda of the Secretary-General’s retreat with Council members that took place in Backåkra, Sweden, on 21-22 April. Although Council members agreed at the

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4https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/golan-heights
retreat on press elements on the political and humanitarian situation and on the use of chemical weapons, it is unclear whether they will be able to engage constructively on this file. P5 members have started to meet regularly on Syria at the ambassadorial level, but substantive divisions persist and the meetings have yet to result in any outcome.\textsuperscript{6}

7July 2017: The United States, Russia and Jordan have agreed to foster a cease-fire in a limited area of southwestern Syria. The agreement came after months of negotiations among the three countries. The agreement was a “first indication of the U.S. and Russia being able to work together in Syria”.

The agreement hinges on a boundary line — as set by the United States, Russia and Jordan — between areas of control for the warring forces and state proxies. Moscow has assured the United States that the government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria will abide by the agreement, the official said. The assent of the government in Damascus came even though the United States continues to insist that neither Mr. Assad, nor any member of his family, can have a long-term role in the country’s leadership.

Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, later said the cease-fire would take effect from midnight to noon local time on Sunday in the areas of Daraa, Quneitra and Sweida in Syria along the Jordanian border. “At first, security around this de-escalation zone will be guaranteed by the forces and means of the Russian military police, in coordination with the Americans and Jordanians,” he said. The official said the cease-fire was, at best, a modest advance in ending the conflict. Still, southwestern Syria has experienced far less violence than in other parts of the country during the war, so the areas the cease-fire will cover is by no means at the heart of the conflict.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{6}https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-06/syria_55.php
\textsuperscript{7}https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/politics/syria-ceasefire-agreement.html
4. Latest developments

4.1. General

The Syrian army battled rebels in an important town in southwest Syria on 21st of June a media unit run by its ally Hezbollah and a war monitor said, as intensifying air strikes killed dozens of people in the area. President Bashar al-Assad has sworn to take back every inch of Syria, and recapturing the southwest, one of the first hotbeds of the uprising against him, would leave rebels with only one remaining stronghold, in the northwest.
The area is in a “de-escalation zone” agreed last year by the United States, Jordan and Assad’s ally Russia to curb fighting. But despite American warnings that it would respond to an attack, it has not done so. Vassily Nebenzia, Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations, indicated that Russia would no longer uphold the de-escalation zone, saying it was among the last strongholds of al Qaeda’s Syrian branch and Islamic State, and the Syrian army has a “legitimate right” to fight “terrorists.”

Insurgent territory in the southwest is strung along the borders with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, narrowing to only a few kilometers wide at the city of Deraa. The Hezbollah media unit said the army had captured the town of al-Harak, northeast of Deraa. The Observatory said it had advanced into the town’s center but fighting continued. A rebel official said the army and allied militia were also seeking to cut insurgent ground in the southwest in two by storming an air base close to the Jordanian border.8

The Special Envoy for Syria warned the Security Council today that a full-scale battle in the country’s previously calm south-west could engulf an area and population the size of eastern Ghouta and Aleppo combined, adding that events seemed to be moving in that direction.9

4.2. Importance

Israel’s primary interest in Syria is to prevent a strategic Iranian military presence across Syria, including Iranian construction of military infrastructure and cultivation of local partner forces. Since late 2017 it has targeted Iranian assets in Syria at an increasing pace. These attacks have drawn retaliation, including by Iran, creating the risk that a spiral of escalation will lead to open war between Israel and Iran, which could spill over into Lebanon. In Syria’s south west specifically, Israel has sought to keep Iranian and Iranian-linked forces away from the Golan armistice line, and the risk of Israeli military strikes triggering a broader escalation stands out as the most consequential uncertainty in an attempt by the Assad regime to retake the area from rebel groups.10

4.3. International Reaction

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10https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/golan-heights
Warfare in southwestern Syria is sensitive to neighboring Jordan and Israel, though government bombardments so far have not focused on territory nearest to the Golan Heights.

In Riyadh, the chief Syrian opposition negotiator Nasr al-Hariri condemned “U.S. silence” over the offensive in the de-escalation zone, comparing it to Washington's prompt use of force against attacks on forces it is allied to elsewhere.  

Israel wants Iranian forces and Tehran-backed militia kept far from its border. Prime Minister Netanyahu told the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, "that Israel would continue to act against the establishment of an Iranian military presence in Syria". Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, asserted that "we have good communication and coordination with Russia and with the Syrian government and we will continue to do so. Our objective here is very clear, that is our objectives and the objective of the Russian Federation and that is to fight terrorism and extremism".

A U.S. State Department official said Russia had agreed to work with Damascus to remove such forces a defined distance from the Israeli and Jordanian borders, and from opposition-held territory in the southwest. “However, we have not yet seen this take place,” the official said. There was no immediate comment on civilian deaths from the air strikes from Damascus or Moscow, which have said they only target armed militants in the seven-year conflict.

Abu Jihad, a local opposition official near the border, said the violence since the 27th of June had forced at least 11,000 people to flee their homes and towns. If the escalation continues, he said, people would head closer to the frontiers with Jordan and the Golan. A Jordanian official said the Jordanian army had stepped up its state of readiness at the border. The country already hosts more than 650,000 registered Syrian refugees and said it will not open the border for more.

4.4. Reaction of the UN
The following statement was issued on June 29, 2018 by the Spokesman for UN Secretary-General António Guterres:

The Secretary-General is deeply alarmed by the military offensive in south-western Syria and its devastating toll on civilians. He calls for an immediate cessation of the military operations. The Secretary-General recalls that the south-west area of Syria is part of a de-escalation agreement agreed between Jordan, Russian Federation and the United States in Amman in July 2017, and calls on its guarantors to uphold their commitments.

The Secretary-General calls on all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law, protect civilians and facilitate safe, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access. All stakeholders must immediately stop attacks directed against medical and educational facilities and put in place security conditions for United Nations cross-border humanitarian deliveries to resume without further delay.

The Secretary-General urges the international community to unite to put an end to this expanding conflict, which risks further destabilizing the region and worsening the deep humanitarian crisis in Syria and neighbouring States. He calls upon all concerned to focus on moving the political process forward, building on the recent consultations in Geneva. The Secretary-General and his Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, will continue to do their utmost in the pursuit of this goal.14

John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said the number of displaced people could nearly double if the fighting continued. Dozens of civilians had been reported killed, while civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, had come under attack. Despite the hostilities, however, the United Nations and its partners were providing core relief to more than 400,000 people in southern Syria from across the border in Jordan, he said. While the geographic space for operations had shrunk as south-eastern areas transitioned to Government control, the number of people supported by the United Nations had grown. “For many people in need in the south of Syria and in the north-west, cross-border operations remain a lifeline,” he added.

In the ensuing dialogue, delegates decried the intensified fighting within the south-western de-escalation zone negotiated by the United States, Jordan, and the Russian Federation in 2017. Expressing deep concern over Syria’s new offensive, directly supported by the Russian Federation, the representative of the United States said claims that more than half of the zone was controlled by terrorists were “just not true” and urged Moscow to uphold the ceasefire it had helped to create.

The Russian Federation’s representative, on the other hand, said life was being restored with “robust” assistance from his country, especially in Damascus and near Homs. Homes were being rebuilt in eastern Ghouta, but in the south-west, the terrorist group Al-Nusrah had attacked Syrian military personnel, while jihadists had shelled Dara’a and other areas that had embraced de-escalation. No cessation-of-hostilities regime had ever stipulated a pause in fighting terrorists, he emphasized.

Syria’s delegate said the Special Envoy had failed to consider combating terrorism a priority, despite the fact that Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh), under the protection of the United States, and Al-Nusrah, under the protection of the United States, Israel and others, were present in the country. Terrorists had carried out attacks in Dara’a and other places in what was being called south-west Syria and it was the duty of Syria’s army to respond, he added.15

5. Questions Resolution Must Answer (QRMAs)

The current divisions inside the Counsil raises the question whether it will be able to work constructively on Syria in the foreseeable future. Council dynamics on Syria continue to be characterized by increased polarization on the three files through which the conflict is discussed: political, humanitarian and chemical weapons.

While divided for more than seven years, the Council has still been able to unite around certain aspects, such as setting the agenda for a political process and authorising cross-border deliveries.

Questions

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1. How to increase pressure on the parties to the conflict and find a compromise that is both realistic and acceptable to all?

2. How to enforce or insure a more strict and systematic implementation of the Resolution 2401 (cease hostilities, humanitarian pauses etc.)?

3. Should the mechanism for the investigation of alleged use of chemical and biological weapons be mobilized in the light of the attack in Douma and similar cases?

6. Additional Readings

In this part of the Study Guide we provided some information you can use for your further research. We collected links, for a better & wider overview, concerning the points we described before.


- Syria, Turkey and Iran: Regional Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict, https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/view/187621, last seen on 21/07/2018


- Syria civil war: ‘Grand bargain’ expected at Trump-Putin Helsinki summit fails to materialise, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/syria-civil-war-trump-putin-meeting-us-russia-deal-a8452056.html, last seen on 20/07/2018


Can Syria’s Chemical Weapons Be Stopped?, https://www.cfr.org/interview/can-syrrias-chemical-weapons-be-stopped, last seen on 17/07/2018

Syria's war: Who controls what?, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/05/syria-country-divided-150529144229467.html, last seen on 21/07/2018

Israel’s Southern Syria Decision Time, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/israels-southern-syria-decision-time, last seen on 20/07/2018


The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/05/09/the-limits-of-russian-strategy-in-the-middle-east/, last seen on 20/07/2018

Syria's War: The Descent Into Horror, https://www.cfr.org/interactives/syrrias-civil-war-descent-into-horror#!/syrrias-civil-war-descent-into-horror, last seen on 01/07/2018

Lost in the Middle East, https://www.cfr.org/blog/lost-middle-east, last seen on 01/07/2018