

July 2021 Monthly Forecast

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Posted 30 June 2021

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In July, the Security Council expects to hold its monthly meetings on the political and humanitarian situations and the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The cross-border humanitarian assistance delivery mechanism through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border, as mandated by [resolution 2533](#) of 11 July 2020, expires on 10 July. The Council is expected to vote on a draft resolution to renew the delivery of cross-border aid.

Key Recent Developments

With the impending expiration of resolution 2533, Syria's humanitarian crisis has been an important focus of global politics. Key amongst recent developments was the 16 June summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. While no concrete outcomes from that meeting were announced, a US official confirmed on 17 June that the two presidents discussed humanitarian access in Syria. Noting that there had been no commitments on the issue, the US official assessed that "it was a constructive conversation" and that there was "scope for the US and Russia to work together on a positive outcome so that [a] resolution gets passed". Finally, he suggested that the US and Russia could work together on "other measures to alleviate the suffering of the people of Syria".

In early June, Turkey and Russia also held bilateral talks in Moscow over, amongst other issues, Turkey's role in facilitating cross-line access for humanitarian assistance—namely, aid that traverses a domestic frontline from Syrian government-held areas into areas outside government control in northwest or northeast Syria. On 22 June, international media reported that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Secretary-General António Guterres that "the situation where Turkey in reality fully controls the provision of humanitarian assistance to Syria is...unacceptable". He further noted that, "with the connivance of Ankara", Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the largest armed group operating in Syria's northwest, has been "obstruct[ing] sustainable deliveries from inside the country". HTS has been designated a terrorist organisation by the Security Council, the US, Russia and Turkey.

On 23 June, the Council met to discuss the humanitarian situation in Syria with a focus on cross-border humanitarian access. Briefing the Council via videoconference (VTC), Guterres appealed to the Council to renew the cross-border mechanism for another year,

stating that “a failure to extend the Council’s authorisation would have devastating consequences”. He also noted that greater humanitarian access was needed, arguing that it is “important...to maintain and expand access, including cross-border and cross-line operations”. Ramesh Rajasingham, Acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, described in greater detail the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Addressing the northwest’s humanitarian situation, he assessed that “there is simply no substitute for the cross-border operation”.

Briefing the Council on 25 June, Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen highlighted Syria’s difficult economic, security and humanitarian conditions. Calling on the parties to the conflict to implement the nationwide ceasefire, he highlighted the 12 June attack on the largest hospital in Syria’s north in Afrin, in which 18 people were killed and critical healthcare infrastructure was damaged. He also called on the Council to renew the cross-border mechanism for a period of 12 months, stating that “your unity on [renewal of the cross-border mechanism] will be critical”. “The same unity”, Pedersen noted, “is needed for the political process”. Pedersen called for a “new constructive international dialogue... to discuss concrete steps—steps that should be reciprocal and mutual, defined with realism and precision, implemented in parallel, and which are verifiable”. He announced his intention to undertake “exploratory substantive consultations” to “identify...steps that Syrian and international players could deliver”.

Finally, on 3 June, the Council heard a briefing via VTC from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Director-General Fernando Arias. Arias reiterated the view that Syria’s declarations to the OPCW on its chemical weapons programs could not be considered accurate and complete. He also briefed on a wide variety of activities that the OPCW was undertaking regarding the Syria chemical weapons file. He reminded Council members that the OPCW “is never a court or a tribunal” but instead “provides the international community with materials that will assist accountability”. The OPCW’s work, he added, was done “under extraordinarily difficult conditions”, including “numerous and sophisticated cyberattacks..., the massive spread of disinformation about [the OPCW’s] work and sometimes even the denigration of some staff members of the organization”.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During its 47th session, the Human Rights Council is expected to receive an oral update on 6 July from the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Key Issues and Options

The main issue for the Council in July will be the renewal of resolution 2533. Given the ongoing and increasingly dire humanitarian situation in Syria’s northwest and northeast, as well as the need for equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations into areas outside Syrian government control, the Council may wish to re-authorise not only the Bab al-Hawa border crossing but also the Bab al-Salam and Al-Yarubiyah crossing points. Another option would be for the Council to re-authorise only two crossings. Finally, in the

absence of an agreement amongst Council members to expand access to cross-border humanitarian deliveries, the Council could adopt a technical rollover of 2533, authorising the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for another 12 months.

In addition, despite strong disagreements on the progress achieved by, and the future of, the Constitutional Committee and the broader political track of work, Council members may wish to organise a closed session of the Council on the political situation in order to assess frankly the effect that the cross-border renewal process could have on the wider dynamics of the Syria conflict.

Council Dynamics

Even with a positive outcome on the renewal of the cross-border mechanism, negotiations are likely to expose the deep divisions over Syria that exist on the Council. Last July, dynamics around the re-authorisation of the Syria cross-border humanitarian aid delivery mechanism were tense and extremely difficult. While the Council succeeded in adopting resolution 2533, it came only after a week of acrimonious negotiations and four failed draft resolutions.

This year, Council members' positions do not appear to have shifted markedly. During recent Council meetings on the humanitarian situation in Syria, most Council members emphasise the importance of renewing the UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism, arguing that its scope and size cannot be replaced. France, the UK and the US have stressed the need to expand the mechanism by re-authorising the Bab al-Salam crossing on the Turkish-Syrian border and the Al-Yarubiyah crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border, which the Council failed to re-authorise in 2020.

Along with the dual issues of which border crossings may be re-authorised and the length of the cross-border mechanism's mandate, the status of cross-line deliveries is likely to be amongst the most difficult issues during negotiations. Russia has maintained that cross-line deliveries can adequately provide assistance to those in need, while most other Council members, echoing the position of the Secretary-General, OCHA and other UN bodies, contend that even regular cross-line deliveries would remain insufficient in providing the level of humanitarian assistance offered by the cross-border operation.

While many Council members have assiduously worked to maintain a clear separation of the Syrian political and chemical weapons files from the humanitarian file, it is possible that a positive breakthrough around the renewal of the cross-border mechanism could augur well for future Council dynamics on the other Syria files. Contrariwise, a failure to renew the mechanism could worsen the Council's overall difficult dynamics on Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 July 2020 <u>S/RES/2533</u>	This resolution renewed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing (Syria/Turkey) until 10 July 2021. Twelve members voted in favour of the resolution, while three members (China, the Dominican Republic and Russia) abstained.
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Secretary-General's Reports

17 June 2021 <u>S/2021/583</u>	This was the regular 60-day report on the implementation of humanitarian resolutions by all parties to the conflict in Syria.
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Security Council Meeting Records

3 June 2021 <u>S/PV.8785</u>	This was a was a meeting on Syria chemical weapons
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