

December 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In December, the Council will receive the monthly Syria briefings on the humanitarian situation, political developments, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Council members are expected to negotiate the renewal of the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access, which was most recently extended through resolution 2449 adopted on 13 December 2018 and which expires on 10 January 2020.

Key Recent Developments

The security and humanitarian situation in north-eastern Syria remains challenging and fluid. Since late October, Russian and Turkish troops have continued to patrol sections of Syria's north-eastern border with Turkey. Having withdrawn its forces from areas near the Syria-Turkish border in October, the US subsequently decided to maintain a military presence in Syria with the declared goal of fighting terrorism and protecting oil fields. Since Turkey initiated its military campaign on 9 October, OCHA has reported that 190,000 people have been displaced, of whom—at press time—over 74,000 remain displaced, while 14,000 have gone across the border into Iraq.

After Russia announced a unilateral ceasefire in north-western Syria on 30 August, the level of violence decreased. However, recent weeks have seen an uptick in fighting in north-western Syria, where there are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). On 20 November, a missile reportedly fired from Syrian government territory hit an IDP camp in Kah, killing at least 12 civilians.

On 30 October, the Syria Constitutional Committee was launched in Geneva. It consists of 150 participants, with 50 each from the government, the opposition, and civil society. During the meeting to initiate the Committee, Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen reiterated that this is a Syrian-owned and led process, while the Committee agreed on the 45 participants who will make up the “Small Group”, the constitution-drafting body. On 8 November, Pedersen held a press conference in which he noted that Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, its state institutions, the rule of law, and terrorism, among other issues, were discussed by the Small Group during its first week of deliberations. The Small Group is expected to reconvene on 25 November.

In a 31 October television interview, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that while the pro-government group of the Constitutional Committee “represents the viewpoint of the Syrian government...the Syrian government is not part of these negotiations nor of these

discussions”.

Secretary-General António Guterres met with Turkish President Recep Erdoğan in Istanbul on 1 November. During the meeting, Erdoğan shared a Turkish plan to resettle refugees who have been in Turkey. Guterres said that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) would study the plan and discuss it with Turkish officials. He also emphasised principles related to the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees.

Fernando Arias, the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and Izumi Nakamitsu, the Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, briefed the Security Council on the use of chemical weapons in Syria in a private meeting on 5 November. Arias apparently noted that there are gaps in Syria’s declaration of its chemical weapons stocks. He said that the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), established to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria following a June 2018 decision of the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), was focusing its work on nine incidents..

On 22 November, the Council adopted a presidential statement welcoming the briefing of the Director-General of the OPCW and reaffirming its strong support for the Chemical Weapons Convention and for the work of the OPCW in accordance with the Convention.

On 14 November, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock briefed the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria. He said that it was critical that the provisions of resolution 2165, which authorised the delivery of cross-border and cross-line aid, be renewed. In this connection, he stated: “Without the cross-border operation, we would see an immediate end of aid that is supporting millions of civilians; that would cause a rapid increase in hunger and disease. A lot more people would flood across the borders, making an existing crisis in the region even worse”.

On 22 November, Special Envoy Pedersen and Sabah al-Hallak, a Syrian activist who serves on the Constitutional Committee, briefed during the Council’s monthly meeting on the Syria political track. Pedersen called launch of the Constitutional Committee a “sign of hope for the Syrian people” but expressed concern about renewed violence in the country and said that if “confidence is to develop among the Syrian people in the political process, the dynamics on the ground need to begin to change”. Al-Hallak, speaking in her capacity as a board member of the Syrian Women’s League and a founding member of the Syrian League for Citizenship, described the devastating impact of the conflict on civilians, especially women and girls. She urged the Council to pressure all parties to the conflict to adhere to international law.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 8 November, a spokesperson for the High Commissioner for Human Rights said that dozens of people had been killed and injured in north-eastern and north-western Syria from a variety of causes, including airstrikes, ground-based strikes, and increasingly indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices in populated areas, including in local markets. From the 9 October launch of the Turkish-led military offensive in north-eastern Syria until 5 November, at least 92 civilians in northern and north-eastern Syria had been killed, the spokesperson said. Meanwhile, following a lull in hostilities in Idlib governorate during October, there was an upsurge in airstrikes and ground-based strikes in early November, mostly in parts of southern and western Idlib, including attacks affecting medical facilities, he added.

Key Issues and Options

The delivery of cross-border and cross-line humanitarian aid, originally authorised through resolution [2165](#) in July 2014 and renewed several times since then, will be a key issue in the Council this month. While the current authorisation under resolution [2449](#) expires on 10 January 2020, it appears that the humanitarian penholders—Belgium, Germany and Kuwait—will seek a renewal of the mandate in December, in keeping with past practice. In considering the mandate, the Council could emphasise the importance of maintaining the four currently-used border crossings.

Another important issue is how the Council can most effectively support the Special Envoy's work, including as facilitator of the Constitutional Committee. In this regard, members may underscore the need to create an environment conducive to negotiations through measures outlined in resolution [2254](#), which established a framework for a political process leading to a new constitution and elections. These measures include an end to attacks on civilian infrastructure, including medical facilities; a nationwide cease-fire, and confidence-building measures.

In the future, the Council will also need to consider how to approach a potential repatriation of Syrian refugees now in Turkey to north-eastern Syria. They may continue to reaffirm the importance of the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees in accordance with international law. One option that members could consider is an informal meeting with UNHCR to familiarise themselves with Turkey's resettlement plan and hear UNHCR's views on the plan.

Council Dynamics

There is widespread agreement in the Council that the formation of the constitutional committee is a positive development, although several members have noted that this is only the first step in a broader political process that should lead to free and fair elections under UN supervision. Other issues that many members believe must be addressed to accompany a successful political process include unfettered humanitarian access, a cessation of hostilities, the release of detainees, the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the threat of terrorism. Several members, such as France, the UK, and the US, have emphasised that reconstruction aid will not be provided to Syria unless there is a legitimate political solution to the conflict.

Most Council members have increasingly emphasised the critical importance of cross-border humanitarian assistance in recent weeks, given that December is the month when this authorisation is typically renewed. In this respect, a wide range of Council members explicitly called for a renewal of the cross-border mechanism during the 14 November humanitarian briefing. Speaking on behalf of the humanitarian penholders, Ambassador Marc Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium) called the renewal “of prime importance” and said that this “mechanism continues to allow the United Nations and its partners to ensure that life-saving assistance reaches millions of people”.

The successive reauthorisations of cross-border aid have not been without controversy, however. In 2017, Russia, China and Bolivia abstained on this reauthorisation (S/RES/2393), while Russia and China abstained on resolution 2449, which renewed the authorisation for cross-border assistance in 2018. In explaining its vote in 2018, Russia expressed concern that the resolution did not reflect that the aid delivery mechanism eventually needed to be removed given “new realities” in Syria. It asked, for example, why the Dar’a-Ramtha crossing—which is on the Syria/Jordan border—should continue to be covered by the resolution when Syria had control of its side of the border. China, for its part, said during the 14 November briefing that the mechanism “could benefit from greater transparency” and that improved coordination with the Syrian government would ensure that only humanitarian aid comes into the country and that it is not diverted to terrorist groups. Lowcock said at the same Council meeting that the cross-border aid delivery system “is one of the most closely scrutinized...in the world” and that “evidence of systemic aid diversion” had not been detected.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 December 2018 S/RES/2449	This was a resolution prepared by Sweden and Kuwait renewing the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria.
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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.
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Security Council Presidential Statements

22 November 2019 S/PRST/2019/14	This statement reaffirmed the Council’s strong support for the Chemical Weapons Convention and for the work of the OPCW in accordance with the Convention.
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8 October 2019 S/PRST/2019/12	This was a presidential statement welcoming the Secretary-General’s announcement of the formation of the Constitutional Committee.
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Security Council Meeting Records

14 November 2019 S/PV.8664	This was a meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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6 November
2019S/PV.8659

This was the communiqué issued on the private meeting on the use of chemical weapons in Syria.