

August 2017 Monthly Forecast

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Posted 31 July 2017

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In August, Council members expect to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria as well as on chemical weapons.

Key Recent Developments

Despite the announcement in early May by Iran, Russia and Turkey of the establishment of four de-escalation areas in Syria, a 4-5 July meeting in Astana ended without agreement on the delineation of the areas or their monitoring mechanisms. On 7 July, the US and Russia, along with Jordan, announced the establishment of a ceasefire agreement in southwestern Syria. While details regarding the implementation of the agreement are still being discussed, Russian military police units have deployed along the perimeter of the de-escalation zone. On 22 July, Russia and Egypt brokered a ceasefire agreement in Eastern Ghouta. Despite the deployment of Russian military police, the government reportedly conducted airstrikes the next day. Taking control of Eastern Ghouta has been a longstanding objective of the government given its strategic location near Damascus. The different actors on the ground, which include Al-Nusra Front's latest iteration Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) along with moderate opposition groups, make it challenging to separate out the armed groups protected by the terms of the ceasefire.

Although violence has subsided in some parts of Syria, the situation has continued to deteriorate in other areas including the east of Al-Sweida. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has repeatedly warned against the parties taking advantage of existing ambiguities to make territorial gains or divert resources to other strategic battlefronts. During consultations on 14 July, de Mistura also emphasised the need to ensure that the de-escalation areas are a temporary measure and highlighted the importance of preserving the national unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

From 10 to 14 July, de Mistura convened the seventh round of the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva. Briefing Council members on 14 July via video teleconference, de Mistura described incremental progress, particularly regarding the holding of joint meetings with opposition delegations before and during the last round of talks in which common positions were identified. He also described how the government has so far not provided concrete thinking on issues in the different baskets, particularly on a proposal regarding the schedule for drafting a new constitution.

During the sixth round of talks, de Mistura had proposed the establishment of a technical process of expert meetings to address constitutional and legal issues, but the government has refused to participate in these meetings between rounds. De Mistura conveyed his intention to address these issues and to push for direct engagement by the parties in the next round of talks in early September. On 13 July, France proposed the establishment of a contact group composed of permanent members of the Council and regional actors to support UN efforts to broker a political settlement.

The investigation of the 4 April attack in Khan Shaykhun conducted by the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), while not able to visit the site given security considerations, concluded that a large number of people, some of whom died, were exposed to sarin or a sarin-like substance used as a chemical weapon. On 29 June, the OPCW informed the Council that with the destruction of an aircraft hangar in June, the OPCW has verified the destruction of 25 of the 27 chemical weapons production facilities declared by Syria. However, the OPCW continues to consider Syria's initial declaration as incomplete.

On 6 July, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and Edmond Mulet, the head of the three-member leadership panel of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), briefed Council members in consultations. Final substantive reports are expected in October, but Mulet presented a progress report regarding incidents involving the use of chemicals as weapons in two incidents: in Um Housh (on 16 September 2016) and Khan Shaykhun. Speaking to the press after the meeting in consultations, Mulet said that the JIM has been under pressure from some member states, telling them how to do their work and otherwise threatening not to accept their conclusions. He appealed to all member states to allow the JIM to perform its work in an impartial, independent and professional manner.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien briefed the Council on 29 June on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Despite the drop in violence in some areas of the country, humanitarian convoys continue to be delayed and blocked by bureaucratic restrictions that limit their ability to get to civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. O'Brien stressed how even if the most egregious restrictions come from the Syrian government, other groups operating in areas not controlled by the government are also implementing procedures that slow the process or impinge upon humanitarian principles. The creation of the de-escalation areas has so far not resulted in a sustained increase in humanitarian access. According to the 21 July report of the Secretary-General, the number of people displaced across northeast Syria due to the counter-terrorism offensive near Raqqa has grown in June alone to almost 20,000, many of whom were displaced more than once. (It is estimated that 190,081 persons have been internally displaced since 1 April.) At press time Ursula Mueller, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, was expected to brief the Council on 27 July.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—which include the Kurdish armed group YPG—continue their offensive against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Raqqa with the support of the US-led coalition. In a 10 July statement, de Mistura stressed how stabilisation efforts in parts of Syria, particularly the management of areas recovered from

ISIL, should not undermine the agenda for a political process guided by resolution 2254. Clashes have occurred between the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army and the SDF over strategic locations in northern Syria. Turkey has strongly criticised the provision of support by the US to the YPG, which it considers a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

After months of increasing tension and direct clashes between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham as well as other moderate opposition groups in Syria, HTS took control of the northern city of Idlib and a strategic border crossing (Bab al-Hawa) in late July. HTS also incurred territorial losses near the Lebanese town of Arsal, in the border with Syria, after a military operation led by Hezbollah. The area shelters several thousands of Syrian refugees.

On 3 July, the Secretary-General appointed Catherine Marchi-Uhel as head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for international crimes committed in Syria since March 2011.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a statement on 28 June, the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed grave concern about the fate of up to 100,000 civilians effectively trapped by the air and ground offensive against ISIL in Raqqa. The High Commissioner noted that the large number of civilian casualties, with conservative estimates of at least 173 killed between 1 and 28 June, “indicates that much more needs to be done by the parties to ensure protection of the civilian population”. He further stressed that “civilians must not be sacrificed for the sake of rapid military victories”.

Key Issues

More than six years since the start of the war, the essential issue is whether the Council can rise above P5 divisions and exert leadership in promoting efforts to reach a political solution.

An important issue is to ensure that the expectations raised by the ceasefire and de-escalation initiatives are fulfilled and improve the living conditions for 13.5 million civilians in need, without promoting a de facto partition of the country. Bringing on board regional actors with influence on the parties but diverging agendas is a related issue.

As the international efforts against ISIL continue, ensuring coherence of stabilisation initiatives with UN efforts aimed at brokering a political settlement is a relevant issue. While some regional and international actors may prioritise expediting the return of refugees to Syria, preserving the right for all Syrians to seek asylum and enjoy refugee protection until conditions are conducive for voluntary return in safety and in dignity is a fundamental issue.

Options

The options at the disposal of Council members are limited because of P5 divisions.

However, Council members could, both individually and collectively, step up efforts to ensure that the parties, particularly the government, guarantee humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

Once details are worked out by the countries involved, Council members could be informed about the operationalisation of the ceasefire and de-escalation agreements and discuss whether there is any UN role to play in supporting the monitoring mechanisms needed to enforce them.

Council and Wider Dynamics

The ceasefire agreement in south-western Syria was partly motivated by the priority of the US to protect Israel and Jordan, specifically opposing any role for Iran or its allies near both countries. However, Israel, which occupies the Golan Heights, has expressed its dissatisfaction with the arrangement. On 16 July, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly opposed the ceasefire agreement, claiming that it did not do enough to prevent Iran from perpetuating its presence in Syria. Iran has for a long time aimed at establishing a land corridor between Iran and Lebanon through southern Syria, which is perceived as a strategic threat for both Israel and Jordan. Despite difficulties in hammering out an agreement, Iran continues to engage with Russia and Turkey over the delineation of other de-escalation areas and confidence-building measures.

As has been the case in the past on Syria, Council members' engagement has been limited to following the lead taken by key actors outside the Council. However, if progress on the establishment of de-escalation areas leads to the deployment of third-party monitoring mechanisms, it is likely that such a decision would be dealt with in the Council. Furthermore, France's initiative to create a contact group to support efforts for a political solution may lead to an increased multilateralisation of actions by member states regarding Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

31 December 2016 <u>S/RES/2336</u>	Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.
17 November 2016 <u>S/RES/2319</u>	Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.
27 September 2013 <u>S/RES/2118</u>	This resolution was adopted unanimously by the Council and required the verification and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, called for the convening of the Geneva II peace talks and endorsed the establishment of a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers.
18 December 2015 <u>S/RES/2254</u>	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.

Secretary-General's Report

21 July 2017 This was on the humanitarian situation.
S/2017/623

Security Council Letters

30 June 2017 This was the report of the FFM report on the Khan Shaykhun attack.
S/2017/567

29 June 2017 This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian
S/2017/564 chemical weapons programme.

23 June 2017 This was the sixth report of the JIM.
S/2017/552

General Assembly Document

21 December Established the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to
2016 assist in the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the
A/RES/71/248 most serious crimes under international law committed in Syria since
March 2011. The resolution was drafted by Liechtenstein and was
passed with 105 votes in favour to 15 against with 52 abstentions.