

January 2020 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In January 2020, the Council expects to receive the monthly Syria briefings on the humanitarian situation, political developments, and the use of chemical weapons.

The cross-border/cross-line aid delivery mechanism, as mandated by [resolution 2449](#) of 13 December 2018, expires on 10 January 2020. By 20 December 2019, it had yet to be renewed. It is not clear whether the Council will be able to agree on a formula for renewing the mandate prior to its expiration, given the difference of views regarding the number of border crossings that should remain open and the duration of the mandate.

Key Recent Developments

On 10-11 December 2019, representatives of the Astana guarantors—Iran, Russia and Turkey—convened in Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), Kazakhstan, for talks on developments in Idlib and the Constitutional Committee, among other issues. Representatives of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and the UN observed the meeting. This was the 14th round of talks as part of the Astana process. The Astana guarantors issued a joint communiqué at the end of the meeting in which, inter alia, they reaffirmed their “strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity” of Syria; “expressed their opposition to the illegal seizure and transfer of oil revenues that should belong” to Syria; welcomed the “signing of the Memorandum of 22 October 2019 [between Turkey and Russia] on stabilization in north-east Syria”; expressed “readiness to support the work of the [constitutional] committee”; and highlighted “the need to facilitate safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their original places of residence in Syria, ensuring their right of return and right to be supported”. The next round of talks in the Astana format is planned for March 2020.

Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller briefed the Council on 19 December on the humanitarian situation in Syria. She emphasised the importance to the people of Syria of cross-border aid operations authorised by the Council, and stated that without this mechanism there would be an immediate end to aid supporting millions of civilians, leading to “a rapid increase in hunger and disease resulting in death, suffering and further displacement.”

On 20 December 2019, the Security Council voted on two draft resolutions that would have renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access. The first draft—which was produced by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait—received 13

affirmative votes but was vetoed by China and Russia. It would have re-authorised use of three of the four border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa on the Turkey/Syria border and Al Yarubiyah on the Iraq/Syria border) that had been mandated by previous resolutions. The draft would have re-authorised these crossings “for a period of six months, followed by an additional period of six months unless the Council decides otherwise”. While the draft would not have re-authorised use of the al-Ramtha crossing on the Syria/Jordan border, it would have requested the Secretary-General to conduct within six months an independent written review of UN humanitarian cross-border and cross-line operations, including recommendations on how to further strengthen the UN Monitoring Mechanism and on the need to re-authorise the use of the al-Ramtha crossing.

The second draft, produced by Russia, failed to be adopted due to an insufficient number of affirmative votes, as only five members (China, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Russia, and South Africa) supported it. (Absent a veto by a permanent member, a resolution on non-procedural matters requires nine or more affirmative votes to be adopted.) The Russian draft called for a re-authorisation of two of the four existing border crossings and a six-month mandate (instead of one year, as had been the case in prior re-authorisations); it would not have re-authorised use of the al-Yarubiyah and al-Ramtha border crossings.

The Constitutional Committee reconvened in Geneva on 25-29 November 2019 for its second session; there was no progress, as the co-chairs from the government side and the opposition side were unable to agree on an agenda for the meeting. The government side wanted to discuss “national constants” such as terrorism and sanctions relief prior to discussing constitutional matters. The opposition maintained that these issues could be addressed but not outside the context of the constitution.

There are signs that the Syrian government is distancing itself from the Constitutional Committee. 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”. Similarly, the Syrian Arab News Agency, which is associated with the government’s Ministry of Information, has described the government side in the Constitutional Committee as the “Syrian Government-backed delegation”, suggesting that the delegation in Geneva has the government’s support but does not represent it.

Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen (via video-teleconference) and Rajaa Altalli, the co-founder and co-director of the Centre for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria, briefed the Council on the political track in Syria on 20 December 2019. Pedersen said that he saw no reason to convene the third session of the Constitutional Committee absent an agreed agenda by the parties. Altalli appealed to the Council to support civil society in Syria and to help with the release of detainees in the country.

On 4 December 2019, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu briefed Council members in consultations on the Syria chemical weapons track. She reportedly said that gaps remain in Syria's initial declaration to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 6 December 2019, a spokesperson for the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern in a statement that, despite the fragile ceasefire in north-eastern Syria, there was “a spike in what appears to be an indiscriminate use of...IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in residential neighborhoods and local markets. These attacks have mainly been carried out in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups and, to a lesser extent, in areas under the control of Kurdish armed groups in northern and north-eastern Syria and in areas within the ‘de-escalation zone’ in Idlib and parts of Aleppo”, the spokesperson said. He also expressed concern over the continued military operations in the “de-escalation zone” of Idlib, including airstrikes and ground-based strikes by government forces and their allies, resulting in civilian casualties.

Key Issues and Options

Given the difficulties in agreeing on an agenda for the second round of talks of the Constitutional Committee, a key issue for the Council is underscoring the importance for the parties to work together constructively in the Constitutional Committee and backing the facilitation efforts of the Special Envoy. Members may want to emphasise the need for the parties to engage earnestly and make the compromises necessary to get the negotiations back on track.

A related issue is the importance of creating an environment in Syria that is conducive to advancing the political process. Members may emphasise the importance of confidence-building measures to accompany the work of the Constitutional Committee. For example, in January's meetings, they could reiterate the confidence-building potential of large-scale releases of detainees and abductees and information about missing persons. Council members could also highlight other potential confidence-building measures, including several of those outlined by the International Crisis Group's 25 November 2019 report, “Ways Out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum”, such as the “establishment of a technical committee to launch a property restitution process;...amnesty for army deserters; [and] regular access to formal and informal detention centres to qualified international organisations”.

The Board of Inquiry (BOI) on Syria is expected to finalise its work by late January. The BOI commenced its work on 30 September 2019 and is responsible for investigating attacks on facilities in north-west Syria on a “deconfliction” list that included health facilities whose coordinates had been provided to the parties to prevent their targeting.

An option would be to ask the Secretariat to brief Council members on the BOI findings in a closed format to allow for a frank dialogue and exchange of views.

Another important issue for the Council is to support efforts to reach the millions of Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance. If agreement is not reached on a resolution to re-authorise cross-border/cross-line humanitarian assistance by the end of 2019, efforts could be made to reach agreement on this matter prior to the 10 January 2020 mandate expiration.

Council Dynamics

Several Council members share concerns with regard to Syria: that any repatriation of refugees into Syria is voluntary and conducted in a safe and dignified manner; and that civilians and civilian infrastructure are not targeted in the conflict. There is also concern that the government has been distancing itself from the Constitutional Committee. Several members have further emphasised the importance of confidence-building measures to help support the political process, such as the release of detainees and abductees. European members of the Council often underscore that Syria should not receive reconstruction assistance without a meaningful and inclusive political process.

The difficult negotiations on the re-authorisation of cross-border aid have highlighted key differences among members on the humanitarian file. Most members underscore the critical importance of this Council-authorized mechanism. China and Russia, however, continue to express reservations. China has maintained that coordination with Syria on this mechanism could be strengthened and expressed concern that aid coming into the country could be diverted to terrorist groups; at the 14 November 2019 Council meeting on Syria, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock said 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. Russia has asserted that the cross-border aid delivery mechanism, as mandated by resolution 2449, does not respond to current realities on the ground.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

18 December 2015S/RES/2254	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.
13 December 2018S/RES/2449	This was a resolution prepared by Sweden and Kuwait renewing the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria.

Security Council Presidential Statements

8 October 2019S/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

20 December 2019S/PV.8696	This was a meeting on the political situation in Syria.
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19 December 2019S/PV.8694	This was a meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Secretary-General's Reports

16 December 2019S/2019/949	This was the most recent Secretary-General report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Other

20 December 2019S/2019/962	This was a Russian draft resolution on cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria that received five affirmative votes and failed to be adopted.
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20 December 2019S/2019/961	This was a Belgium/Germany/Kuwait draft resolution on cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria that was vetoed by China and Russia.
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29 November 2019S/2019/915	This was the OPCW report on Syria covering the period 24 October to 23 November 2019.
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