

November 2021 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

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

Key Recent Developments

After a nearly nine-month hiatus and following nearly eight months of facilitation by Syrian Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen to build consensus around an agreed methodology on the Constitutional Committee's future work, the committee commenced a sixth round of meetings on 18 October. The meetings were held in person in Geneva over five days; participants included a 45-member drafting committee. On 17 October, in anticipation of the sixth round of talks, Pedersen met with both the government and opposition co-chairs together for the first time since the committee's inception. He subsequently announced that "serious and frank" discussions had been held on how to move ahead on constitutional reform and that the two sides had agreed they would begin the drafting phase of the constitution after five previous rounds had failed to do so.

At the conclusion of the committee's sixth round of talks on 22 October, Pedersen told the media that while there had been both positive and negative developments throughout the week, the final day had been a "big disappointment". No date was set for a further round of meetings. He noted that though "there are possibilities" for the delegations to reach understandings, the committee lacked both "a proper understanding on how to move [the] process forward" and a vision for how to develop a "substantial drafting process".

With an uptick in violence in recent weeks in several parts of Syria, the country's security situation remains precarious. According to the Secretary-General's 21 October report on the humanitarian situation in Syria, violence has intensified in Syria's north-west, with mutual shelling and airstrikes causing particular harm to civilians and affecting certain parts of the north-west for the first time since March 2020, when Russia and Turkey reached a ceasefire agreement in the area. On 20 October, several violent incidents took place, including the bombing in Damascus of a bus that was reportedly carrying Syrian military personnel; at least 14 people were killed. Later that day, Syrian government forces shelled a residential district in the north-west town of Ariha, outside Idlib, killing 11 civilians, including four children. In confirming the children's deaths, UNICEF noted that the attack was a reminder that "the war in Syria has not come to an end" and that "civilians, among them many children, keep bearing the brunt of a brutal decade-long conflict". From 1 August to 26 September, some 126 civilians (including 44 children) were killed in Syria, according to OHCHR.

There has also been a spate of violence in October involving Turkish forces and Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria, mainly near the town of Tal Rifaat. This comes amidst international media reports that Turkey might be preparing a large-scale incursion into the area and concern amongst some Syria analysts that a significant military confrontation between Turkey on one side and Syrian and Russian forces on the other may be imminent in north-west Syria.

In response to the 20 October violence, Council members apparently worked on a draft press statement that had initially been circulated by Russia. However, the draft was not adopted as some Council members could not agree to include references to the attack on the military bus in Damascus without also mentioning the Syrian military attacks in the north-west.

The humanitarian situation in Syria also remains dire. In observance of World Food Day on 16 October, the Food and Agricultural Organization, World Food Programme, and OCHA released a joint statement on Syria, highlighting the plight of millions of Syrians who do not have regular access to “safe, nutritious and adequate food”. According to the statement, the decade-long conflict and more recent crises caused by severe economic decline have caused 12 million Syrians to face food insecurity, with another 1.8 million people at risk of “sliding into hunger”.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has also had a severe effect on the humanitarian situation and on health care facilities’ ability to provide adequate services. According to the Secretary-General’s 21 October report, COVID-19 transmission rates “remained high and likely far beyond official records”, with inadequate testing capacity and protective and medical equipment. The virus has surged in some parts of the country; local and international media reports noted that as of early October, there were some 77,000 confirmed coronavirus cases in the country’s north-west, which has a population of approximately four million people. Only 1.6 percent of the population in the north-west have been vaccinated.

Finally, climate-related factors also appear to be having a negative impact on the humanitarian situation. Syria is now considered at “very high risk” of extreme climate events and ranks third-highest in the world for drought risk. Climate events, such as poor rainfall and unusually high temperatures, have had a drastic effect on many aspects of Syrians’ lives, particularly in the country’s north-east. The Secretary-General’s 21 October report outlines a number of increasing impacts of the drought: unprecedentedly diminished water levels in the Euphrates River—which provides electricity to some three million people and drinking water to more than five million people in north-east Syria—have contributed to power outages, reduced access to clean drinking water, loss of crops, and an increase in water-borne diseases.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During its 48th session, the Human Rights Council (HRC) received an oral update on 24 September from High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, who said that her office had compiled a list of 350,209 identified individuals killed in the conflict in Syria between March 2011 and March 2021. “It indicates a minimum verifiable number, and is certainly an under-count of the actual number of killings”, she said. On 8 October, the HRC adopted resolution 48/15 on the human rights situation in Syria, with 23 in favour, seven against and 17 abstentions (A/HRC/48/L.10).

Women, Peace and Security

During the 28 September political meeting on Syria, Rouba Mhaissen, Founder and Director of Sawa for Development and Aid, briefed the Security Council (S/PV.8866). Mhaissen stressed that “the demands for which the people of Syria, especially the courageous women of Syria, went to the streets in 2011 remain unmet” and emphasised the importance of keeping Syria on the international agenda. In her remarks, Mhaissen was critical of what she believed was the confinement of issues such as housing, livelihoods and education to meetings on humanitarian matters in Syria, given that in her view these everyday concerns are “what is most political”. Mhaissen also highlighted the issue of the forced return of refugees to Syria. She pointed out that, despite evidence of returnees leaving Syria again and of “big waves of forced internal migration”, forced returns are only rarely raised during political discussions on Syria. In concluding, Mhaissen said that “peace in Syria will require the Council to move from its fixation on great-power politics” to engagement with conflict-affected communities, and urged Council members to “[p]ut Syrians at the forefront of any strategy”.

Issues and Options

The Council has been closely following developments around the Constitutional Committee since its inaugural meeting in November 2019. Given that the committee did not make meaningful progress during its most recent round of talks and failed to identify dates for a future meeting, Council members may wish to adopt a press statement, calling on all parties to work in good faith towards a new constitution in line with resolution 2254 and offering concrete benchmarks for the committee to achieve as the Special Envoy endeavours to get the committee’s work back on track.

Another key issue for the Council is the ongoing volatility around Syria’s security situation, including the escalating violence in Syria’s north, concern for the status of the March 2020 ceasefire in the north-west, and the recent attacks on Syrian military personnel in Damascus. Despite Council members’ inability to agree on press elements in response to the 20 October attacks in the north-west and Damascus, they may wish to issue a press statement that broadly condemns violence on all sides of the conflict and calls for a nationwide ceasefire.

Council Dynamics

Building on the unanimous adoption of resolution 2585, most members have expressed their preference in the Council for shifting the dynamics on Syria towards more constructive engagement. Despite these views and Council members’ ability to bridge

differences and find compromise language in resolution 2585, several issues continue to divide the Council on Syria. Primary amongst these divisions on the humanitarian file are the efficacy of cross-line deliveries and the length of the cross-border mechanism mandate. On the political file, there have been long-standing divisions on the work of the Constitutional Committee. Given the mostly positive atmosphere and heightened expectations that preceded the last round of talks, however, Council members will largely share Pedersen's less-than-positive assessment of the last round of talks.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

9 July 2021 <u>S/RES/2585</u>	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.
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Secretary-General's Reports

21 October 2021 <u>S/2021/890</u>	This was the latest report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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