

September 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

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

Key Recent Developments

Iran, Russia and Turkey have yet to agree on the operational and technical aspects of the de-escalation areas that were announced in May in Astana. However, several initiatives by relevant member states have led to measures aimed at curbing violence. On 23 August, a monitoring centre was established in Amman for the de-escalation area in south-western Syria, agreed to by the US and Russia, along with Jordan, in early July. In July and August, Russia and Egypt brokered ceasefire agreements in Eastern Ghouta and Homs. Despite the deployment of Russian military police to ensure compliance, the Syrian government has repeatedly violated the ceasefire in those two areas. During consultations on 14 July, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura 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.

Since the end of the seventh round of the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva on 14 July, de Mistura's team has convened opposition experts as part of a technical process to address constitutional and legal issues. The government has also been invited to participate, but has so far refused to attend these meetings between rounds of talks. Following the postponement to mid-September of the Astana meeting to discuss the implementation of the ceasefire and de-escalation areas, it remains unclear whether there will be a new round of talks in Geneva this month. Members of the opposition groups (including the High Negotiations Committee and the Moscow and Cairo platforms) met in Riyadh in late August to identify areas of convergence and explore the possibility of forming a unified delegation ahead of the next round of talks. A meeting of the contact group proposed by France on 13 July to support UN efforts to broker a political settlement is expected to be convened in New York in the margins of the high-level segment of the General Assembly.

A 28 July letter by the director of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said that the security situation now allows safe access for the OPCW's secretariat to confirm the condition of the last two stationary chemical weapons production facilities included in Syria's original declaration. On 16 August, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, briefed Council members in consultations on progress in the destruction of Syria's declared stockpile of

chemical weapons. At the meeting, the US expressed its intention to table a resolution ensuring accountability for chemical weapons attacks before the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the OPCW and the UN releases its final substantive reports on two recent attacks, which are expected in October. On 21 August—the fourth anniversary of the chemical weapons attack by the government in Ghouta, which led to the adoption of resolution 2118—the US demanded that the Syrian government cease its use of chemical weapons, fully declare all of its chemical weapons stockpiles, and cooperate with the OPCW and the JIM.

Ursula Mueller, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, briefed the Council on 27 July via video teleconference from Jordan. Mueller stressed the ongoing difficulties with humanitarian access, especially in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Despite the drop in violence in some parts 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. OCHA has repeatedly stressed that the Syrian government imposes the most egregious restrictions, while other groups operating in areas not controlled by the government also implement procedures that impinge upon humanitarian operations and violate humanitarian principles. Mueller also discussed how the intensification of fighting between non-state armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate resulted in civilian casualties. The border crossing of Bab al-Hawa was closed for a week in late July, negatively impacting UN cross-border operations and the delivery of humanitarian aid.

In a 28 July letter to de Mistura, Russia's Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, expressed the willingness of Russian military police units to ensure the safe passage of humanitarian convoys in coordination with Syrian authorities in the Southern and Eastern Ghouta de-escalation areas. The Council was briefed by Russia in consultations on 9 August under "any other business" on the contents of this letter and the role of these units in the de-escalation areas. On 17 August, an aid convoy reached the besieged town of Douma for the first time since May, after Russian military police stationed along the route secured the road.

The Syrian government and the US-led coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continue to separately target ISIL positions in Deir ez-Zor. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—which include the Kurdish armed group YPG—pursue their offensive against ISIL in Raqqa with the support of the coalition. As the humanitarian crisis mounts, Jan Egeland, senior humanitarian adviser to de Mistura, urged members of the humanitarian task force on 24 August to "do whatever is possible to make it possible for people to escape Raqqa".

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a statement on 3 August, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria of the Human Rights Council (HRC) called on the international community to recognise that the crime of genocide was being committed by ISIL against the Yazidis and to “undertake steps to refer the situation to justice, including to the International Criminal Court or an ad hoc tribunal with relevant geographic and temporal jurisdiction as well as to dedicate resources to bringing cases before national courts”.

On 6 August, the Commission of Inquiry released a statement confirming that one of its three commissioners, Carla Del Ponte, had resigned. The statement said that Del Ponte had informed her fellow commissioners in mid-June of her intention to step down. Del Ponte was quoted in media reports as saying she was resigning because the Commission of Inquiry “is not backed by any political will” and she has “no power as long as the Security Council does nothing”. In its statement, the Commission of Inquiry said that it would continue its investigations as it had an “obligation to persist in its work on behalf of the countless number of Syrian victims of the worst human rights violations and international crimes known to humanity”.

During its 36th session in September, the HRC is set to hold an interactive dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry to consider its latest report (A/HRC/36/55).

Key Issues and Options

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 efforts to reach a political solution. However, the options at the disposal of Council members are limited by those divisions.

The ceasefire and de-escalation initiatives raised the expectations of many inside and outside Syria. Ensuring that these are fulfilled and improve the living conditions for 13.5 million civilians in need, without promoting a de facto partition of the country, should be a key priority of the international engagement. 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 the Council has any role to play in supporting the monitoring mechanisms needed to enforce them.

As international efforts against ISIL continue, ensuring coherence of stabilisation initiatives with UN efforts aimed at brokering a political settlement is important so as not to create conditions on the ground that undermine such efforts. Some regional and international actors prioritise expediting the return of refugees to Syria. The Council could hold a session to hear directly from refugees and UNHCR and reaffirm the right of all Syrians to seek asylum and enjoy refugee protection until conditions are conducive for voluntary return in safety and in dignity.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Divisions in the Council persist on Syria. On 27 July, Russia rejected the inclusion of language proposed by the UK in press elements on the humanitarian situation that would have criticised the Syrian government for the difficulties imposed regarding humanitarian access and for the forcible removal of medical supplies. The UK then objected to the press elements that had been presented by the humanitarian penholders, and these were not

released. During Russia's presentation of its involvement in ensuring humanitarian access to de-escalation areas on 9 August, the US and the UK criticised that this is only happening in places that Russia considers as priorities and that the Syrian government continues to be the main obstacle to the delivery of humanitarian aid. The US initiative of drafting a resolution regarding accountability for attacks with chemical weapons is unlikely to bridge Council divisions. Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to discuss the delineation of de-escalation areas and confidence-building measures, but divergent priorities have prevented them from delivering as a tripartite mechanism.

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. The presentation in September of France's initiative to create a contact group to support efforts for a political solution will show whether this new effort can contribute to exerting pressure on the parties and increased coordination by member states—including regional actors—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.
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

24 August 2017 <u>S/2017/733</u>	This was a report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Security Council Letters

28 July 2017 <u>S/2017/693</u>	This was a letter from Russia's Defence Minister on the willingness to ensure the safe passage of humanitarian convoys in de-escalation areas.
28 July 2017 <u>S/2017/658</u>	This was a letter transmitting an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
25 July 2017 <u>S/2017/638</u>	This was a letter that expressed concerns regarding the lack of humanitarian access by members of the Geneva-based humanitarian task force.

Security Council Meeting Record

27 July 2017 Ursula Mueller, the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian
S/PV.8015 Affairs, briefed the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria.