

July 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In July, Council members expect to receive briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria and on chemical weapons, including on the work of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM).

Key Recent Developments

On 4 May, the three ceasefire guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) signed a memorandum establishing four de-escalation areas and security zones in Syria. This agreement has led to a localised reduction of violence. However, violence persists both within and outside these areas. This includes government military offensives in Dara'a (despite a short-lived ceasefire on 17-18 June) and in the eastern region known as Badia. Even though the memorandum established a 4 June deadline for the actual delimitation of the areas, no announcement has been made on this, nor on monitoring or enforcement mechanisms. The next meeting between the guarantors, the parties, and observer countries is scheduled for 4-5 July in Astana. Briefing the Council on 22 May, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura assessed the memorandum as a promising development and stressed the UN's readiness to provide technical expertise. He also highlighted that there were still important details to clarify and warned against the parties taking advantage of existing ambiguities to make territorial gains or divert resources to other battlefronts.

De Mistura's plan to convey an expert meeting on the consultative process on constitutional and legal issues in between rounds of the intra-Syrian talks was rejected by the Syrian government. However, de Mistura met with experts from opposition delegations on 15-16 June. On 17 June, he announced that the seventh round of the intra-Syrian talks would begin on 10 July in Geneva. Briefing the Council on 27 June de Mistura expressed his readiness to "seek to facilitate direct talks between the government and the opposition" either at a formal or technical level.

On 15 June, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, briefed Council members on progress in the elimination of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons. She stressed that there has been no change to the lack of safe access to the two above-ground stationary facilities that are to be destroyed with the supervision of the OPCW. She also highlighted how long-standing issues related to Syria's original stockpile declaration and subsequent amendments remain unresolved. The JIM, whose three-member leadership team (headed by Edmond Mulet with Judy Cheng-Hopkins and

Stefan Mogl) is now complete, has started to investigate the 16 September 2016 incident where the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) found that mustard gas was used and is expected to start investigating the 4 April Khan Shaykhun attack upon completion of the FFM final report on that incident.

OCHA head Stephen O'Brien briefed the Council on 30 May on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Despite the drop in violence in some areas of the country, O'Brien stressed how the humanitarian conditions are worsening not due to insecurity or poor infrastructure, but to increasingly strict limitations by local authorities and non-state armed groups, as well as terrorist organisations, along with the actions of some neighbouring countries. He highlighted the delays in the approval of facilitation letters by the government for cross-line inter-agency convoys. O'Brien also denounced the "so-called 'evacuation' agreements" and the need for accountability for starve and surrender tactics. At press time O'Brien was expected to provide his next briefing to the Council on 29 June.

The US has been involved in several incidents in reaction to threats to their forces or those of their partners. On at least two occasions (on 18 May and 6 June), the US attacked pro-government military convoys that were nearing the Tanf base close to the Jordanian border where the US trains Syrian opposition groups. The US also downed two Iranian drones near the base. On 18 June, the US shot down a Syrian jet that had attacked the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a US-supported armed group involved in the offensive over Raqqa—near Tabqah. After the attack, the US Central Command stated: "The Coalition does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend Coalition or partner forces from any threat." On 19 June, the Russian Defence Ministry suspended its participation in the deconfliction line with the US as a result of the attack and announced that it considered airborne objects detected west of Euphrates River as legitimate targets.

The SDF's ongoing offensive against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Raqqa continues with the support of the US-led coalition. In a speech to the Human Rights Council (HRC) on 14 June, the chair of HRC's Independent International Commission of Inquiry, Paulo Pinheiro, described how the military campaign has resulted in staggering loss of civilian life and displaced more than 160,000 people in Raqqa. The Syrian government joined forces with Iraqi Shiite militias in their offensive towards ISIL-held Deir Ez-zor. On 21 June Secretary-General António Guterres appealed to all those conducting military operations in Syria to do everything in their power to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, as fighting continues in Raqqa and elsewhere.

Human Rights-Related Developments

At the 14 June interactive dialogue with the HRC, Pinheiro noted that following the establishment of the de-escalation zones there was a “discernible reduction” in levels of violence in the zones around Idlib and western Aleppo, but that violence continued unabated in the zones around Homs, Damascus and southern Dara’a, and the zones had yet to bring any tangible improvement in the delivery of humanitarian aid. However, the commission argued that the establishment of the zones was a step in the right direction and could help the more comprehensive political discussions within the Geneva framework led by de Mistura. Outside of the de-escalation zones, the conflict continued to have disastrous consequences for civilians, with the commission calling for “meaningful accountability” for ongoing human rights violations. The commission emphasised that ultimately only an end to the war would bring an end to civilian suffering in Syria. On 23 June, the HRC adopted by 27 votes to 8, with 12 abstentions, resolution 35/26 on the human rights situation in Syria. The resolution demanded that the Syrian government cooperate with the HRC and the Commission of Inquiry by providing full access throughout the country, and also invited member states to provide financial support for the establishment and functioning of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism. (Of the seven Security Council members currently on the HRC, Japan, UK and US voted “yes”, Egypt and Ethiopia abstained, and Bolivia and China voted “no”.)

Key Issues

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

Enforcing the ceasefire that Council members took note of in [resolution 2336](#) of 31 December 2016 and ensuring that the current de-escalation initiative has sustained impact on the ground, including on humanitarian access, is an important issue that could contribute to progress in the Geneva talks, as well as to improve the living conditions of the millions of Syrians affected by the conflict.

Amid increasing tensions among international actors in Syria, preventing incidents that may lead to military escalation is a related issue.

Options

The Council has many options at its disposal—such as imposing an arms embargo or targeted sanctions, referring Syria to the International Criminal Court, or authorising a no-fly zone to deter the Syrian government from using its aerial capacity—but P5 divisions make these unlikely options.

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

Council members could be briefed by the ceasefire guarantors on the establishment of the de-escalation areas and their monitoring, the release of detainees, and demining.

Council and Wider Dynamics

The US has repeatedly expressed its concern regarding the role of Iran as a guarantor, particularly in the areas bordering the Golan Heights (disputed between Israel and Syria) and Jordan. Secret talks have reportedly been underway between Russia and the US to agree on the delimitation of a de-escalation zone in south-western Syria that would include Dara'a and Al-Quneitra. As part of these talks, on 17 June a 48-hour ceasefire was agreed to in Dara'a, although the government military offensive continued after the ceasefire expired. The talks happen as Syrian troops and Iranian-sponsored militias expand their influence in southern Syria. In June, the US deployed a high mobility artillery rocket system to the strategically-located base of Tanf.

A Russian draft resolution welcoming the memorandum agreed to in Astana in early May was never negotiated in the Council as a result of Council members' concerns regarding the limited information available to them in order to make a decision. In consultations on 22 May, several Council members asked questions regarding the enforcement of the memorandum and the monitoring of the de-escalation areas. Many Council members have highlighted the importance of ensuring humanitarian access in the areas. Even though Russia provided an update regarding the working group established by the guarantor countries, some questions remained unanswered as the work of the group was still ongoing. The Council might still consider these issues as further details are agreed to by the guarantors and accepted by the parties. If the monitoring mechanisms require the deployment of a third party, it is likely that such a decision would be dealt with in the Council.

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

23 June 2017 <u>S/2017/541</u>	This was on the humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letter

30 May 2017 <u>S/2017/469</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Records

15 June 2017 <u>S/PV.7973</u>	This was a briefing by Nakamitsu on the destruction of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.
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27 June 2017 <u>S/PV.7983</u>	This was a briefing by de Mistura.
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