

September 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

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

Key Recent Developments

The conflict has been marked in recent weeks by the consolidation of territory by the government in the southwest and the potential for a military offensive in the northern governorate of Idlib and adjacent areas, near the border with Turkey. While Idlib was supposed to be part of a de-escalation zone agreed to by Iran, Russia and Turkey, it has been the target of Russian and Syrian airstrikes. Idlib, which remains under the control of armed groups, hosts hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced by the conflict, and the UN has repeatedly warned about the terrible humanitarian impact of an escalation of military activity in and around Idlib. The presence of several thousand members of Council-designated terrorist groups in Idlib continues to be used to justify military operations, as has happened in other parts of Syria.

A 30-31 July meeting of Iran, Russia and Turkey in the Russian city of Sochi yielded no agreement on Idlib's fate. The final statement calls upon the international community to restore basic infrastructure assets, including social and economic facilities. However, the final declaration of an EU-UN conference held in Brussels on 24-25 April stressed that international support for reconstruction will only be possible once a credible political solution is firmly underway. It stated that this also requires minimal conditions for stability and inclusiveness, a democratic and inclusive government, an agreed development strategy, reliable and legitimate interlocutors as well as guarantees in terms of funding accountability.

The political process remains stalled. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura continues his efforts to facilitate the establishment of a constitutional committee. While the government and the opposition have provided a list of 50 candidates for the committee, de Mistura has reiterated the importance of including civil society and fulfilling the aspiration for women to make up 30 percent of the committee. At a 25 July briefing to Council members, he emphasised some of the challenges that he is facing in facilitating that process, such as fostering agreement on the committee's purpose, its membership and its rules of procedure, including decision-making mechanisms. In press elements agreed to at the meeting, Council members called on the Syrian parties to engage with the Special

Envoy constructively, in good faith and without preconditions over the constitutional committee. De Mistura has invited Iran, Russia and Turkey for formal consultations in Geneva on 11-12 September to work on the constitutional committee.

Humanitarian access continues to be restricted for the UN and its partners, despite the swaths of territory that are increasingly under the control of the government and the fact that it would be possible to deliver aid through regular Damascus-based humanitarian programmes. In a press conference on 9 August, Jan Egeland, the special advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, highlighted the need for more protection guarantees for civilians notwithstanding the deployment of Russian military police in some of the territory recently taken over by the government.

On 27 July, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Virginia Gamba briefed the Council on humanitarian developments and the situation of children in Syria. Sweden, as Council President, conceived the meeting as a way to address the special vulnerabilities of children in Syria. Gamba told Council members that since the beginning of 2018 alone, over 1,200 violations against children have been verified. These include more than 600 children killed or maimed, and more than 180 recruited and used for military purposes. In addition, more than 60 schools have been attacked, and there have been over 100 attacks on hospitals and medical facilities or personnel. Actual numbers may be much higher, Gamba told the Council.

The deputy to the High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Thomas Markram, briefed Council members in consultations on 2 August. Although the two remaining chemical weapons production facilities have been destroyed, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) continues to consider that the initial declaration submitted by the Syrian government to the OPCW in 2013 was incomplete. The Fact-Finding Mission of the OPCW continues to investigate the 7 April incident in Douma. The OPCW Technical Secretariat is currently putting in place arrangements to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria in line with the decision taken on 27 June by the Conference of States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

In late July, terrorist raids and suicide bombings in the southern city of Sweida killed more than 200 people. According to press reports, several meetings have taken place between Kurdish representatives holding territorial control in north-eastern Syria and government representatives in Damascus to discuss self-administration. So far, these meetings have been inconclusive.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a 31 July press statement, the spokesperson of the High Commissioner for Human Rights strongly condemned the attacks in Sweida by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). According to the statement, ISIL militants raided homes in at least eight villages, shooting and killing civilians inside their homes and abducting women and children. The ISIL militants included many who were recently evacuated and relocated from the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp, Hajar Al-Aswad, and Al-Tadamon areas of southern Damascus as part of a government reconciliation agreement. “The transfer of armed fighters with a history of gross human rights abuses and contempt towards international law can mean an increase in the likelihood of violent attacks against civilians like the ones carried out...in Sweida”, the spokesperson said. “We urge the Syrian government not to put civilians at serious risk through such relocations”. The Human Rights Council will hold an interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria and consider the commission’s report (A/HRC/39/65) during its 39th session in September.

Key Issues and Options

The current level of P5 divisions raises the question of whether the Council will be able to work constructively on Syria in the foreseeable future. If the paralysis continues, those with even a limited capacity to act—whether elected members, the Secretary-General, or members of the General Assembly—may seek to take the initiative.

While divided on Syria for more than seven years, the Council has been able to unite at times around some aspects of the conflict, such as initially setting the agenda for a political process, investigating the use and providing for the destruction of chemical weapons, and authorising cross-border deliveries of humanitarian relief. As the political climate deteriorated, the Security Council failed to renew the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism in late 2017, and there is a risk that Council decisions may be further undermined. Council members could hold informal, unscripted and forward-looking discussions at the ambassadorial level to seek ways to increase pressure on the parties to the conflict and strive for a political settlement that is both realistic and acceptable to all.

Since it was established in August 2011, the Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria has briefed Council members in an Arria-formula meeting seven times, most recently on 21 April 2017. Council members could hold a meeting to be briefed on the commission’s newest report, released in June, on the siege of Eastern Ghouta, which could also be transmitted to the Council as an official document.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council dynamics on Syria continue to be characterised by increased polarisation on the three files through which the conflict is discussed: political, humanitarian, and chemical weapons. In May, P5 members started meeting regularly on Syria at the ambassadorial level, but it seems that these discussions have now subsided. As the government consolidates territory, including in areas of strategic importance for external actors near Syria’s borders, the regional dimension of the conflict is likely to feature more prominently in Council discussions.

In December 2017, the adoption of [resolution 2393](#), drafted by Egypt, Japan and Sweden, renewed the authorisation for cross-border humanitarian access to Syria. It was adopted with the abstentions of Bolivia, China and Russia. In explaining their vote, China and Russia highlighted the importance of working through the government and eventually rolling back a provision that had been devised originally as a temporary measure. In the Council, Russia has continued to question the *raison d'être* of this mechanism, which is currently authorised until 10 January 2019.

As pressure mounts to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, UNHCR has emphasised that while refugees always have a right to return, this has to be voluntary, sustainable, and under safe and dignified conditions.

Kuwait and Sweden are the penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

24 February 2018 S/RES/2401	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
19 December 2017 S/RES/2393	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.
18 December 2015 S/RES/2254	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.
27 September 2013 S/RES/2118	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.

Secretary-General's Reports

22 August 2018 S/2018/777	This was the Secretary-General's monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
19 June 2018 S/2018/617	This was the Secretary-General's latest report on the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria.

Security Council Letter

27 July 2018 S/2018/745	This was a letter transmitting the OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Record

27 July 2018 <u>S/PV.8320</u>	This was a briefing by Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Virginia Gamba on humanitarian developments and the situation of children in Syria.
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