

December 2015 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In December, Council members will receive their regular monthly briefings on the chemical weapons and humanitarian tracks in Syria.

The authorisation in resolution [2191](#) for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access in Syria expires on 10 January 2016. The Council may adopt a resolution renewing the authorisation in December before one of the humanitarian leads, Jordan, rotates off the Council.

It is unlikely, but possible, that there may be action in the Council towards empowering a UN-endorsed mission to monitor a yet to be agreed ceasefire plan for Syria. This is highly dependent on how realistic the International Syria Support Group's ambitious target of 1 January is to prepare for a ceasefire and the beginning of political talks.

Key Recent Developments

Two new developments in November were the accelerated diplomatic efforts in Vienna toward a political solution to the Syrian crisis, as well as renewed attention to counter-terrorism efforts following the 13 November attack in Paris for which the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) claimed responsibility. (Council members issued a press statement the same day condemning this attack.)

While there has been a spate of recent attacks by ISIS (claimed or suspected) in Afghanistan, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia and Turkey, the Paris attack was the catalyst for France to draft a counter-terrorism resolution that was adopted with very little negotiation on 20 November—the same day as the Mali attack. Resolution 2249 called for member states to take all necessary measures on the territory under the control of ISIS to prevent terrorist acts committed by ISIS and other terrorist groups.

French President François Hollande travelled to Washington D.C. and Moscow in late November calling for a single international coalition against ISIS. Analysts note the US is unlikely to join Russia in any counter-terrorism coalition targeting groups in Syria, especially following the incident on 24 November when Turkey shot down a Russian jet near the Syrian border. At a 24 November joint press conference with Hollande, US President Barack Obama said the incident “points to an ongoing problem with the Russian operations.”

Talks on Syria were held in late October in Vienna with the P5, the UN, the EU, regional countries Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE, and European countries Germany and Italy. It was the first time that Iran participated in international talks aimed at finding a common position on a political solution to the war in Syria. Syrians were not included in these talks; neither government nor opposition representatives were invited to attend.

A Joint Statement was released from Vienna on 30 October that invited the UN to convene government and opposition representatives for a political process leading to credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections held under UN supervision. The UN was given a role in exploring modalities for implementing a nationwide ceasefire. While the Joint Statement referenced the Geneva Communiqué, it did not explicitly call for a transitional governing body or the need for the protection of civilians—both of which are central elements of the Geneva Communiqué.

The following week, the P3 drafted a press statement welcoming the Vienna talks. However, it seems Russia had a strong preference to include language in the draft that would “endorse” the Joint Statement. The P3 did not want to “endorse” the Joint Statement and believed that it was important to keep the focus on the Geneva Communiqué as the guiding framework for a political transition in Syria. In the end, no press statement was issued.

Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, briefed Council members under “any other business” on 10 November saying the UN was ready to support “any decision taken at the next round of talks”. It seems de Mistura put the Vienna talks in an extremely positive light even though some fundamental divisions among the P5 remained unresolved. (The UN was not included in the drafting of the 30 October Vienna Joint Statement.)

Vienna talks re-convened on 14 November. The Arab League was added to the group that now refers to itself as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). The statement coming out of that meeting set an ambitious timeframe to prepare for a parallel ceasefire and political process by 1 January 2016 that will lead to credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance within six months. The following step would be the drafting of a constitution and elections within 18 months.

At the Vienna II talks, the P5 pledged to support a Security Council resolution endorsing a ceasefire (not applicable to anti-ISIS efforts) and authorising a monitoring mission. However, following OCHA’s 16 November briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria, the US was the only Council member to mention such a monitoring mission during its intervention. The US also set out its views on timing, stating that a ceasefire would go into effect as soon as the government and opposition have taken steps toward a transition based on the Geneva Communiqué. Russia focused on Vienna II’s condemnation of terrorism and referenced proposals, which remained unspecified in Russia’s intervention, to move the political process forward.

On 23 November, US Secretary of State John Kerry was in the United Arab Emirates and Russian President Vladimir Putin was in Iran—both discussed Syria with their regional counterparts ahead of the next round of ISSG talks in December. In the interim, de Mistura will be working on the challenging task of forging a unified delegation out of disparate Syrian opposition groups aligned with various international backers. He will have the delicate task of balancing Turkey's preference for the opposition in exile, the Syrian National Coalition; Egypt's preference for the opposition groups that have been meeting in Cairo which do not include the Muslim Brotherhood; Russia's preference for the Moscow group of "regime-approved" opposition; and the results of the Syrian opposition conference slated for mid-December in Saudi Arabia.

Another part of the ISSG's preparatory work is agreeing on which actors should be identified as terrorist groups in addition to those already designated by the Security Council, such as Al-Qaida, ISIS and Al-Nusra Front. Such groups would be barred from participation in political talks and could be targeted by counter-terrorism operations.

Following a 24 November meeting, NATO said its assessment of the downing of a Russian jet near the Syrian border was consistent with Turkey's description of the incident. While there was no corresponding Security Council meeting, Turkey did send a letter to the Council describing the event without naming Russia. The letter said that two SU-24s violated Turkish national airspace after being warned 10 times in a five minute period. (An SU-24 is a Russian attack aircraft.) Russia said the plane had been attacked when it was 1 kilometre inside Syria. A US official said the Russian jet had been hit over Syria after an incursion into Turkish airspace.

In other developments, on 10 November, Acting UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Kim Won-soo briefed Council members on the regular chemical weapons track. The previous day, the Secretary-General had informed the Council that the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), established to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, would be fully operational on 13 November. This notification triggered the JIM's 90-day deadline for a report to the Council, due in mid-February 2016.

Subsidiary Body-Related Developments

On 24 November, the 1373 Counter-Terrorism Committee held an open meeting on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. The meeting was particularly timely given that six of the nine who are suspected of perpetrating the 13 November Paris attacks are believed to have travelled back and forth from Syria.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 12 November, Security Council members held a closed Arria-formula meeting with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Commissioners Paulo Pinheiro and Karen Koning AbuZayd briefed on the impact of the intensification of armed activities on civilians, especially vulnerable groups such as internally displaced persons.

On 19 November, the General Assembly's Third Committee adopted a resolution drafted by Saudi Arabia that condemns the Syrian regime and ISIS and expresses regret that a May 2014 Security Council draft resolution referring the situation in Syria to ICC was not adopted ([A/C.3/70/L.47](#)). It also criticises Iranian and Russian military activities in Syria, without directly naming those member states. The vote was 119 in favour (including Council members Chile, France, Jordan, Lithuania, Malaysia, New Zealand, Spain, the UK and the US), 15 against (including Council members China, Russia and Venezuela) and 51 abstentions (including Council members Angola and Nigeria).

Key Issues

The essential issue for the Council—in the fifth year of a war that has exacted a death toll of 250,000, injured one million and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.3 million refugees—is to find ways to exert effective leadership, particularly in supporting a cessation of violence and resuscitating meaningful efforts for a political solution.

Options

The ISSG has identified a role for the Security Council and the UN in the event that their talks produce concrete results. However, immediate options seem limited as it is likely that any Council outcome related to a ceasefire will be reminiscent of resolution 2118 on chemical weapons, in that the substance will likely be negotiated outside of New York and only shared with the broader Council after agreement is reached between Russia and the US.

How a monitoring mission might get off the ground would likely require more consideration by the Council. The only specification in the 14 November ISSG statement was that such a mission would operate in areas where monitors would not come under threat of terrorist attacks. De Mistura is advocating “light footprint” options based out of Damascus.

Council and Wider Dynamics

A few Council members believe that Russian military involvement in Syria, the surge of Syrians seeking refuge in Europe and the expanding reach of ISIS (whether real or perceived) could collectively tip the conflict toward a political solution. The question then is what that solution might look like.

Russia, Syria and Iran have signalled support for a political solution but are reiterating well-known positions regarding power-sharing (versus a transitional government), sequencing such power-sharing only within the context of a united effort against “terrorism”; elections that do not exclude President Bashar al-Assad; and talks with a “healthy” opposition. Iran and Russia have publicly stated that they are not wedded to Assad but have not yet noticeably used their leverage to significantly rein in the government's behaviour.

The P3 and some regional states have modified their stance on Assad's role in a political transition, indicating that the timing of his exit from power does not have to be immediate. Meanwhile, they have increased their military support to armed opposition groups in response to the Russian military involvement and new government offensives.

While Council members recognise that getting Iran and Saudi Arabia to sit at the same negotiating table is a breakthrough and that the Vienna talks have built up momentum and a modicum of hope, they also note that the positions of the P5 and regional actors, in particular regarding the role of Assad, may have not shifted sufficiently to clear a path toward a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The push and pull between Russia and the P3 over whether the Vienna Joint Statement or the Geneva Communiqué should guide international negotiations demonstrate those ongoing divisions.

France is the penholder on Syria overall. Jordan, New Zealand and Spain lead on humanitarian issues. In practice, however, most texts are agreed between Russia and the US prior to seeking agreement by the broader Council.

UN Documents

Security Council Resolutions

20 November 2015 <u>S/RES/2249</u>	This was a resolution that calls upon member states that have the requisite capacity to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, to redouble and coordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIS and other Al-Qaida affiliates.
7 August 2015 <u>S/RES/2235</u>	This was a resolution that requested the UN Secretary-General and OPCW Director-General to recommend the establishment and operation of a UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria.
6 March 2015 <u>S/RES/2209</u>	This resolution condemned the use of toxic chemicals such as chlorine, without attributing blame; stressed that those responsible should be held accountable; recalled resolution 2118; and supported the 4 February 2015 decision of the OPCW.
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.
17 December 2014 <u>S/RES/2191</u>	Renewed authorisation for cross-border humanitarian access until 10 January 2016.
14 July 2014 <u>S/RES/2165</u>	This resolution authorised cross-border and cross-line access for the UN and its partners to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria without state consent and established a monitoring mechanism for 180 days.

22 February 2014 <u>S/RES/2139</u>	This resolution demanded that all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities, allow humanitarian access in Syria across conflict lines, in besieged areas and across borders and expressed the intent to take further steps in the case of non-compliance.
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Security Council Press Statements

19 November 2015 <u>SC/12127</u>	This was a press statement that condemned ISIS for the murder of a Chinese citizen and a Norwegian citizen.
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13 November 2015 <u>SC/12121</u>	This press statement condemned the terrorist attacks which took place in several places in Paris causing numerous deaths and injuries among civilians.
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Security Council Meeting Record

16 November 2015 <u>S/PV.7560</u>	This was a meeting on humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letter

9 November 2015 <u>S/2015/854</u>	This was the notification from the Secretary-General that the UN-OPCW JIM would be operational on 13 November.
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Secretary-General's Reports

11 November 2015 <u>S/2015/862</u>	This was Secretary-General's report on humanitarian situation.
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26 October 2015 <u>S/2015/820</u>	This was Secretary-General's report on chemical weapons.
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