

Syria: Consultations on Developments in Idlib

 securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2020/01/syria-briefing-in-consultations-on-developments-in-idlib.php

What's In Blue

Posted Thu 2 Jan 2020

Tomorrow (3 January) Council members are expected to hold consultations on the situation in Idlib. France and the UK requested the meeting in light of the recent escalation of hostilities on the ground in north-west Syria. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo are expected to brief.

Since mid-April, there has been an intensification of hostilities in Idlib governorate, which is part of one of the four “de-escalation” areas agreed by the Astana guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) in 2017. During the month of December 2019, there was an upsurge in aerial bombardment and ground fighting between government forces and Syrian opposition forces in southern Idlib. According to OCHA, the hostilities in December resulted in dozens of civilian casualties and the displacement of approximately 300,000 people—the majority of whom are believed to be women and children. Many of the displaced fled from Ma’arrat An -Nu’mān, a city in southern Idlib governorate which has experienced increased aerial bombardment in the recent assault, and have moved north within Idlib governorate or to areas in the northern Aleppo governorate.

On 23 December 2019, a spokesman for UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a statement expressing the Secretary-General’s concern regarding the escalation of the military operation in north-west Syria and the reported attacks on evacuation routes used by civilians who are trying to flee north to safety. The Secretary-General reminded the parties to the conflict of their obligations to protect civilians and ensure freedom of movement. He further emphasised that “sustained, unimpeded and safe humanitarian access to civilians, including through the cross-border modality, must be guaranteed in order to allow the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to continue to carry out their critical work in northern Syria.”

The violence has continued into 2020. According to the UN, an attack on a school in the town of Sarmin in northern Idlib on 1 January reportedly killed ten civilians, five of whom were children. According to local sources, the school had been used to shelter displaced families from southern Idlib.

At tomorrow’s meeting, Lowcock and DiCarlo are expected to give an overview of the security and humanitarian situation in north-western Syria. DiCarlo is likely to reiterate the position that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict and emphasise the need to promote a political process as stipulated in resolution 2254. It is likely that she will call on the parties to uphold the September 2018 agreement between Turkey and Russia on the establishment of a demilitarised zone along the contact line between armed groups and government troops in Idlib.

Lowcock is expected to emphasise the consequences of the ongoing attacks on the civilian population and highlight the need for humanitarian support. He may stress the increased vulnerability, due to the harsh winter conditions, of those who have been displaced. Some Council members may be interested in Lowcock's views on measures that could be taken to alleviate the acute humanitarian situation caused by the displacement of civilians, also considering the challenges which arise from humanitarian workers being forced to relocate due to the situation on the ground. Both briefers are likely to emphasise the need for a permanent ceasefire in Idlib, as well as throughout Syria, and call on the parties to the conflict to uphold international humanitarian law, ensure the protection of civilians, and urgently de-escalate the situation.

Following a telephone call between US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan on 2 January, the White House reported that the two leaders "agreed on the need for de-escalation in Idlib, Syria, in order to protect civilians". Members may be interested in any further information on this conversation.

Council members are likely to reiterate views expressed during the most recent Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria, which took place on 19 December 2019. At that meeting, Council members voiced grave concern over the dire humanitarian situation in Idlib. Russia took the view that Idlib continues to be overrun by terrorist organisations, while several Council members emphasised that efforts to combat terrorism do not absolve parties from their obligation to uphold international law, including humanitarian law. In that regard, these members condemned the targeting of civilians and attacks on civilian infrastructure in Idlib and in other parts of Syria and urged that the ceasefire in Idlib be restored. This will be the first opportunity for the five newly elected members of the Council to set out their views on the situation in Syria.

While tomorrow's meeting is focused on the situation in Idlib, it comes on the heels of the Council's failure, as yet, to adopt a resolution renewing the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access mandated in resolution 2449 of 13 December 2018 (for more on this, see our What's in Blue from 19 December 2019). As the expiry of this mechanism approaches on 10 January 2020, Council members may refer to the worsening humanitarian conditions in Idlib to illustrate the urgent need to agree on a resolution which will permit the unhindered delivery of aid into Syria.

Tags: Insights on the Middle East, Syria