

September 2016 Monthly Forecast

 securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2016-09/syria_35.php

Posted 1 September 2016

Download Complete Forecast: [PDF](#)

MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

New Zealand's Prime Minister, John Key, will preside over a high-level Security Council meeting on Syria aimed at ensuring the peace process gets back on track. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon will brief at the meeting, which is set for 21 September. At press time no outcome was envisaged. Council members will also receive their regular monthly briefings on the humanitarian and chemical weapons tracks.

On the chemical weapons track, the UN-Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical weapons (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM), the body mandated to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, issued its [final report](#) in late August. At press time, it was unclear how the Council might respond in September to the report's conclusions or whether the JIM's mandate would be renewed.

In addition, the Security Council is expected to meet to follow up [resolution 2286](#), which condemned attacks on health care workers and facilities and demanded compliance with international humanitarian law. While resolution 2286 is not country-specific, it is relevant to Syria in light of escalating attacks against medical facilities there, in particular by government airstrikes (for more details on this briefing, please see the [relevant brief](#) in this issue of the Monthly Forecast).

Key Recent Developments

On 7 July, Syrian government forces and allied militias—backed by Russian air strikes—took control of Castello Road, severing the opposition's final supply route into eastern Aleppo. Opposition forces, including Al Nusra Front, launched a counter-offensive on 31 July to break the siege and open a route to eastern Aleppo by fighting through densely populated southern areas of the city. In response, aerial bombardment of opposition-held areas has escalated, and on 16 August Russia, for the first time, launched an attack in Syria from Iran. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch has said there is compelling evidence that incendiary weapons are being used by Syria, including in attacks in which Russian aircraft are participating.

On 8 August, France, New Zealand, Ukraine, the UK and the US co-hosted an Arria-formula meeting on the siege of Aleppo. Council members heard from three civil society speakers with intimate, on-the-ground knowledge of the situation in Aleppo. Abdullah Kawlhla—representing the White Helmets, which rescues civilians trapped or injured by the conflict—delivered a pre-recorded video briefing from Aleppo. Dr. Zaher Sahloul and

Dr. Samer Attar, both of whom work with the Syrian American Medical Society and who had recently returned from Aleppo, spoke about the increasing medical crisis the city is facing. Clarissa Ward, a correspondent for Cable News Network, provided her analysis of the fight for Aleppo, from where she too had recently returned, and what it could mean for the trajectory of the Syrian civil war. The meeting was open to all member states and the media, and it was webcast on UNTV—the first time for an Arria format meeting.

The next day, Council members held consultations on the political and humanitarian situations in Syria, with briefings by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and OCHA head Stephen O'Brien. De Mistura had few positive developments to report regarding the resumption of talks, in light of the battle for Aleppo, and the difficulties between Russia and the US over a proposal to cooperate on counter-terrorism in Syria in exchange for a renewed nationwide cessation of hostilities and a formula for a political transition. De Mistura's deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, reported on 4 August that not much had been accomplished in July to get the talks back on track, largely due to the intensification of the military activities. O'Brien reported that the encirclement of eastern rebel-held Aleppo put it at risk of becoming another besieged area and by far the largest in Syria. He reiterated his call for a weekly 48-hour pause in fighting to allow humanitarian aid to reach Aleppo.

O'Brien first asked the Council to support the UN's call for a 48-hour pause during a 25 July Council briefing. In press comments following that meeting, Japan, as president of the Council, said that there was overwhelming support among Council members for a weekly 48-hour humanitarian pause. However, Council members were unable to agree to issue a statement to this effect given the direct role Russia plays in supporting the government offensive. There was another attempt to respond to the crisis in Aleppo following O'Brien's 9 August briefing. The UK circulated a draft press statement to express support for "recurring substantial pauses in fighting to ensure sustained humanitarian deliveries...to Aleppo can commence safely and effectively". It seems over three days of negotiations Russia insisted on language that the humanitarian situation had deteriorated due to terrorist activity. In the end, consensus could not be reached and the statement was not issued.

O'Brien briefed the Council again on 22 August and was unable to convey any significant progress in humanitarian access to Aleppo since his 9 August briefing. The Secretary-General's report on the humanitarian situation said an estimated 250,000 to 275,000 people in opposition-held eastern Aleppo are at risk of besiegement, and called yet again for a weekly 48-hour pause in fighting. On 24 August, New Zealand, Egypt and Spain circulated a press statement that called on all parties to adhere to regular 48-hour pauses to the fighting to allow the UN to provide humanitarian assistance to all those in need and urged all stakeholders to rapidly reach agreement on the necessary operational modalities. At press time and following input from several Council members, the statement was on hold as members awaited the outcome of ongoing talks between the US and Russia.

Apart from the Security Council, there were discussions in August between Russia and the UN on Russia's unilateral 28 July proposal to open "humanitarian corridors" for civilians and rebels to leave Aleppo. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), the Riyadh-based opposition umbrella group, condemned Russia's proposal for humanitarian corridors, characterising it as a euphemism for forced displacement. The same day that Russia announced its initiative for humanitarian corridors, O'Brien released a statement saying that he was aware of the proposal and noting the critical need for the security of any such corridors to be guaranteed by all parties. The statement added that people should be able to use such corridors voluntarily and that no one should be forced to flee by any specific route or to any particular location. It reiterated that international humanitarian law required humanitarian access for people to leave and for aid to come in.

On 3 August, de Mistura transmitted to Russia a UN position paper that outlined the conditions that needed to be met for UN humanitarian agencies to possibly be involved with "humanitarian corridors" in Aleppo. It seems the paper included many of the points that OCHA had already announced publicly regarding the need to ensure the humanitarian nature of such corridors, as well as detailing operational and protection considerations that needed to be present for the UN to be willing to engage—especially concerns regarding detention. Issues around detention are of particular importance in light of the incident in early 2014 when, during a UN-monitored evacuation from Homs, men and boys were separated from their families and detained by the government. Subsequently, international monitors faced difficulty in ascertaining the whereabouts of these men and boys. Amnesty International has recently reported that almost 18,000 people have died in government prisons since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. It seems Russia responded on 15 August that the UN position paper could be used as a basis for further discussion but that some elements, such as security screening of evacuees, required further work.

On 18 August, in a rare display of frustration, de Mistura suspended the meeting in Geneva of the International Syria Support Group's (ISSG) humanitarian task force, which Russia and the US co-chair. It seems he did so because it was clear ten minutes into the meeting that the co-chairs had not sufficiently bridged their differences; meanwhile, the fighting in Aleppo continued to escalate, and there had been no humanitarian access to the city in July or August. In comments to the press, he again reiterated the UN's call for a 48-hour pause.

On 25 August, Daraya's Civil Council and the Free Syrian Army leadership struck a deal with the Syrian regime stipulating that the government evacuate residents of the town. Daraya, a suburb of Damascus, had been besieged and frequently bombarded by the government forces since August 2012. A week earlier, reports emerged that the last remaining hospital in Daraya was hit with barrel bombs filled with a napalm-like substance in a days-long bombing campaign by the regime. The UN was not involved in the deal. O'Brien and de Mistura both voiced concerns, warning that civilians should be evacuated only if their safety could be guaranteed and it was on a voluntary basis.

On chemical weapons, Acting High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Kim Won-soo briefed Council members on 30 August. The meeting focused on the OPCW Director-General's report that described discrepancies in Syria's declared chemical weapons arsenal that had not been clarified by Syrian authorities, despite repeated visits to Syria over the course of two years by the OPCW's Declaration Assessment Team (DAT). The Director-General's report also included information that samples taken by the DAT at several Syrian facilities indicated undeclared chemical weapons activities at multiple locations. These discrepancies and lack of sufficient cooperation from Syria led the OPCW to conclude that Syria's declaration cannot be considered accurate and complete. Virginia Gamba, the head of the JIM, also briefed, presenting the Mechanism's final report on the nine cases it investigated: eight related to allegations of the government's use of chemical weapons and one related to an alleged use of chemical weapons by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The JIM's final report concluded that the Syrian regime used chlorine gas against its own population in Talmenes on 21 April 2014 and in Sarmin on 16 March 2015, both in Idlib province. It also found that ISIL used mustard gas in Marea on 21 August 2015. Attacks in Kafr Zita in Hama governorate on 18 April 2014, Qmenas in Idlib governorate on 16 March 2015, and Binnish in Idlib governorate on 14 March 2015, merit further investigation, the report said.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 4 August, the special rapporteur on the right to health released a statement reporting that in areas besieged by the government or its allies, humanitarian agencies cannot deliver assistance without a cumbersome approval procedure subject to rejections and delays. Armed groups also deny convoys' access to areas they put under siege, and there are reports that ISIL executes those caught smuggling food into such areas. Medical facilities in besieged areas routinely lack personnel and equipment, while the government frequently prohibits medical supplies on convoys or removes them in transit.

In what appears to be an unprecedented move, the Secretary-General sent a letter on 15 August to the Security Council ([S/2016/708](#)) transmitting the Syria Commission of Inquiry's 21 June oral update to the Human Rights Council and the Commission's 16 June report on ISIL crimes against the Yazidis ([A/HRC/32/CRP.2](#)). Since March 2015, Human Rights Council resolutions on Syria have included the decision to transmit all reports and oral updates of the Commission to all relevant bodies of the UN for appropriate action, including the Security Council. In 2015, no report was formally transmitted to the Security Council. In 2016, prior to the 15 August letter, a 19 April letter ([S/2016/358](#)) drew the Security Council's attention to the Commission's 11 February report and provided its document symbol but did not transmit the actual report.

On 16 August, the Commission released a [statement](#) on the urgent need to protect civilians, including a reported 100,000 children, living in eastern Aleppo. The statement said the attacks against Aleppo appeared to form the prelude to a siege, designed to capture the city through an already documented strategy of "surrender or starve." More than 25 hospitals and clinics have been destroyed in Aleppo by aerial bombardment since January, and two million civilians currently lack access to running water. The statement reiterated the UN's position on the requisite conditions to set up humanitarian corridors. The Human Rights Council will consider the Commission's latest report during its 33rd session in September ([A/HRC/33/55](#)).

Key Issues

With Syria in the fifth year of a war that has exacted a death toll of 470,000 and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.8 million refugees, the essential issue for the Council is to exert effective leadership in supporting a cessation of hostilities and efforts to reach a political solution.

Regarding chemical weapons, the conclusions of the JIM report and the determination by the OPCW that Syria's declared chemical weapons arsenal cannot be considered accurate and complete means that the Council is in a position to consider whether Syria is in breach of resolutions [2118](#), [2209](#) and [2235](#).

Options

The ISSG and resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#) have identified roles for the Council in the event that talks in 2016 produce concrete results towards a national ceasefire and a parallel political process. In the near term, however, day-to-day oversight of the implementation of resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#) has been outsourced to the ISSG broadly, and Russia and

the US in particular. So long as Russia and the US remain committed to this particular iteration of a political process, no matter how tenuously, options are limited for other Council members to inject new thinking or energy to help resolve the situation.

Regarding chemical weapons, if the Council is able to determine that Syria has violated resolutions 2118, 2209 and 2235 then it has the option to pursue the “further measures” cited in all three resolutions, an implicit threat of sanctions. Council members may also request to be briefed on recent allegations of the regime’s use of incendiary weapons in rebel-held areas.

Council Dynamics

Many Council members are of the view that the government’s offensives, particularly around Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, confirm the regime’s preference for prolonged armed conflict over a negotiated settlement unless such talks pivot significantly in their favour. There is also broad recognition that if fighting in Syria cannot be controlled, particularly in Aleppo, then it will be close to impossible for UN mediation between the government and the opposition to resume.

Some Council members have observed that the ambitious talks in July between Russia and the US about counter-terrorism cooperation in Syria in exchange for a renewed nationwide cessation of hostilities and a formula for a political transition have been whittled down in August to talks focused on an Aleppo ceasefire. Expectations of a breakthrough between Russia and the US to lower violence and resuscitate the political track have been severely reduced to hopes that the two states can agree on terms for a 48-hour pause in fighting by those they are supporting.

At press time, it was too early to gauge whether there was broad support in the Council for pursuing “further measures” against Syria with the OPCW and JIM reports pointing to non-compliance with resolutions 2118, 2209 and 2235. However, most Council members feel certain that if such a draft resolution were tabled for a vote it would be vetoed by Russia.

Four of the P5 members (France, Russia, the UK and the US) are involved militarily in the Syrian war to varying degrees. In August, China—the fifth permanent member—reported its willingness to strengthen cooperation with the Syrian government, following Rear Admiral Guan Youfei’s visit to Damascus to meet with Lieutenant General Fahd Jassem al-Frej.

Most outcomes on Syria are agreed between Russia and the US prior to adoption by the Council. Egypt, New Zealand and Spain lead on humanitarian issues.

UN Documents on Syria

Security Council Resolutions

26 February 2016 <u>S/RES/2268</u>	This was a resolution that endorsed the cessation of hostilities and called for the resumption of political talks.
--	--

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.
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.

Secretary-General's Reports

24 August 2016 <u>S/2016/738</u>	This was the JIM's final report.
16 August 2016 <u>S/2016/714</u>	This report was on the humanitarian situation.
2 August 2016 <u>S/2016/678</u>	This report was on chemical weapons.

Security Council Meeting Record

22 August 2016 <u>S/PV.7757</u>	This was a briefing on the humanitarian situation.
---	--

Other Useful Sources

Video: [Aleppo Under Siege: Syria's Latest Tragedy Unfolds – Security Council Arria-Formula Open Meeting](#) (8 August 2016)