

July 2020 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In July, the Security Council expects to hold its monthly meetings on political issues, the humanitarian situation, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Due to the extraordinary and provisional measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meetings are likely to be held through videoconferencing (VTC).

The cross-border/cross-line aid delivery mechanism, as mandated by [resolution 2504](#) of 10 January, expires on 10 July. Negotiations on its renewal began on 19 June.

Key Recent Developments

On 16 June, Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen briefed the Council, describing the current political, socio-economic and security challenges Syria faces. Despite three months of relative calm in Syria's north-west since the 5 March ceasefire agreed by Russia and Turkey, the situation in Syria remains volatile. Instability persists because of a series of ongoing crises, including recent ceasefire violations in Idlib province; the rapidly deteriorating economic situation in the country, including the sudden and precipitous depreciation of the national currency (the Syrian pound); and the ongoing threat posed by COVID-19 to Syria's healthcare system. Among other topics, Pedersen described the situation of detainees and those missing in Syria. The Council also heard from Noura Ghazi, founder of NoPhotoZone, a civil society organisation devoted to assisting families of detainees. She highlighted how women and children are affected by detentions. In his briefing, Pedersen also announced that the third session of the Constitutional Committee would be convened in Geneva at the end of August.

Syria's security situation appears to have grown more unstable in recent weeks. There have been reports of sporadic shelling in the north-west despite the ceasefire, and both Turkish and Syrian forces have deployed reinforcements around the de-escalation zone. In addition, media sources reported that Russian air strikes on 8 June in Idlib province had led to multiple civilian deaths and caused hundreds of civilians to flee their villages. Russia denied any role in the airstrikes. According to OCHA, hostilities in the area caused "renewed displacement... in some parts of southern Idlib governorate and northern Hama governorate". The situation also remains tense in and around Deraa in the south-west, where the Syrian opposition has attacked government facilities and where, more recently, there have been anti-government demonstrations in Suwayda, a majority Druze city, because of the deteriorating economic situation.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock was scheduled to brief the Council on 29 June. According to the Secretary-General's 13 May review of the UN's humanitarian cross-line and cross-border operations, 11 million people throughout Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance. Of the 6.2 million people living in areas not under Syrian government control, 4.2 million concentrated in Syria's north-east and north-west have acute humanitarian needs. According to OCHA, of the four million people living in north-west Syria, an estimated 2.7 million people are internally displaced and in dire need of humanitarian assistance, including via cross-border deliveries.

Delivery of humanitarian assistance in the north-west through the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings are at record levels, with a 130 percent year-on-year increase between April 2019 and April 2020. Meanwhile, in the north-east, cross-line air shipments of health supplies have been ongoing. On 14 June, the World Health Organization announced the delivery of more than 80 tons of emergency medical supplies to support the health system in the region. According to Lowcock's 19 May briefing, however, since the Council failed to renew the authorisation for cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria through Al Yarubiyah, on the Syria-Iraq border, "supplies [have] reached only 31 percent of the medical facilities that had previously been supported by cross-border deliveries from Al Yarubiyah". This, he argued, meant that a "combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain, and preferably increase, humanitarian assistance" and that alternatives to Al Yarubiyah have comparatively more limitations.

The precarious humanitarian situation has been compounded by Syria's worsening economic outlook, the collapse of the Syrian pound, and concerns about the impact of COVID-19. According to OCHA, the Syrian pound has been devalued by 105 percent since the start of May and by approximately 360 percent since June 2019. This has resulted in a steep rise in the price of food, medicine and other goods, with 7.9 million people unable to meet their food needs and a further 1.9 million people at risk of food insecurity. Though there have been few confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Syria (with the Syrian Ministry of Health as of 19 June officially confirming 178 cases of COVID-19 throughout the country and no reports of infections in the north-west), concerns about the pandemic persist.

On 2 June, the Council returned to its regular monthly closed-meeting format to discuss the monthly report of the Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The June meeting followed an acrimonious informal interactive dialogue (IID) on chemical weapons in Syria on 12 May which discussed the first report of the OPCW's Investigation and Identification Team (IIT) on the alleged role of the Syrian Air Force in the use of sarin as a chemical weapon in Ltamenah on 24 and 30 March 2017 and chlorine as a chemical weapon on 25 March 2017.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During its resumed 43rd regular session (this session was suspended on 13 March because of the COVID-19 pandemic and resumed on 15 June) the Human Rights Council renewed on 22 June the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria for one year (A/HRC/43/L.33).

Key Issues and Options

The cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance remains a contentious issue and will be in focus before the authorisation contained in resolution 2504 expires on 10 July. Members are anticipating difficult negotiations.

One option could be for the Council to renew resolution 2504 for a period of 12 months, allowing for consistent, unhindered cross-border humanitarian aid to be delivered to Syria through two Council-authorised border crossings with Turkey (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa).

Another option could be for the Council to pursue a renewal of resolution 2504, seeking to reinstate the Al Yarubiyah border crossing between Syria and Iraq. Several Council members have sought ways to authorise the reopening of the Al Yarubiyah border crossing in recent months, given their views about the inadequacy of current cross-line deliveries and especially in light of the risk posed by COVID-19.

According to press reports, the initial draft resolution proposes the re-authorisation of Al Yarubiyah for six months until 10 January 2021 with an option for an additional six months if the Council determines that the effects of COVID-19 warrant it. Some Council members, however, have expressed scepticism about the need for such an authorisation: speaking during the 29 April Council briefing, Russia's Permanent Representative urged Council members "not to waste their time on looking for a way to advocate, explicitly or implicitly for getting Al Yarubiyah back".

Council Dynamics

The Council remains divided on Syria; difficult negotiations on the re-authorisation of cross-border aid in December 2019 and January 2020 starkly illustrated differences on the humanitarian file. Most members have emphasised the critical importance of the cross-border delivery mechanism. China and Russia, however, have often expressed reservations. Both countries have maintained that coordination with Syria on this mechanism could be strengthened and expressed concern that aid coming into the country could be diverted to terrorist groups. During his November 2019 Council briefing, Lowcock said that the cross-border aid delivery system "is one of the most closely scrutinized...in the world" and that "evidence of systemic aid diversion" had not been detected.

Belgium and Germany are the penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

10 January <u>2020S/RES/2504</u>	This resolution renewed the authorisation of cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria through two border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa) for six months.
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Secretary-General's Reports

14 May <u>2020S/2020/401</u>	This was on the review of the UN's cross-line and cross-border operations.
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29 May <u>2020S/2020/310</u>	This was the first report of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' Investigation and Identification Team.
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Security Council Letters

18 June 2020 <u>S/2020/551</u>	This was a letter from the president of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the permanent representatives of Council member states containing the record of the 16 June open VTC meeting on Syria.
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21 May 2020 <u>S/2020/427</u>	This was a letter from the president of the Security Council addressed to the Secretary-General and the permanent representatives of Council member states containing the record of the 19 May open VTC meeting on Syria.
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