

January 2021 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In January, the Security Council expects to hold its monthly meetings on the political and humanitarian situations and on the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Key Recent Developments

Though the 5 March 2020 ceasefire agreed by Russia and Turkey in Syria's north-west is generally holding, numerous incidents of shelling and aerial attacks persist. Syrian government military forces continue to attack various armed groups, including jihadist factions, around Idlib and across Syria's north-west. This comes in the wake of media reports in early December that Turkey had withdrawn from three additional observation points and military outposts in the region, following their departure from several such posts in November.

The deteriorating security situation in the north-west has also caused civilian harm: speaking to the Council on 25 November 2020, Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ramesh Rajasingham noted that at least eight civilians were killed due to shelling and airstrikes in the region during the previous month. Since the March ceasefire agreement, "240,000 displaced people have returned to towns and villages in southern Idlib and western Aleppo," he said. "These places are now, again, coming under attack".

The security situation also remains tenuous in Syria's south-west. In the Deraa governate, local media have reported that there have been nearly 800 attacks since June 2020 on government officials, former opposition members, and Syrian and Russian military personnel involving targeted assassinations, landmines, improvised explosive devices, and other means, with over 500 civilians also reportedly killed.

Briefing the Council on 16 December 2020, Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen described the fourth session of the Constitutional Committee, which was convened in person in Geneva from 30 November to 4 December. At the insistence of the Syrian government, the agenda of the meeting centred on "national foundations and principles", such as countering terrorism and sanctions relief, while the opposition had argued that the agenda should move on to constitutional principles, rights and freedoms, or the structure of the constitution. Before the session started, members of the Constitutional

Committee reached an agreement, saying that though the agenda would revolve around “national foundations and principles”, the fifth round will transition to a discussion of constitutional issues.

Pedersen told the Council on 16 December 2020 that “given the deep divides in Syria, in the region, and internationally, forging a consensus on exactly how to bring about...a truly constructive diplomacy is proving very difficult”. Nonetheless, Pedersen argued that the parties of the Constitutional Committee did share common ground and that plans for the next round of meetings, currently scheduled to be conducted in person in Geneva during the week of 25 January, would therefore go forward. The agreed agenda for that meeting—discussion of constitutional principles—may result in the beginning of a drafting phase, which Pedersen recently expressed hope could be “possible to start...with the next few rounds of discussions”.

While progress on the political track remains halting, Syria’s humanitarian situation continues to worsen. Speaking to the Council on 16 December 2020, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock noted that “even as active conflict in some areas [in Syria] has subsided, economic decay and the compounding impact of COVID-19 are driving deterioration in people’s lives”. According to OCHA, getting an accurate number of Syria’s COVID-19 cases is difficult because of low testing capacity and significant community spread of the disease, among other reasons. Meanwhile, there appears to be a particularly high level of coronavirus infections in Syria’s north-east and north-west. The growing number of cases continues to further degrade Syria’s damaged health care system: by 9 December, 1,618 of all COVID-19 recorded cases in Syria’s north-west were healthcare workers, up significantly from the 693 reported on 9 November.

Continuing economic decline and rising food insecurity have also had far-reaching effects on the country. After stabilising for a short period this autumn, the Syrian pound has declined again recently, with a devaluation of some 15 percent over the last several weeks. This has led to further increases in the price of basic goods for families whose economic situation was already perilous. The World Food Programme regularly assesses the number of Syrians considered food insecure, which it now estimates at over 9.3 million.

Finally, the Council’s deep disagreements around the use of chemical weapons in Syria have again been on display in recent weeks. On 11 December 2020, Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Director-General Fernando Arias updated the Council on the status of Syria’s compliance with the OPCW as part of the Council’s regular monthly briefing on the implementation of resolution 2118, which requires the verification and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpiles. Arias concluded that “to date, considering the gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies that remain unresolved, the declaration submitted by Syria still cannot be considered accurate and complete”. This position was also echoed by High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu, who briefed the Council alongside Arias.

Arias also updated the Council on the Syrian government's failure to respond to a 20 July 2020 letter he sent to Syria's deputy foreign minister, following the 9 July decision by the OPCW's Executive Council to condemn Syria's use of chemical weapons in Ltamenah, Syria, in March 2017. The decision and subsequent letter requested that Syria declare to the OPCW not only where the chemical weapons used in the attacks were "developed, produced, stockpiled, and operationally stored for delivery" but also "all of the chemical weapons it currently possesses". Arias told the Council he notified the OPCW Executive Council and States Parties on 14 October 2020 that Syria had not fulfilled any of the requirements called for in the 9 July decision.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a 20 November 2020 press briefing note, Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed deep concern about reports of the ongoing detention of civilians, including humanitarian workers in Idlib, in north-western Syria. She emphasised the "deeply troubling reports of executions following the detentions and so-called trials by the de facto authorities" in areas under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other armed groups. Shamdasani underscored that the armed groups continue to impose rules and codes of conduct that "fundamentally violate a range of human rights protected by international law" and noted that any non-state actors exercising government-like functions in a territory are obliged to respect human rights norms.

Women, Peace and Security

On the occasion of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence (GBV)—which is observed each year from 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) to 10 December (International Human Rights Day)—Muhannad Hadi, the Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, and Luay Shabaneh, the UN Population Fund Regional Director, issued a joint statement condemning all violence against women and girls affected by the Syrian conflict, including the violence committed against women human rights defenders and women humanitarian workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis. They called upon all those engaged in the response to COVID-19 in Syria to commit to ending gender-based violence and to addressing its root causes.

Key Issues and Options

With the completion of the Constitutional Committee's fourth round and the announcement of a fifth-round session that ostensibly will focus on constitutional issues, Council members may wish to follow the committee's work very closely in late January. Council members may want to refrain from putting pressure on the parties in anticipation of the January meeting but could re-evaluate the committee's progress after the session. This would allow the Council to determine whether enough progress has been achieved to warrant the Council's offering support for future rounds of meetings, or other steps should be taken to reinvigorate the talks. Given ongoing security challenges in north-western Syria, rising COVID-19 cases, and the onset of winter, some members may request more in-depth information from OCHA on what steps the Council could potentially pursue to ameliorate the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the region.

Council Dynamics

The Council remains deeply divided on Syria's political, humanitarian and chemical weapons files. Despite OPCW Director-General Arias' 11 December 2020 briefing to the Council, discord amongst Council's members persists on the chemical weapons file. There are also stark cleavages between Council members over the way forward on the humanitarian file. Positive, albeit modest, developments on the Constitutional Committee may help improve Council dynamics on the political track. While there is broad agreement among Council members that the work of the committee is a generally positive development, some members have become openly concerned about the committee's lack of progress. Council members will be keen to see if the fifth-round meetings planned for January will finally usher in fruitful discussions on a new constitution and perhaps initiate a drafting process.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 July 2020S/RES/2533	This resolution renewed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing (Syria/Turkey) until 10 July 2021. Twelve members voted in favour of the resolution, while three members (China, the Dominican Republic and Russia) abstained.
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Secretary-General's Reports

11 December 2020S/2020/1195	This was the regular 60-day report on the implementation of humanitarian resolutions by all parties to the conflict in Syria.
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