

August 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In August, the Council expects to receive the monthly briefings on the humanitarian situation in Syria and on the use of chemical weapons. At press time, no briefing was scheduled on political developments.

Key Recent Developments

The government has continued to consolidate its territory in Syria. The military offensive in the country's south-west, which was supposed to be part of a de-escalation zone agreed to by Jordan, Russia and the US in July 2017, has displaced more than 300,000 civilians, the most at any one time since the beginning of the conflict in March 2011. The government, with the support of its allies, has taken control of swaths of territory in Dara'a, Quneitra and Sweida. The newly captured areas include strategic locations, such as the Nassib-Jaber crossing on the border with Jordan and positions near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Military operations have heightened tensions between Israel and Syria, including the downing of a Syrian fighter jet that entered the Israeli airspace on 24 July. Despite insistence by the UN that Jordan open its border to allow for the escape of some 60,000 civilians displaced by the military offensive who had headed south, the border has remained closed. Several hundreds of members of the "White Helmets" civil defence group and their families were evacuated via Israel to Jordan in late July.

Also in July, the government broke the sieges of the towns of Foah and Kafraya, which had been besieged by armed groups since October 2015. The governorate of Idlib, which remains under the control of armed groups and hosts hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced by the conflict, has been the target of Russian and Syrian airstrikes. The UN has repeatedly warned about the terrible humanitarian impact that escalation in Idlib could have. Military operations have also continued in the Yarmouk valley.

The political process remains stalled. On 25 July, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura briefed Council members in consultations on his efforts to facilitate the establishment of a constitutional committee, which was the main outcome of a January conference in Sochi hosted by Russia, along with Iran and Turkey. De Mistura told Council members that the government and the opposition had each provided a list of 50 candidates for membership of the committee. He reiterated the importance of including civil society and fulfilling the aspiration for women to make up 30 percent of the committee. He also emphasised some of the challenges that he is facing in facilitating that process, including fostering agreement on the committee's purpose, its membership and rules of procedure, including

decision-making mechanisms. At the meeting, he reiterated concern about unilateral legislative acts, such as Law Number 10, which threatens to expropriate the private property of millions of displaced Syrians. On 12 July, Germany and Turkey, along with 38 other member states, sent a letter to the Secretary-General and the president of the Security Council expressing their deep concerns about the possible grave ramifications of such a law. In press elements agreed to at the meeting, Council members called on the Syrian parties to engage constructively, in good faith and without preconditions, with the Special Envoy regarding the constitutional committee.

The humanitarian situation in Syria has further deteriorated as a result of the ongoing military operations. The Director of the Coordination and Response Division of OCHA, John Ging, briefed the Council on 27 June. He described the impact on civilians of the escalation of violence in southern Syria, such as the use of heavy artillery and aerial shelling to target civilian infrastructure, including several health facilities. He also presented a 19 June Secretary-General's report containing a review of the UN's humanitarian cross-border operations. The report, which had been requested by Russia in the negotiations on resolution 2393 in December 2017, explained the processes in place to enable accountable, effective and transparent cross-border operations, based on assessments of needs and with prior notification to the Syrian government. At the meeting, Ging emphasised that there are 2.67 million people in need in areas accessed solely through cross-border operations and that these deliveries remain critical. In a statement at the meeting, Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia (Russia), characterised the review as disappointing and urged the Secretariat to "come up with ways to provide a gradual and agreed-on withdrawal from cross-border operations in the near future". On 27 July, the Council was briefed on humanitarian developments and the situation of children in Syria by Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict Virginia Gamba.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed Council members on 3 July. She told them that the two remaining chemical weapons production facilities had been destroyed. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) continues to consider that there are outstanding issues with Syria's initial declaration. On 2 July, a report of the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the OPCW concluded that the mission was not able to determine confidently whether or not a specific chemical was used as a weapon in two separate incidents in Al-Hamadaniyah on 30 October 2016 and Karm al-Tarrab on 13 November 2016. On 6 July, the FFM published an interim report on the 7 April incident in Douma. According to the report, no organophosphorus nerve agents or their degradation products were detected, either in the environmental samples or in plasma samples from the alleged casualties. Various chlorinated organic chemicals were found in samples from two locations, along with residues of explosive. The work of the FFM to establish the significance of these results and draw final conclusions is ongoing.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a 29 June press statement, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein called on all sides to the conflict to end the escalating violence in Dara'a to avoid a repetition of the bloodshed and suffering seen earlier this year in Eastern Ghouta. Since 19 June, when shelling and airstrikes escalated, the UN Human Rights Office has documented at least 46 civilian deaths, the statement said. "Now another supposed 'de-escalation' zone risks becoming the scene of large-scale civilian casualties. This madness must end", Zeid said.

On 6 July, during its 38th session, the Human Rights Council (HRC) voted 26 to five (with 15 abstentions) to adopt resolution 38/16 on the human rights situation in Syria. Of the five Security Council members currently on the HRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Peru, and the UK voted yes; Ethiopia abstained; and China voted no. The resolution, among other things, urged all parties to the conflict to refrain from carrying out attacks against the civilian population and civilian objects, demanded all parties desist immediately from any use of chemical weapons, and demanded the immediate release of all persons arbitrarily detained. It expressed profound concern at the findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria on the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence ([A/HRC/37/72](#) and [A/HRC/37/CRP.3](#)) and took note of the Commission's March publication "Detention in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Way Forward", on the arbitrary detention of tens of thousands of individuals. It also expressed deep concern at the Commission's finding that tactics used in the recapturing of the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity ([A/HRC/38/CRP.3](#)).

Key Issues and Options

The current level of P5 divisions raises the question of whether the Council will be able to work constructively on Syria in the foreseeable future. If the paralysis continues, those with even a limited capacity to act—whether elected members, the Secretary-General, or members of the General Assembly—may seek to take the initiative.

While divided on Syria for more than seven years, the Council has been able to unite around some aspects of the conflict during some of that time, such as initially setting the agenda for a political process, investigating the use and providing for the destruction of chemical weapons, and authorising cross-border deliveries. As the political climate deteriorated, the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism was discontinued in late 2017, and there is a risk that Council decisions may be further undermined. Council members could hold informal, unscripted and forward-looking discussions at the ambassadorial level to seek ways to increase pressure on the parties to the conflict and strive for a compromise that is both realistic and acceptable to all.

Since it was established in August 2011, the HRC's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria has briefed Council members in an Arrria-formula meeting seven times, with the most recent meeting held on 21 April 2017. Council members could hold a meeting to be briefed on the commission's most recent report, on the siege of Eastern Ghouta, which could also be transmitted to the Council as an official document.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council dynamics on Syria continue to be characterised by increased polarisation on the three files through which the conflict is discussed: political, humanitarian, and chemical weapons. In May, P5 members started meeting regularly on Syria at the ambassadorial-level, but it seems that these discussions have now subsided. As the government consolidates territory, including in areas of strategic importance for external actors near Syria's borders, the regional dimension of the conflict is likely to feature more prominently in Council discussions.

In December 2017, the adoption of [resolution 2393](#), drafted by Egypt, Japan and Sweden, renewed the authorisation for cross-border humanitarian access to Syria. It was adopted with the abstentions of Bolivia, China and Russia. In explaining their vote, China and Russia highlighted the importance of working through the government and eventually rolling back a provision that had been devised originally as a temporary measure. Russia's statement on 27 June suggests that it continues to question the *raison d'être* of this mechanism, which is currently authorised until 10 January 2019.

As pressure to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries mounts, UNHCR has highlighted that while refugees always have a right to return, this has to be voluntary, sustainable, and under safe and dignified conditions.

Kuwait and Sweden are the penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

24 February 2018 S/RES/2401	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
19 December 2017 S/RES/2393	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.
18 December 2015 S/RES/2254	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.
27 September 2013 S/RES/2118	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

20 July 2018 S/2018/724	This was the Secretary-General's monthly report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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19 June 2018 <u>S/2018/617</u>	This was the Secretary-General's latest report on the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria.
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Security Council Letters

23 July 2018 <u>S/2018/732</u>	Included a report of the OPCW fact-finding mission in Syria regarding the incidents in Al-Hamadaniyah on 30 October 2016 and in Karm Al-Tarrab on 13 November 2016 and an interim report regarding the Douma 7 April 2018 incident.
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12 July 2018 <u>S/2018/700</u>	This was a letter from Germany and Turkey, along with 38 other member states, regarding Syria's Law Number 10.
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27 June 2018 <u>S/2018/644</u>	This was a letter transmitting the OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Record

27 June 2018 <u>S/PV.8296</u>	This was a briefing on cross-border operations by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and Director of the Coordination and Response Division of OCHA John Ging.
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