

December 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In December, the Council will receive the monthly Syria briefings on the humanitarian situation, political developments, and the use of chemical weapons.

Council members are expected to negotiate the renewal of the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access, which was most recently extended through [resolution 2393](#) and expires on 10 January 2019.

Key Recent Developments

Despite occasional violations, the relative calm has continued in the north-western province of Idlib after Turkey and Russia agreed to establish a demilitarised zone 15 to 20 kilometres wide along the contact line between armed groups and government troops. However, questions persist about the sustainability of the arrangement, the degree of compliance by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (a Council-designated terrorist organisation) and other groups, and the continuously precarious situation of civilians. While Syria considers this measure temporary, OCHA has stressed repeatedly the need to prevent an all-out military offensive with disastrous humanitarian consequences. At press time, the guarantors of the Astana process—Iran, Russia and Turkey—were expected to hold a senior-level meeting on 28-29 November.

Despite the military impasse, the political process has remained dormant, including the failure to establish the constitutional committee. The committee is expected to comprise 150 people (one-third each from the government, the opposition, and civil society). Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has repeatedly told the Council that the main reason for the delay in convening the first session of a credible and inclusive constitutional committee is the government's refusal to accept the current list of civil society participants, which was prepared by the UN. [Briefing](#) the Council on 19 November, de Mistura said that the UN welcomes constructive and moderate suggestions, as long as they maintain the same spirit of credibility, balance and international legitimacy of the UN-proposed civil society list. He warned against this list becoming a vehicle for political representatives of either side. In addition to civil society, according to the January Sochi Final Declaration, the list is to include Syrian experts, independents, tribal leaders and women, with "adequate representation of Syria's ethnic and religious components".

A source of tension among member states has been the timing of the first meeting of the constitutional committee. While the members of the Small Group (Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the P3) had encouraged de Mistura and the Secretary-General to convene the constitutional committee as quickly as possible (before the end of October at first, and then before the end of November), Russia warned against pursuing “artificial deadlines”. A joint statement by the presidents of France, Russia and Turkey and the Chancellor of Germany after a summit held on 27 October in Istanbul called for the “establishing and early convening, considering the circumstances, by the end of the year of the constitutional committee in Geneva”. The Secretary-General, who had directed de Mistura actively to verify once and for all the feasibility of forming a credible and inclusive constitutional committee before the end of his tenure in November, extended his mandate until the end of the year, given the emergence of a new deadline. On 31 October, Geir O. Pedersen was appointed new Special Envoy for Syria, although the date on which he will assume this function has yet to be announced.

At press time, Council members had just started negotiating a resolution to reauthorise the delivery of cross-border aid into Syria. According to OCHA, cross-border deliveries of humanitarian aid continue to provide an indispensable lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people across Syria. In the first nine months of 2018, food aid reached over 750,000 people on average each month through UN cross-border activities. A 19 June report of the Secretary-General, which had been requested by Russia in the negotiations for resolution 2393 in December 2017, explained the processes in place to ensure accountable, effective and transparent cross-border operations, based on assessments of needs and with prior notification to the Syrian government. In October, the Secretary-General recommended the renewal of this authorisation for 12 more months.

On 16 November, Elizabeth Hoff, the representative of the World Health Organization in Syria, briefed Council members in consultations. The meeting was held at the initiative of Russia, which requested that it focus on the sanitary situation and problems with obtaining medical care in Syria.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed the Council on 5 November. On 19 November, the Conference of States Parties (CSP) to the Chemical Weapons Convention approved a 2019 budget allocating two million euros to a team of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in charge of identifying the perpetrators of chemical weapons use in Syria in line with a 27 June CSP decision. Russia, which has opposed this decision, voted against the budget, as did Council members Bolivia, China, Kazakhstan and incoming Council member South Africa.

The situation in north-eastern Syria, particularly between Turkey and the YPG, a Kurdish militia that is part of the US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces, continues to be tense, despite joint patrolling by the US and Turkey near Manbij. However, there has been little attention in the Council to this aspect of the Syrian conflict.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 16 November, the Third Committee of the General Assembly adopted a resolution drafted by Saudi Arabia on the human rights situation in Syria with 106 votes in favour; 16 votes against, including Council members Bolivia, China, and Russia; and 58 abstentions, including Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea and Kazakhstan (A/C.3/73/L.50). Among other things, the resolution “demands that the Syrian authorities immediately put an end to all attacks on their own people”; “[u]rges all Member States, especially the members of the International Syria Support Group, to create conditions for continued negotiations for a political solution”; “[d]emands that the Syrian authorities cooperate fully with the Commission of Inquiry, including by granting it immediate, full and unhindered access throughout the Syrian Arab Republic”; and “[d]emands that the Syrian authorities and all other parties to the conflict ensure the full, immediate, unimpeded and sustained access of the United Nations and humanitarian actors”. On 28 November, Council members participated in an Arria-formula meeting with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria. This was the first such meeting in more than a year and a half.

Key Issues and Options

Given the crucial role of Russia, Turkey and Iran on both the political and humanitarian fronts, Council members could seek an informal interactive dialogue with their representatives to have a more action-oriented discussion regarding current and future efforts to avert a full-fledged military offensive in Idlib.

Some Council members question whether any effort on the political process is likely to yield results, given the Syrian government’s emphasis on regaining territory and consolidating control. Before the end of de Mistura’s tenure, Council members could hold an informal and frank discussion about the challenges that he encountered in facilitating the political process and how Council members, individually and collectively, could best support the work of his successor.

The issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons has not attracted much attention in the Council and is mostly considered under the rubric of confidence-building measures being discussed by the Astana guarantors. With little progress on this front and the Syrian government’s release of thousands of death notices for prisoners, the Council could hold a meeting on this matter.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council dynamics on Syria continue to be characterised by polarisation on the three files through which the conflict is discussed: political, humanitarian, and chemical weapons.

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 abstentions by 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 originally devised as a temporary measure. In 2017, Turkey played a key role in convincing those critical of the authorisation to renew it. As Council members negotiate it again, the role of Turkey, from whose territory most of the cross-border aid is delivered, is expected to be equally critical.

Russia and Syria continue to link the return of refugees to Syria with the need for international donors to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. However, other Council members argue that there can be no international support for funding for development and long-term reconstruction until irreversible progress has been made in the political process.

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

21 November 2018 S/2018/1041	This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letter

29 October 2018 S/2018/971	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Records

19 November 2018 S/PV.8406	This was a briefing by de Mistura on his efforts to bring about a constitutional committee.
5 November 2018 S/PV.8390	This was a briefing by Nakamitsu.