

November 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In November, Council members expect to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria.

Regarding chemical weapons, Council members are expected to consider the final report of the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN on the Khan Shaykhun and Um Housh attacks, as well as the renewal of the JIM, which expires on 17 November.

Key Recent Developments

On 24 October, Russia cast its ninth veto on Syria on a US draft resolution renewing the mandate of the OPCW-UN JIM for another year. In August, the US had announced its intention to have an early renewal of the JIM to delink it from the conclusions of the JIM's report on two separate attacks (Um Housh on 16 September 2016 and Khan Shaykhun on 4 April), expected on 26 October. Russia had repeatedly expressed strong reservations about the methodology employed by both the OPCW's fact-finding mission (mandated to determine whether chemical weapons were used) and the JIM, and argued that a vote should not occur before the release of the report. In a non-paper annexed to a [6 October letter](#) to the Secretary-General, Russia maintained that the crater resulting from the explosion that released chemical weapons at Khan Shaykhun was consistent with an improvised explosive device and not with aerial bombardment.

Before the vote, Russia proposed postponing the meeting until 7 November under rule 33(3) of the provisional rules of procedure. A procedural vote was held, but Russia's proposal was supported by only Bolivia, China and Kazakhstan, hence failing to gain the nine votes required for adoption (Egypt, Ethiopia and Senegal abstained, and eight Council members voted against).

The draft resolution that would renew the JIM mandate for one year garnered 11 affirmative votes, with Bolivia and Russia voting against and China and Kazakhstan abstaining. This was the third time that China abstained on a Syria resolution vetoed by Russia; it has vetoed six other drafts jointly with Russia.

In response to a question during consultations on 4 October, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu confirmed the utility of an early renewal to ensure continuity in the JIM's capacity to deliver on its mandate. The uncertainty regarding the JIM's future during the negotiations of the mandate renewal in 2016 created difficulties in

the planning and hiring of staff, which disrupted the JIM's work for several months. On 26 October, the JIM stated that it was confident that the Syrian government was responsible for the release of sarin in Khan Shaykhun.

Efforts continue to enforce de-escalation areas in Syria. As of press time, four areas had been established (in Idlib, Eastern Ghouta, Homs and in the south-western region) with varying degrees of adherence. Since the newest de-escalation zone was established in Idlib in September, the Turkish army has deployed there with the objective of enforcing the de-escalation and containing the influence of Kurdish militias in northern Syria. Russia has also established two additional de-confliction zones in Afrin and Eastern Qalamoun. Briefing the Council on 27 September, Staffan de Mistura reiterated the widespread consensus among Syrian stakeholders that de-escalation arrangements must not lead to a partition of the country. He stressed that de-escalation should be a precursor to a truly nationwide ceasefire and to action on the humanitarian and confidence-building fronts. He has also repeatedly expressed frustration at the lack of progress on the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons. At press time, the seventh round of talks in Astana, to which additional countries had been invited to participate as observers, was expected to take place on 30-31 October.

Briefing the Council on 26 October, de Mistura announced that he expected to convene a new round of the intra-Syrian talks on 28 November in Geneva. Different opposition groups (the High Negotiations Committee and the Moscow and Cairo platforms) continue to work on developing common negotiating positions and to explore the possibility of forming a single delegation. De Mistura called upon those with influence on the government to press it to negotiate substantive issues in Geneva.

On 17 October, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced the takeover of Raqqa, the military stronghold of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Counter-terrorism operations by different actors continue in various regions of Syria, including Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Dara'a and near Raqqa. According to a 25 October report by the Secretary-General on the humanitarian situation, these operations have led to an increased displacement of civilians.

Briefing the Council on 27 September Mark Lowcock, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, emphasised the longstanding difficulties in ensuring humanitarian access. The difficult security situation, administrative impediments, deliberate restrictions, and the removal of items from convoys continue to hamper the delivery of humanitarian aid, particularly to besieged and hard-to-reach locations. At press time, Lowcock was expected to brief the Council on Syria on 30 October.

Key Issues and Options

More than six years since the start of the war, the essential issue is whether the Council can rise above P5 divisions and exert leadership in efforts to reach a political solution. However, those divisions limit the options at the disposal of Council members.

Although the chemical weapons dossier on Syria was mostly a result of US-Russia cooperation, elected members may be better positioned to bridge the current divide and overcome the increasing politicisation of the file.

The ceasefire and de-escalation initiatives have raised the expectations of many inside and outside Syria. A key priority of the international community's engagement appears to be to ensure that these expectations are fulfilled and that they improve the living conditions for the 13.5 million civilians in need without promoting a de facto partition of the country. In September, Russia circulated a resolution welcoming the decisions made in Astana, but no further engagement has taken place on the draft. However, Council members could be provided with more information about the implementation of the ceasefire and de-escalation agreements, as well as their limitations, and consider whether the Council has any role to play in supporting the monitoring mechanisms needed to enforce them.

As international efforts against ISIL continue, an important issue is to ensure the coherence of stabilisation initiatives with UN efforts aimed at brokering a political settlement, so as not to create conditions on the ground that undermine those efforts. Some regional and international actors prioritise expediting the return of refugees to Syria. The Council could hold a session to hear directly from refugees and UNHCR, and reaffirm the right of all Syrians to seek asylum and enjoy refugee protection until conditions are conducive for voluntary return in safety and in dignity.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Council divisions have been made apparent once again by the ninth veto on Syria. Russian ambassador Vassily Nebenzia indicated, when explaining his vote, that Russia was ready to negotiate the JIM's extension after the publication and discussion of the report. He also mentioned the need to address some of the limitations of the JIM, but it is unclear whether Council members will be able to agree on this issue before the mandate's expiration on 17 November. (Last year, Russia pushed to give the JIM a broader, regional mandate to monitor and investigate the use of chemical weapons, with an increased focus on non-state actors and terrorist groups.)

In December, the Council is expected to consider renewing the authorisation of UN cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid established initially through [resolution 2165](#) on 14 July 2014. "Trans-border supplies will have to be gradually rolled back as humanitarian access expands", Nebenzia said at the 27 September briefing. However, OCHA and most Council members have criticised the recurrent obstacles to humanitarian access and highlighted the vital role that the cross-border authorisation has played in the delivery of humanitarian aid in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

31 December 2016 <u>S/RES/2336</u>	Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.
17 November 2016 <u>S/RES/2319</u>	Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.
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.
Secretary-General's Reports	
25 October 2017 <u>S/2017/902</u>	This was a report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
Security Council Letters	
6 October 2017 <u>S/2017/848</u>	This was a letter from Russia addressed to the Secretary-General expressing concerns about the methodology of the fact-finding mission and the JIM with regard to Khan Shaykhun.
3 October 2017 <u>S/2017/832</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
Security Council Meeting Records	
24 October 2017 <u>S/PV.8073</u>	This was the meeting at which Russia vetoed a resolution renewing the JIM, following a procedural vote.
26 October 2017 <u>S/PV.8076</u>	UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura briefed the Council on the situation in Syria.
Other	
24 October 2017 <u>S/2017/884</u>	This was a draft resolution renewing the JIM that was vetoed by Russia.