

April 2021 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

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

Key Recent Developments

March saw the commemoration of a decade of conflict in Syria. In addition to hundreds of thousands of deaths from the conflict, the war has forced 13 million Syrians, more than 60 per cent of the country's population, to flee their homes and left 13.4 million people in need of humanitarian aid, which is estimated to be more than three times the number of people in need at the end of 2012.

During his Council briefing on 15 March, Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen focussed on the need for a peaceful resolution of the decade-long conflict. Despite five rounds of meetings of the Constitution Committee, which is responsible for drafting a new constitution for Syria in line with resolution 2254, there has been no tangible progress in producing a political solution. Resolution 2254, adopted unanimously in 2015, expressed support for a UN-facilitated, Syrian-led political process. It was hoped that the last round of meetings, held from 25 to 29 January, would see the beginning of the drafting phase of a new constitution, but the government and opposition members taking part in the talks failed to produce any concrete results.

At his 15 March Council briefing, Pedersen noted that it was essential to use the opportunity afforded by the relative calm in the conflict to put a fresh focus on the political process, noting that there was "great danger that the fragile calm could unravel" and derail any progress. He also emphasised the need for the international community to engage in "sustained and robust diplomatic dialogue", telling the Council that it was time to establish a "new international format" that would bring together different parties, including the Council's five permanent members, Iran, Turkey, Arab states, and the European Union, to peacefully resolve the conflict. To this end, he maintained that it was "now necessary for all these actors to seriously sit down and develop a Syrian policy based on the understanding that none of them can dictate the outcome of the Syrian conflict".

The call for renewed international efforts came as the foreign ministers of Russia, Qatar and Turkey met in Doha on 11 March to discuss Syria. After the meeting, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, announced that the three countries had "launched a new "trilateral consultation process" to discuss ways of contributing to a lasting political solution in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that the group did not aim to replace the Astana group consisting of Russia, Turkey and Iran. In a joint statement, Russia, Qatar and Turkey expressed their commitment to advancing a political process in accordance with resolution 2254. On the humanitarian situation, they called on the "international community, the UN and its humanitarian agencies to enhance their efforts". On 9 March, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, said the EU would continue to withhold reconstruction funds until there had been a political transition in line with resolution 2254, underscoring the EU's long-standing view that "there will be no end to sanctions, no normalizations, no support for reconstruction until a political transition is underway".

Meanwhile, Syria's security situation remains worrying despite an overall decrease in violence. On 21 March, a Syrian military artillery attack on Al Atareb Surgical Hospital in Aleppo governorate killed six patients and injured 16 civilians, including five medical staff. Several aerial attacks, some allegedly by Russian military jets, took place near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border and within a few hundred meters of where a number of humanitarian organisations have offices, striking a gas facility and subsequently setting fire to trucks deployed to deliver humanitarian assistance. The UN deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria told the media that approximately one million people live in refugee camps in the area and "are highly vulnerable when airstrikes and shelling happen". Meanwhile, on 16 March, the official Syrian news agency reported that Israel had launched a series of missile strikes on Syria. It was unclear, however, whether the missiles hit their intended targets, two ammunition depots located outside Damascus that ostensibly belong to Iranian-backed militias. Syrian state television claimed that the missiles were shot down by Syrian air defences.

Syria's humanitarian and economic conditions also continue to worsen. According to a 19 March World Food Programme report, food security in Syria "remain[s] at critical levels", with food prices having reached a record high in January. On 16 March, UNICEF's Middle East regional director indicated that over six million Syrian children need assistance and that one-third of Syrian schools were now unusable due to damage, serving as shelters for displaced families, or being used for military purposes. COVID-19 continues to affect the humanitarian situation as Syria's caseload grows, with approximately 41,000 cases reported throughout the country on 16 March. On 23 March, WHO announced that it will begin its COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Syria in April or early May and aims to inoculate approximately 20 percent of Syria's population this year. However, the equitable delivery of the vaccine is likely to be complicated, given humanitarian access challenges into areas outside government control in Syria's north-east and north-west.

Finally, on 4 March, the Council held its regular monthly meeting on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said that “at this stage, the declaration submitted by [Syria] cannot be considered accurate and complete”, noting that 19 issues related to Syria’s chemical weapons declarations made to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) remain unresolved. While calling on the Syrian government to cooperate fully with the OPCW, she also highlighted that the OPCW Declaration Assessment Team had been deployed to Syria to hold consultations with the government.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During the 46th session of the Human Rights Council, High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said on 11 March that “with Syria about to enter its 11th year of violence and conflict, the pursuit of truth, justice and reparations for victims must not only continue but be stepped up”. The recent conviction of a former Syrian intelligence officer by a German trial court for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity was an important step forward on the path to justice, the High Commissioner said. She stressed the need to address the issue of missing and disappeared people and joined the call for the creation of an independent mechanism with an international mandate to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing people, identify human remains, and provide support to their families.

Key Issues and Options

Reinvigorating the stalled political process will be a key focus in April. Council members were unable to agree on a press statement after Pedersen’s briefing on 15 March. However, the Special Envoy’s emphasis on the need for the international community to come together in a “sustained and robust” manner could serve as the catalyst for some Council members to seek another opportunity through a presidential statement or, at minimum, a press statement to call on the parties in the conflict to take a serious and meaningful approach to the political process in line with resolution 2254 and engage with the Constitutional Committee.

Addressing the deteriorating humanitarian situation will also be a major focus for the Council. It may use the announcement of the WHO vaccination rollout as the impetus for exploring ways to ensure that access issues do not present an obstacle to the equitable distribution of the vaccines in government– and opposition–held areas.

Council Dynamics

Stark differences between Council members on Syria’s political, humanitarian and chemical weapons files persist. Recent calls for Council members to work together to influence Syrian actors to peacefully resolve the conflict seem to have done little to build consensus on how to advance the political process. The monthly meeting on chemical weapons regularly highlights the Council’s deep divisions on the issue, while the cleavages that exist between Council members on the humanitarian file are likely to be exacerbated as a vaccination rollout begins this spring in Syria. Members are also anticipating further discord as discussions about the renewal of cross-

border humanitarian access gather pace in the coming weeks, due to the 11 July expiration of resolution 2533, authorising cross-border humanitarian deliveries.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 July 2020 <u>S/RES/2533</u>	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

18 February 2021 <u>S/2021/160</u>	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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