

November 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In November, the Council expects to receive the monthly Syria briefings on the humanitarian situation, political developments, and the use of chemical weapons.

Key Recent Developments

October was marked, at least momentarily, by a respite over the tense situation 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. Following the timeline established by the memorandum of understanding between the two countries, heavy military equipment had been removed from the area by 10 October.

The agreement also provided for the separation of forces of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (a Council-designated terrorist group) from other rebel groups. While Syria considers this measure temporary, OCHA has repeatedly stressed the need to prevent an all-out military offensive of disastrous humanitarian consequences.

Despite the military impasse, the political process has failed to gain traction, including over the establishment of the constitutional committee. The committee is expected to comprise 150 people (one-third each from the government, the opposition, and civil society). [Briefing](#) the Council on 17 October, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura told Council members that the main reason for the delay in convening the first session of a credible and inclusive constitutional committee is the government's difficulty in accepting the current list of civil society participants, which was prepared by the UN. In his statement, he mentioned that Russia and Iran have also called that list into significant question, while Turkey has indicated lately its full understanding of the logic and composition of the list.

De Mistura also briefed Council members on a late September meeting between Secretary-General António Guterres and Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, in which the latter questioned the validity of the 30 January final statement that resulted from a meeting of Syrians in Sochi and the UN facilitation role in establishing the constitutional committee. This controversy is not new, as illustrated by the Syrian government's uploading of a modified version of the Sochi final statement to its website, which led to the circulation of the original statement as an official Council document in February, at Russia's initiative. De Mistura travelled to

Damascus in late October in a last attempt to get the government to engage on the establishment of the constitutional committee, and briefed the Council on his mission on 26 October. He told the Council that the Syrian government did not accept a role for the UN in general in identifying or selecting the civil society list.

Ahead of the 17 October meeting, 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. They reiterated this message in the meeting, but Russia warned against pursuing “artificial deadlines”. De Mistura also announced that he will be stepping down from his position at the end of November and that the Secretary-General has directed him to actively verify once and for all the feasibility of the implementation of a credible and inclusive constitutional committee.

Despite the reprieve in Idlib, the threat of a military offensive continues to loom. Cross-border deliveries of humanitarian aid, which have been vital in providing assistance to Idlib, continue as a result of a Council authorisation which is set to expire on 10 January 2019. There have also been efforts to provide life-saving winterisation assistance. In late October, the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent had to postpone for security reasons the organisation of a joint convoy to an estimated 50,000 civilians stranded at the Rukban camp in southeast Syria, where the situation is critical. The last delivery of UN aid to Rukban took place in January 2018 through Jordan. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock briefed the Council on 29 October.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed Council members on 9 October. At the meeting, several Council members expressed concern about recent reports of the attempt by Russia to hack the internal computer system of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). In November, the Conference of States Parties (CSP) to the Chemical Weapons Convention is expected to discuss a progress report of the OPCW Director-General regarding arrangements to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria in line with a 27 June CSP decision.

There have been internal debates among donors and repeated requests by Russia and Syria regarding the need to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. On 18 September, nine former, current and incoming Council members (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Sweden, the UK and the US) sent a letter to the Secretary-General stressing that there can be no international support for funding for development and long-term reconstruction “until irreversible progress has been made through the UN-led process towards a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition”.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During its 39th session, the Human Rights Council (HRC) voted 27 to four (with 16 abstentions) on 28 September to adopt a resolution on the human rights situation in Syria (A/HRC/RES/39/15). Of the five Security Council members currently on the HRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Peru, and the UK voted in favour, Ethiopia abstained, and China voted against. The resolution incorporates provisions of past HRC resolutions on Syria, and added several new ones, such as urging an immediate end to the violence in Idlib to prevent further deaths and "to avoid a potential humanitarian catastrophe" and expressing "deep concern" over the Commission of Inquiry on Syria's finding "that tactics used in the recapturing of the besieged area of Eastern Ghouta amounted to war crimes and crimes against humanity". Other new provisions noted "the recent issuing of death notifications of detained individuals by the Syrian authorities, which provides further indication of systematic violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law" and urged authorities "to provide families with the remains,...to protect the lives and rights of all persons currently detained or unaccounted for, and to clarify the fate of those who remain missing or are still in custody". The resolution also expressed "deepest concern" that the Commission's latest report (A/HRC/39/65) stated that "a vast body of evidence suggested that chlorine had been dropped by helicopter on a residential building...in Douma on 7 April" and that "in a series of ground attacks in Douma on 22 January and 1 February 2018, the Syrian authorities and/or affiliated militias had committed the war crime of using prohibited weapons".

Key Issues and Options

Given the crucial role of actors such as Russia, Turkey and Iran on both the political and humanitarian fronts, Council members could seek an informal interactive dialogue with them in order 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 efforts on the political process are likely to yield results, given the Syrian government's emphasis on regaining and consolidating control of territory. 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 a political process and how Council members, individually and collectively, could better 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 recent release of thousands of death notices for prisoners, the Council could hold a meeting on this matter.

Council and Wider Dynamics

A new element since September has been the participation in Council meetings of Iran and Turkey, the Astana guarantors currently not on the Council. The members of the Small Group that do not sit on the Council (Egypt, Germany, Jordan and Saudi Arabia) asked to participate in the 17 October meeting, as well under rule 37 of the provisional rules of procedure. Although the participation of Germany was initially opposed by China and Russia, in the end the Council President (Bolivia) granted all requests to speak. The

meeting exposed wider regional tensions regarding political Islam and the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The UK and France criticised some participants for discussing topics that were not on the meeting's agenda, and Russia then defended their right to make such statements.

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. As the expiration of the authorisation nears and as the situation in Idlib evolves, Council members are expected to look closely at the role that this authorisation continues to play in the provision of life-saving assistance.

In early October, Russia requested a discussion under “any other business” regarding allegations that volunteers involved in search and rescue operations, known as White Helmets, were involved in the preparation of attacks with chemical weapons in Syria. Most Council members consider these reports unsubstantiated.

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 Report

23 October 2018 S/2018/947	This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letters

27 September 2018 <u>S/2018/875</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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14 February 2018 <u>S/2018/121</u>	This was the final statement of the conference held in Sochi.
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Security Council Meeting Record

17 October 2018 <u>S/PV.8373</u>	This was a briefing by de Mistura with the participation of the guarantors of the Astana process and the members of the Small Group.
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