

June 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In June, Council members expect to receive briefings on the political and humanitarian situations in Syria and on chemical weapons. Council members will also be following closely the seventh round of the intra-Syrian talks, which are expected to be convened in Geneva in June.

Key Recent Developments

At a 3-4 May international meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, the ceasefire guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) agreed on the establishment of four de-escalation areas and security zones in Syria. A memorandum established the areas with the stated aim of ending violence, improving the humanitarian situation, and creating favourable conditions to advance a political settlement. The areas are as follows:

- Idlib province and certain parts of neighbouring provinces (Latakia, Hama and Aleppo provinces);
- certain parts in the north of Homs province;
- eastern Ghouta; and
- certain parts of southern Syria (Deraa and Al-Quneitra provinces).

According to the memorandum, security zones are to be established along the lines of the de-escalation areas to prevent incidents and military confrontations between the parties. After the meeting, Russia circulated a draft resolution on 5 May welcoming the memorandum and calling on all member states to contribute in good faith to its implementation. Several member states said they needed time to consult with capitals and required further information to make a decision on the draft. Japan and Sweden proposed holding an informal interactive dialogue with the guarantors, but they did not receive a positive response. The meeting in Astana also resulted in progress in addressing the issues of detainees, abductees and missing persons, and humanitarian demining. During consultations on 22 May, Russia updated Council members on an 18-19 May meeting of a joint working group composed of guarantor representatives and efforts to implement the memorandum.

Briefing the Council on 22 May, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura assessed the memorandum as a promising development and stressed the UN's readiness to provide technical expertise. He also highlighted that there were still important details to clarify and warned against the parties taking advantage of existing ambiguities to make territorial gains or divert resources to other battlefronts.

The sixth round of intra-Syrian talks was convened by de Mistura in Geneva between 16-19 May. At the talks, de Mistura announced an initiative to establish a technical consultative process of expert meetings to address constitutional and legal issues in the context of the intra-Syrian talks. This process, which is not aimed at making decisions, is expected to feed into the formal Geneva talks through the discussion and definition of options.

De Mistura's efforts to get the delegations of the Cairo and Moscow platforms to join the opposition delegation announced on 11 February for these expert meetings were unsuccessful. Despite these difficulties, de Mistura stressed at the 22 May briefing that the sixth round of talks faced fewer obstacles related to "possible walk-outs, procedural objections or long statements attacking each other or even the questioning of the other side's legitimacy".

Despite the announcement of the four de-escalation areas and a general decrease in levels of violence, clashes have continued both inside and outside the areas, which have yet to be precisely defined. In addition to violence in Hama and Homs, government offensives in May on strategic locations adjacent to eastern Ghouta near Damascus resulted in the besiegement and forced displacement of thousands of civilians in Barzeh, Qaboun and Tishreen towns.

Ensuring rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access continues to be an issue for 4.5 million people in need in hard-to-reach and besieged areas. Given the bureaucratic challenges and the security situation, only 17 inter-agency humanitarian convoys had been carried out in 2017 as of 17 May. At press time, OCHA head Stephen O'Brien was scheduled to brief the Council on 30 May.

The military campaign by the coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its partners on the ground in April resulted in scores of civilian casualties and displaced more than 66,000 people in the Raqqa governorate alone. On 8 May, the US announced that it would supply arms to the Kurdish militia YPG, which is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in the offensive to take Raqqa, an ISIL stronghold.

The Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) shared with Council members a 12 May update on its investigation of the 4 April Khan Shaykhun attack. An analysis of biomedical samples in OPCW-designated laboratories confirmed the use of sarin or a sarin-like substance in the attack. Once the final report is issued, the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) is expected to investigate the attack to identify the perpetrators.

In a 2 May report, the FFM confirmed the use of sulfur mustard in a September 2016 attack in Um-Housh near Aleppo, which had been denounced by the government of Syria. On 23 May, Izumi Nakamitsu, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, in briefing Council members on progress in the elimination of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons reiterated the OPCW's belief that Syria's initial declaration remains incomplete.

Human Rights-Related Developments

During its 35th session in June, the Human Rights Council (HRC) is set to hold an interactive dialogue with the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, which will provide an oral briefing as mandated by HRC resolution 34/26. The HRC is also expected to consider the summary report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the high-level panel discussion on the situation of human rights in Syria held during its 34th session in March (A/HRC/35/15).

Key Issues

More than six years since the start of a war, the essential issue is how the Council can rise above P5 divisions and exert leadership in promoting efforts to reach a political solution.

Enforcing the ceasefire that Council members took note of in resolution 2336 of 31 December 2016 and ensuring that the current de-escalation initiative has sustained impact on the ground, including on humanitarian access, is an important issue that could contribute to progress in the Geneva talks as well as to improve the living conditions of the millions of Syrians affected by the conflict.

Options

The Council has many options at its disposal—such as imposing an arms embargo or targeted sanctions, referring Syria to the International Criminal Court, or authorising a no-fly zone to deter the Syrian government from using its aerial capacity—but P5 divisions make these unlikely options.

Council members could, both individually and collectively, step up efforts to ensure that the government guarantees humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas.

Council members could discuss with the ceasefire guarantors the establishment of the de-escalation areas, the release of detainees, and demining in an informal interactive dialogue.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Over the last few years, Council members' engagement in the Syrian political negotiations has been limited to following the lead taken by key actors outside the Council. This was again the case when Russia circulated a draft resolution welcoming the memorandum agreed to in Astana. In this instance, however, several Council members voiced concerns regarding the limited information available to them in order to make a decision. These concerns have to do with the role of the guarantor countries in the enforcement of the memorandum, in ensuring that the parties respect the deal, and in monitoring the de-escalation areas. At press time, no negotiations had been held on the draft resolution. The memorandum states that third parties could be deployed to monitor the de-escalation areas if there is consensus among the guarantors, but Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem rejected a role for the UN or other international forces in monitoring the agreement.

In a 4 May statement, the US State Department expressed its concern regarding the role of Iran as a guarantor. Particularly critical for the US is Iran's potential presence in areas bordering the Golan Heights (Al-Quneitra province), which is disputed by Israel and

Syria, as well as on the border with Jordan. On 18 May, the US conducted an airstrike on an Iranian-backed military convoy that it said had ignored warning signals and was nearing a base close to the Jordanian border where the US trains Syrian opposition groups.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Letters

S/2017/440 (18 May 2017) was an update report from the OPCW FFM mission on the Khan Shaykhun attack.

S/2017/400 (4 May 2017) was a report by the OPCW FFM on a chemical weapons attack in Um-Housh in September 2016.

S/2017/373 (28 April 2017) was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.

Security Council Meeting Records

S/PV.7946 (23 May 2017) was a briefing by Nakamitsu on the destruction of Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons.

S/PV.7944 (22 May 2017) was a briefing by de Mistura after the sixth round of the Geneva talks

Security Council Resolutions

31 December 2016	Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.
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S/RES/2336

17 November 2016	Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.
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S/RES/2319

27 September 2013	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.
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S/RES/2118

18 December 2015	This was the first resolution focused exclusively on a political solution to the Syrian crisis. It was adopted unanimously.
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S/RES/2254

Secretary-General's Report

22 May 2017 <u>S/2017/445</u>	This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letters

12 May 2017 <u>S/2017/440</u>	This was an update report from the OPCW FFM mission on the Khan Shaykhun attack.
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4 May 2017 <u>S/2017/400</u>	This was a report by the OPCW FFM on a chemical weapons attack in Um-Housh in September 2016.
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