

June 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In June, the Council will receive the monthly briefings on the humanitarian situation, the political process, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Key Recent Developments

Since mid-April, there has been an intensification of hostilities in north-western Syria—which is considered one of the four “de-escalation” areas agreed by the Astana guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) in 2017—that has included Syrian and Russian airstrikes and a ground offensive. At the request of the humanitarian penholders on Syria (Belgium, Germany and Kuwait), Council members discussed on 10 May the humanitarian impact of the escalation of hostilities in north-western Syria, particularly in Idlib, in consultations with OCHA’s Director of Operations and Advocacy, Reena Ghelani.

The humanitarian penholders proposed a draft press statement that did not get the unanimous support needed to be issued. When it became clear that a meaningful statement was not possible, 11 Council members (all except China, Indonesia, Russia and South Africa) decided to read it at the stakeout. The statement condemned the loss of civilian life and expressed alarm at the targeting of population centres and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and schools. The statement urged the concerned parties to recommit and comply fully with the September 2018 ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey.

As the escalation continued despite the setting up of a Turkish-Russian working group to re-establish a cessation of hostilities, the Council held a [briefing](#) on the situation in the north-west on 17 May. The Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, warned that if the offensive pushed forward, “we risk catastrophic humanitarian fallout and threats to international peace and security”. While she discussed the need to address the presence of the Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib, she emphasised that combating terrorism cannot be allowed to supersede obligations under international law. Also briefing the Council, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, stressed how the three million people in Idlib were among the most vulnerable populations in Syria even before the recent escalation, particularly the one million children and the 1.3 million people who fled to Idlib from other parts of the country. Lowcock told the Council that at least 18 medical facilities have been damaged or destroyed by air strikes, shelling or other fighting. Furthermore, 49 health facilities have partially or totally suspended activities for

fear of being attacked. Although he fell short of assigning responsibility, he called the Council's attention to the fact that the location of these facilities had been deconflicted—shared with the parties in order to avoid attacks—and that at least some of the attacks were carried out using modern air force and so-called smart and precision weapons. Council members expressed divergent positions on the military operations in the north-west. Most Council members called for all parties to uphold international humanitarian law, protect civilians and urgently de-escalate the situation, but China and Russia emphasised the importance of fighting terrorism.

In north-eastern Syria, there have been increased operations by Turkey and its allies in Tal Rifaat. The area is held by the Kurdish YPG militia, which is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the escalation of hostilities started around the same time as in Idlib. The situation has become increasingly fragile following the December 2018 announcement by the US that it would withdraw its troops from Syria.

The conditions in the camp of Al-Hol near the Iraqi border remain dire. Some 75,000 people, more than 90 percent of whom are women and children, are sheltered there after being displaced by hostilities between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the SDF.

Regarding the political process, Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen continues discussions with the parties, as well as the Astana guarantors, on convening a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee as soon as possible that could help to unlock a broader political process.

The Identification and Investigation Team of the OPCW, established to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria following a decision of the Conference of State Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in June 2018, is expected to become operational imminently. On 15 May, China and Russia, which opposed the establishment of such a team, circulated a draft resolution to Council members highlighting the need to avoid the politisation of the OPCW and saying that in the absence of the relevant state's consent, the Council remains the only organ authorised to impose legitimate compulsory measures on states, including those arising from noncompliance with the provisions of the CWC.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a statement on 9 May, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria “noted with grave concern the recent spike in hostilities throughout north-western Syria, warning any further escalation would invariably result in a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe” following “reports of numerous attacks by pro-government forces against civilian areas, causing high numbers of casualties including of women and children”. The statement said that over 290,000 individuals have been internally displaced in the north-west over the past three months. In another statement, on 9 May, the commission noted “with grave concern that tens of thousands of civilians displaced by recent battles to capture the last enclaves of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in eastern Syrian are languishing in makeshift camps...[and that] detained individuals are enduring appalling and inhumane conditions of shelter, health, and hygiene”.

Key Issues and Options

Given the crucial role of the Astana guarantors 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 efforts to avert a full-fledged military offensive in Idlib. Furthermore, they could meet informally with OCHA to discuss the recent attacks on medical facilities and schools, many of which had been deconflicted.

Despite international engagement on the establishment of the constitutional committee, there are questions as to whether any effort on the political process is likely to yield results, considering the trajectory of the conflict and the consolidation of control by the Syrian government. Council members could organise a retreat to hold an informal and frank discussion with Pedersen to consider how, individually and collectively, they can best support the prospects for a political process based on resolution 2254.

Building on the information provided by DiCarlo in her 27 March briefing, the Council could suggest that the working group on detainees, abductees, handover of bodies and identification of missing persons, which includes the Astana guarantors and the UN, meet in Geneva in the near future and move beyond one-for-one exchanges to focus instead on the simultaneous release of unequal numbers of detainees/abductees. The Council could hold a meeting specifically to shed light on this little-discussed issue and call on the guarantors to use their influence on the government to engage in good faith on this matter.

The Council could request a briefing in consultations by the Secretariat to focus on the potential for instability in north-eastern Syria, call on the actors involved to exercise restraint, and support good-offices efforts to address long-standing grievances.

Council members could invite the Director-General of the OPCW to participate in an informal interactive dialogue on the work of the organisation on Syria.

Council Dynamics

The clear divisions among Council members over the situation in north-western Syria and the Council’s inability to react unequivocally to violations of international humanitarian law exemplify the entrenched nature of members’ positions on Syria. The impact of these

divisions on the three areas through which the Council engages on the conflict continues to frame the evolution of the conflict.

Belgium, Germany and Kuwait are co-penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 December 2018 <u>S/RES/2449</u>	This was a resolution prepared by Sweden and Kuwait renewing the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria.
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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.
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27 September 2013 <u>S/RES/2118</u>	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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Security Council Letter

29 April 2019 <u>S/2019/355</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Record

17 May 2019 <u>S/PV.8527</u>	This was on the situation in north-western Syria.
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