

# October 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

## Syria

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### Expected Council Action

In October, the Security Council is expected to hold its monthly meetings on the humanitarian situation, the political process, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

### Key Recent Developments

September marked the one-year anniversary of a memorandum of understanding agreed by Russia and Turkey for the demilitarisation of Idlib, which, however, failed to prevent an intensification of hostilities in north-western Syria. There has been a steady increase in attacks since late April. On 30 August, Russia announced a unilateral ceasefire that was confirmed by the Syrian government and appears to have led to a reduction in violence. OHCHR has documented 1,089 civilian deaths as a result of shelling and aerial bombardments in north-western Syria between 19 April and 29 August while OCHA has reported 630,000 displacements—a figure that includes multiple displacements of the same person—between 1 May and 27 August, as people fled the fighting.

Ten Council members—Belgium, the Dominican Republic, France, Germany, Indonesia, Kuwait, Peru, Poland, the UK and the US—met with the Secretary-General on 27 July to deliver a petition asking him to establish an internal UN Headquarters Board of Inquiry (BOI) to investigate the “destruction of, or damage to facilities on the deconfliction list and UN-supported facilities” in north-western Syria. The “deconfliction list” refers to a list of health facilities whose coordinates have been provided to the parties to prevent their targeting, and the démarche urged an investigation into why they continued to be bombed.

On 1 August, the Secretariat announced the establishment of a BOI, and on 13 September, the Secretary-General released a statement through his spokesman announcing its composition and start date. The BOI will be led by Lieutenant General Chikadibia Obiakor (Nigeria) and will include Janet Lim (Singapore) and Marta Santos Pais (Portugal) as its other members. Two senior experts—Major General Fernando Ordóñez (Peru) and Pierre Ryter (Switzerland), the former head of the ICRC East Asia delegation—will support its work. The BOI is expected to commence its work on 30 September. At his 13 September press briefing, Stéphane Dujarric, the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, said that the “goal of the board is to establish the facts for the Secretary-General”, without indicating whether the BOI would assign responsibility for attacks. When asked if the findings would be made public, he replied, “Board of Inquiries...are internal documents and not for public release...That’s what I can tell...at this point”.

On 29 August, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen briefed the Council on the humanitarian and political situations in Syria, respectively. Lowcock described the humanitarian impact of the fighting in Idlib, including the deaths, injuries and displacement of civilians. He also described the difficult conditions facing displaced persons in Al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria. Pedersen described his consultations with the Syrian government and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission regarding efforts to establish “a credible, balanced and inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee under United Nations auspices in Geneva”.

On 16 September, the presidents of Iran (Hassan Rouhani), Russia (Vladimir Putin), and Turkey (Recep Erdoğan), a configuration referred to as the Astana guarantors, met in Ankara, Turkey, where they released a joint statement “reiterat[ing] their support to the efforts of...Special Envoy...Geir O. Pedersen to achieve agreement between the Syrian parties on the rules of procedure” of the Constitutional Committee.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced on 23 September that the Syrian government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission had agreed to form “a credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee that will be facilitated by the UN in Geneva”.

On 19 September, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller briefed the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Among other things, she said that further fighting in Idlib would endanger and displace more civilians and described the threat posed to Syria’s population by unexploded ordnance from the conflict.

Following the meeting, the Council voted on competing draft resolutions aimed at a ceasefire in Idlib: one draft produced by the humanitarian penholders on Syria (Belgium, Germany and Kuwait) that Council members have been negotiating since late August, and a second draft, produced by China and Russia, focusing largely on counter-terrorism issues, that was put in blue earlier in the day without prior negotiations among the full Council. China and Russia vetoed the Belgium/Germany/Kuwait draft, while 12 members voted in favour and Equatorial Guinea abstained. China and Russia were the only members to vote for their own draft; nine members voted against it and four (Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Indonesia, and South Africa) abstained.

The Identification and Investigation Team of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), established to identify perpetrators of chemical weapons attacks in Syria following a June 2018 decision of the Conference of State Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, has identified a non-exhaustive provisional list of nine incidents on which it intends to focus its investigative work. The OPCW has made public that Syria has denied visas and refused to submit confidential information to the members of the team.

## **Human Rights-Related Developments**

In her opening statement on 9 September at the 42nd session of the Human Rights Council (HRC), High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said, “[S]ince the launch of the current campaign on 29 April, more than a thousand civilians have been killed, including at least 300 children—mainly due to airstrikes by Government forces and their allies but also, to a lesser extent, attacks by non-state armed groups”. On 17 September, the HRC held an interactive dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria and considered its report ([A/HRC/42/51](#)). The report emphasises that “government forces, armed groups and all parties to the conflict must facilitate unimpeded humanitarian access to civilians affected by fighting”. It also contains recommendations to member states and, in particular, to those that provide support to the warring parties, “as they bear a shared responsibility for the crimes committed against millions of Syrian women, men and children”.

### **Key Issues and Options**

Key issues for the Council on Syria include how to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Idlib and how to support the next steps in the political process.

The establishment of the constitutional committee appears to be an encouraging step forward in the political process. The Council could welcome this development in a presidential statement, and members could engage with the Special Envoy in consultations in an open and frank discussion on his ideas for next steps in the political process and how to support them.

Given the impact of the Astana guarantors on political and humanitarian developments in Syria, an informal interactive dialogue could be convened with them in order to exchange action-oriented ideas for de-escalating the conflict in Idlib and encouraging the parties to release larger numbers of detainees and abductees. (Informal interactive dialogues are closed meetings that, unlike consultations, allow for the participation of non-UN representatives.) During his 29 August briefing to the Council, Pedersen expressed the view that meaningful action on detainees, abductees and missing persons—such as “unilateral releases [that] move beyond one-for-one exchanges”—could help open space for political progress.

Council members could also consider inviting the Director-General of the OPCW for an informal interactive dialogue to discuss how best to address the challenges of its work in Syria.

### **Council Dynamics**

Stark divisions continue to colour Council dynamics on Syria and hinder the Council’s ability to play a meaningful role in resolving the conflict or even in mitigating its impact on civilians. While Russia has tended to emphasise the threat of terrorism in Syria, the P3 and others have traditionally focused on violations of international humanitarian law, including attacks on schools and hospitals. In this regard, some members have expressed concern that counter-terrorism operations could mask indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets. Russia continues to call into question the information that the UN provides on attacks on medical facilities in Idlib, including during a 16 September press conference at UN headquarters convened on this issue by Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia (Russia).

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

UN Documents on Syria

#### Security Council Meeting Records

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19 September <a href="#">2019S/PV.8623</a>	This meeting was on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
29 August <a href="#">2019S/PV.8609</a>	This was a meeting on the political and humanitarian situations in Syria.
Other	
19 September <a href="#">2019S/2019/756</a>	This was a draft resolution on Idlib that was vetoed by Russia and China.
19 September <a href="#">2019S/2019/757</a>	This was a draft resolution on Idlib that failed to be adopted.

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