

# September 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

## Syria

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### Expected Council Action

In September, 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 late April, the situation in Syria has been marked by the recrudescence of the conflict in Idlib and neighbouring areas in north-western Syria. At a 30 July [briefing](#), the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, said that “bombing and shelling by the Government of Syria, backed by the Russian Federation, has produced carnage in the so-called de-escalation zone of Idlib”. In mid-August, the Syrian army took control of the town of Khan Shaykhun, in Idlib province, which is strategically located along the Damascus-Aleppo M5 highway. At a 29 August briefing, Belgium, Germany and Kuwait announced the circulation of a draft resolution aiming at urgently alleviating the humanitarian situation in north-western Syria.

The offensive has led to increasing attacks on health care facilities and personnel, most of whose coordinates the UN had “deconflicted”—shared with the parties in order to avoid attacks. Also [briefing](#) the Council on 30 July, Susannah Sirkin, the director of policy and partnerships for Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), highlighted how these attacks have been “a defining factor and a deliberate, inhumane and illegal strategy of war”. From March 2011 through July 2019, PHR corroborated 578 such attacks, 91 percent of which were perpetrated by the Syrian government and its allies.

At the meeting, Council members displayed divergent positions. While most stressed the need for accountability for these attacks, Russia questioned the information provided by the UN and said that the main objective of Western members of the Council was “to sustain a terrorist enclave in Idlib”. Lowcock went into detail regarding the information used by the UN, stating that it came from direct or verified sources and that it had been triangulated, reviewed and confirmed. In a 16 July letter, Syria argued that 119 hospitals and health care centres in Idlib had been taken over by terrorist groups and could thus not be considered civilian objects protected under international humanitarian law. Lowcock challenged this assertion, giving examples of some of the hospitals mentioned in the letter that continue to serve their purpose.

The spate of attacks led ten Council members—Belgium, Dominican Republic, France, Germany, Indonesia, Kuwait, Peru, Poland, the UK and the US—to meet with the Secretary-General on 27 July to request the launch of an investigation. On 1 August, the Secretariat announced the establishment of an internal UN Headquarters Board of Inquiry to investigate the “destruction of, or damage to facilities on the deconfliction list and UN-supported facilities” in north-western Syria. However, it remains unclear whether the Board of Inquiry will identify perpetrators and make its conclusions public or even share them directly with the Council. On 15 August, Mark Cutts, the UN Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, announced that airstrikes in Ma’arat Humeh had killed a paramedic and an ambulance driver as well as a rescue worker the day before. At the request of the UK, the Council discussed the attack under “any other business” on 16 August.

For the first time since the beginning of the conflict, on 7 August, at the request of the US, supported by eight other Council members, the Council held a meeting solely focused on the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons in Syria. At the meeting, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, acknowledged that, although the UN was not able to verify the numbers, reports suggest that more than 100,000 people have so far been detained, abducted, disappeared or gone missing, largely, but not only, through the actions of the Syrian government. She assessed the detainee releases so far as insufficient in scale. Only 109 people have been released in four exchanges agreed to in the framework of a working group comprising Iran, Russia, Turkey and the UN, with the International Committee of the Red Cross as an observer.

She reiterated the call for the parties to move beyond “one for one” exchanges and engage in unilateral releases. She also urged the working group to meet in Geneva and to hold meetings more regularly. Dr. Hala Al Ghawi, physician and founder of Syria’s Bright Future, a civil society organisation, and Amina Khouliani, founder of Families for Freedom, also briefed the Council. Dr. Hala asked the Council to adopt a resolution to put pressure on the Syrian government and all warring sides immediately to release the names of all detainees, stop torture and mistreatment, grant unconditional access to detention facilities for international humanitarian organisations and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syria, and share the real cause of death and burial location with the families of the deceased. Khouliani, a former detainee herself, shared with the Council the case of her three brothers, who were killed in detention by the Syrian government.

Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen has continued discussions with the parties, as well as with the Astana guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey), on convening a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee as soon as possible. In July he said that international discussions and cooperation could contribute to a broader political process and declared his intention to convene a meeting in Geneva to bring together all key international players, such as the Astana guarantors, the Small Group (Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UK and the US) and China.

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, became operational in June 2019. It 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**

During its 42nd session, the Human Rights Council is scheduled to hold an interactive dialogue on 17 September with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria and consider its report (A/HRC/42/51).

### **Women, Peace and Security**

During the 7 August briefing on the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons, DiCarlo specifically addressed the situation of women. She argued that they were not only direct victims of arbitrary detention, abduction and related crimes, but also at risk of losing legal rights to housing, land, and property if their husbands or male relatives disappear and the affected families are unable to explain their whereabouts or lack the legal documentation to prove their death. DiCarlo concluded that these circumstances make it even harder for women to sustain their entire family.

### **Key Issues and Options**

Despite international engagement, the constitutional committee has yet to be established. It remains an open question whether efforts on the political process will yield results, considering the divisions in the Council, 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 could best support the prospects for a political process based on [resolution 2254](#).

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 the escalation of conflict in north-western Syria.

In the wake of the 7 August [meeting](#) on detainees, abductees and missing persons, the Council could encourage the parties to focus on promoting the simultaneous release of unequal numbers of detainees and abductees.

The Council could request from the Secretariat a briefing in consultations to focus on the threats of instability in north-eastern Syria involving Turkey and Kurdish armed groups, 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**

Council members continue to be deeply divided over the situation in Syria. In addition to divisions regarding the conflict and its evolution, there is no unanimity in their assessment of the information presented by the UN in Council meetings. Given the deadlock, Council members have devised creative ways to bypass the lack of consensus. The 27 July démarche of ten Council members to the Secretary-General, or the reading in the stakeout of press elements that failed to garner unanimous support (on 18 July by the humanitarian penholders and on 10 May by 11 Council members), are examples of this.

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

### **UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA**

#### Security Council Resolutions

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13 December <a href="#">2018S/RES/2449</a>	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 <a href="#">2015S/RES/2254</a>	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 <a href="#">2013S/RES/2118</a>	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 Letters

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6 August <a href="#">2019S/2019/639</a>	This was a joint statement by the Astana guarantors after a 2 August meeting.
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16 July <a href="#">2019S/2019/572</a>	This was a letter by Syria justifying the targeting of hospitals and health care centres in Idlib.
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25 July <a href="#">2019S/2019/601</a>	This transmitted an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons programme.
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#### Security Council Meeting Records

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7 August <a href="#">2019S/PV.8593</a>	This was a briefing on the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons in Syria.
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30 July <a href="#">2019S/PV.8589</a>	This was a briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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#### Secretary-General's Report

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21 August  
2019S/2019/674

This was the most recent Secretary-General report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.