

October 2017 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In October, Council members expect to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria and on chemical weapons.

Key Recent Developments

During their last round of talks in Astana on 14-15 September, Iran, Russia and Turkey agreed to the delineation and monitoring mechanism for a de-escalation zone in the north-eastern region of Idlib. While the details for its operationalisation are yet to be defined, agreement on this area had proved difficult given its geostrategic interest. Among the key challenges in Idlib is the difficulty of separating armed groups protected by the 30 December 2016 ceasefire agreement and other groups affiliated with Council-listed terrorist organisations, such as Jabhat Fath al-Sham. Three other de-escalation areas have been established since July—in the south-western region, Eastern Ghouta and Homs—with varying degrees of adherence by the parties. Another de-escalation area is being negotiated near Afrin. Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has repeatedly emphasised the need to ensure that the de-escalation areas are a temporary measure and has highlighted the importance of preserving the national unity and territorial integrity of Syria. In September, Russia circulated a draft resolution among the permanent members of the Council to welcome the outcome of the talks in Astana.

Briefing the Council on 30 August, de Mistura expressed the need to extend the cooperation among external and internal players on the de-escalation areas into the political realm. He briefed the Council on how members of the opposition groups (the High Negotiations Committee and the Moscow and Cairo platforms) met in Riyadh in late August to develop common negotiating positions and explore the possibility of forming a single delegation. He warned that the government has sent strong public signals that indicate an exclusively military approach and a dismissal of the prospects for any meaningful political negotiation. He emphasised that only political dialogue can turn military advances into a sustainable post-conflict situation. De Mistura is expected to convene a new round of the intra-Syrian talks in late October or early November in Geneva. France had proposed the creation of a contact group made up of the permanent members of the Council and regional actors to support UN efforts to broker a political settlement, but disagreements over its composition led to a meeting of only the P5 on 21 September.

Regarding efforts to eliminate Syria's declared stockpile of chemical weapons, preparations are under way to confirm the condition of the last two stationary chemical weapons production facilities included in Syria's initial declaration. On 16-18 September, high-level consultations were held between the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the Syrian government aimed at clarifying all outstanding issues regarding Syria's initial declaration. While the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism expires on 17 November, the US has expressed its intention to negotiate the renewal of its mandate before the release of the final substantive reports on two recent attacks, expected in late October.

Stephen O'Brien, then-Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, briefed the Council on Syria for the last time on 30 August. In his statement, O'Brien urged Council members "to find a way to stop the Syrian people from paying the price of political failure". According to a 21 September Secretary-General's report, the trend toward ceasefire agreements and the establishment of de-escalation areas has contributed to a notable reduction in civilian casualties in areas where agreements have been put into effect. However, violence against civilians persists, and military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor continue to have a major impact on civilian populations.

The offensive by the government and its allies on ISIL-held areas in eastern Hama has recently intensified. The security situation, administrative impediments imposed by the government, other deliberate restrictions by the parties, and the removal of medical items by the government continue to hamper the delivery of humanitarian aid, particularly to besieged and hard-to-reach locations. Russia has requested the UN to intensify the delivery of humanitarian aid to de-escalation areas. On the margins of the UN General Assembly, the EU convened a meeting to address resilience and stabilisation efforts in Syria and support for the humanitarian needs of civilians. At press time, the newly appointed Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, and de Mistura were expected to brief the Council on 27 September.

Human Rights-Related Developments

In his opening statement at the 36th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC) on 11 September, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein remarked that “the conflict in Syria has redefined the meaning of the word ‘horror’ [and that] the continuation of this nightmare will forever darken the legacy of this generation of world leaders”. He stated that OHCHR has “documented hundreds of airstrikes and ground-based strikes in 2017 which have killed thousands of civilians across the country, at least a quarter of them children. Across the country, thousands of people have been deprived of their liberty and are held in facilities run by the government or armed opposition groups, where they are frequently subjected to torture or cruel treatment, including sexual violence”.

During its 36th session, the HRC held an interactive dialogue with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria and considered its report (A/HRC/36/55). The report, covering March to July, concluded that civilians throughout the country continue to account for the overwhelming majority of casualties; children and internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain among the most vulnerable to violence, such as in Al-Rashidin, Aleppo, where a car bomb in April targeted IDPs and killed 96 persons, including 68 children. According to the report, government forces continued the pattern of using chemical weapons against civilians on at least four occasions, including a sarin attack in Khan Shaykhun, Idlib, which killed more than 80 civilians, the majority of whom were women and children. The report urged the Security Council to support its recommendations, include regular briefings by the Commission of Inquiry as part of the formal agenda of the Security Council, and to use its influence with all relevant actors and stakeholders to ensure a comprehensive and all-inclusive peace process that maintains due respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. It also recommended that the HRC transmit the report to the Secretary-General for the attention of the Security Council.

Key Issues and Options

More than six years since the start of the war, the essential issue is whether the Council can rise above P5 divisions and exert leadership in efforts to reach a political solution. However, those divisions limit the options at the disposal of Council members.

The ceasefire and de-escalation initiatives have raised the expectations of many inside and outside Syria. A key priority of the international community's engagement appears to be to ensure that these expectations are fulfilled, and that they improve the living conditions for the 13.5 million civilians in need without promoting a de facto partition of the country. As Council members decide whether to put its weight behind a resolution endorsing the decisions made in Astana, they could be informed about the operationalisation of the ceasefire and de-escalation agreements and consider whether the Council has any role to play in supporting the monitoring mechanisms needed to enforce the de-escalation agreements.

As international efforts against ISIL continue, an important issue is to ensure the coherence of stabilisation initiatives with UN efforts aimed at brokering a political settlement, so as not to create conditions on the ground that undermine those efforts. Some regional and international actors prioritise expediting the return of refugees to

Syria. The Council could hold a session to hear directly from refugees and UNHCR and reaffirm the right of all Syrians to seek asylum and enjoy refugee protection until conditions are conducive for voluntary return in safety and in dignity.

Council and Wider Dynamics

As has been the case in the past with regards to Syria, Council members' engagement has been limited to following the lead taken by key actors outside the Council. In late September, Russia circulated a draft resolution among the permanent members of the Council to welcome the outcome of the talks in Astana. When Russia previously circulated a draft resolution in May welcoming the memorandum agreed to in Astana, several Council members voiced concerns regarding the limited information available to them in order to make a decision, including on the monitoring mechanisms and the role of the guarantor countries in the enforcement of the ceasefire. While some of these details have been agreed to since then, some Council members are still likely to raise questions regarding the scope and functioning of the de-escalation areas in negotiating the draft circulated by Russia in September. The US has consistently expressed its concern regarding the role of Iran as a guarantor in this process and sees its own initiative in bringing about the south-western de-escalation area as separate from the Astana process.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

31
December
2016
S/RES/2336

Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.

17
November
2016
S/RES/2319

Renewed the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism for a further year.

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.

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.

Secretary-General's Report

21
September
2017
S/2017/794

This was on the humanitarian situation.

Security Council Letter

29 August 2017
S/2017/756

This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.

Security Council Meeting Record

30 August 2017
S/PV.8036

This was a briefing by O'Brien and de Mistura.