

# June 2016 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

## Syria

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Expected Council Action

In June, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura is expected to brief Council members on the intra-Syrian political process that, at press time, was facing serious challenges due to the unravelling cessation of hostilities and the ongoing lack of humanitarian access.

Council members will also receive their regular monthly briefings on the humanitarian and chemical weapons tracks.

Key Recent Developments

On 3 May, the Security Council adopted resolution [2286](#) condemning attacks on health care workers and facilities and demanding compliance with international humanitarian law. While the resolution was not country-specific, many Council members viewed it as relevant to Syria in light of ongoing attacks against medical facilities there, in particular the airstrike targeting a hospital in rebel-held Aleppo in late April and the shelling of a maternity ward in government-held Aleppo in early May.

On 4 May, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien briefed the Council on the escalation of hostilities around Aleppo. Government forces, supported by Russian air power and the Lebanese Shi'a militia Hezbollah, were targeting armed rebel groups, ostensibly fighting in coordination with Al Nusra Front, which is not a party to the cessation of hostilities.

In early May, Russia and the US declared so-called “regimes of calm”, or local and temporary truces, to try and shore up the failing cessation of hostilities in Aleppo as well as in government-controlled Latakia and rebel-held Eastern Ghouta outside of Damascus. On 9 May, Russia and the US, in their capacity as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group's (ISSG) ceasefire task force, issued a joint statement that they would intensify efforts to implement a nationwide cessation of hostilities, enhance efforts to promote humanitarian assistance, and redouble efforts to reach a political solution. The statement also committed to delineating areas controlled by Al Nusra Front and by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), to ensure a common understanding of which areas were afforded protection by the cessation of hostilities and which areas were not—a task originally set out in resolution 2268 in February, but with unclear results, as any such agreement between Russia and the US on delineation has not been shared with others.

The situation on the ground over the course of May did not provide any evidence that commitments in the 9 May statement were being observed. The Syrian regime pressed on with two key objectives: to encircle Aleppo and break rebel control of areas around Damascus. There were escalating government airstrikes in Aleppo, including targeting the last road into rebel-held parts of the city. Outside of Damascus, airstrikes had allowed government forces to advance into rebel-held areas in Eastern Ghouta by 19 May.

On 12 May, despite having received clearance from government authorities, a UN aid convoy was denied access to government-besieged Darraya, a suburb of Damascus that had not received aid since 2012. The convoy was refused entry by the 4th Division of the Syrian Army, controlled by President Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher, because it included medical and nutritional supplies, with the government arguing it had only approved vaccines, school supplies and baby formula. After the convoy turned back, government forces launched a mortar attack at the area where civilians had gathered to receive the aid, reportedly killing a father and his son and injuring five others.

Following the aborted aid delivery, media reports indicated that rebel fighters feared an imminent assault on Darraya, citing the deployment of increased numbers of government troops and equipment near the town. A government offensive over the weekend of 21-22 May was repelled. The rebel Free Syrian Army, on behalf of 40 armed opposition groups, announced on 22 May that they would no longer abide by the cessation of hostilities unless Syrian forces ceased attacks on Aleppo and around Damascus.

On 23 May, US Secretary of State John Kerry spoke with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, urging him to use his influence to halt Syrian government attacks on Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus. At press time, Russia had called for another "regime of calm" to be extended to the Damascus suburbs of Darraya and Eastern Ghouta and had said its military would hold off on strikes for a limited period of time to allow rebel groups to withdraw from Al-Nusra Front positions.

Meanwhile, in mid-May, Al Nusra Front, in coordination with rebel groups and other extremist groups, seized Khan Touman, a village south of Aleppo. There were also reports of insurgents killing and abducting civilians when they advanced into the government-controlled Alawite village of Al Zara. Attacks by ISIS on 23 May killed 160 people in the government-controlled towns of Jableh and Tartous.

At press time, the situation in Syria was grim, with the cessation of hostilities on the cusp of falling apart, leaving the political process in limbo. At the end of the last round of intra-Syrian talks in late April, de Mistura said that the parties had agreed on the need for a "transition" but remained far apart on how to achieve it. The government proposed a national unity government, but explicitly rejected the opposition's position to form a transitional governing body with full executive powers (in line with the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué), and insisted that Assad's presidency was not subject to negotiation.

Indeed, there were no political talks held in May, though the ISSG met on 17 May, resulting in yet another statement reaffirming the need for a full cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access. The statement welcomed the new Russian-US Coordination Cell

in Geneva that was set up to investigate, respond to and mitigate the effects of the violations of the cessation of hostilities. Regarding aerial bombardment, the statement recalled the Syrian government's March commitment not to "arbitrarily" use weapons, presumably in reference to strikes against civilian targets. The statement added that if a party was persistently non-compliant it could then be excluded from the cessation of hostilities, but the approval process to determine such exclusion as described was arduous and opaque. On humanitarian issues, the statement said that if the UN continues to be denied access to besieged areas after 1 June, then the World Food Programme should deliver humanitarian aid via air bridges and air drops, as it does in ISIL-controlled Deir ez-Zor. Finally, the statement underscored that, as per resolution [2254](#), 1 August remained the deadline for the parties to reach an agreement on a framework for a genuine political transition and welcomed the Special Envoy's 27 April Mediator's Summary.

Unlike in past statements, the ISSG could not reach agreement on when talks might resume. However, by welcoming the Mediator's Summary, the ISSG signaled agreement that the basis for the next round of talks would include issues such as the powers of the presidency in a transitional government, security sector reform, constitutional issues, justice sector reform and issues related to UN-supervised elections. The opposition umbrella group, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), has reiterated the need for a full cessation of hostilities and the delivery of humanitarian aid before they would return to talks. At press time, de Mistura was scheduled to brief Council members on 26 May and was expected to echo the need for substantially less violence and substantially more aid, and reiterate that, despite agreement on an agenda for the talks, without appropriate conditions the credibility of any future talks would be in jeopardy.

Regarding the humanitarian situation, OCHA head O'Brien was expected to brief Council members on 27 May and report that ongoing indiscriminate attacks, the slow-down in aid delivery, the continued removal of medical supplies from convoys by government forces and the lack of access to government-besieged suburbs of Damascus, particularly Darraya, continued to undermine independent humanitarian action.

On chemical weapons, Acting UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Kim Won-soo briefed Council members on 5 May.

### **Sanctions-Related Developments**

On 20 April, the 1267/1989/2253 Al-Qaida/ISIL Sanctions Committee added five individuals to its list ([SC/12332](#)). Separately in late April, Russia requested that Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam be added to Al-Qaida/ISIL sanctions list. But the request was blocked in early May as consensus among all 15 Council members could not be reached.

### **Key Issue**

The essential issue for the Council, entering the sixth year of a war that has exacted a death toll of 470,000 and displaced half of the Syrian population, including 4.84 million refugees, is to exert effective leadership in supporting a cessation of hostilities and efforts to reach a political solution.

### **Options**

The ISSG and resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#) have identified roles for the Council in the event that talks in 2016 produce concrete results towards a national ceasefire and a parallel political process, including elections. In the near term, however, Council options are limited as the day-to-day oversight of resolutions [2254](#) and [2268](#) has been outsourced to the ISSG broadly, and Russia and the US in particular.

### **Council Dynamics**

Many Council members are of the view that the government's recent offensives, particularly around Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, confirm the regime's preference for prolonged armed conflict over a negotiated settlement. There is also a broad recognition that if fighting in Syria cannot be controlled then it will be difficult for UN mediation between the government and the opposition to resume with any chance of success.

There is a palpable sense of frustration among many elected members over spending time and energy deciding questions of meeting formats and arguing over press statements rather than grappling with the substantial issues at hand. Two draft press statements in May were blocked by Russia: one on attacks against hospitals in Aleppo, and another addressing an attack against a camp for internally displaced persons near the Turkish border. Finally, on 12 May, Council members were able to agree on a press statement that generically expressed outrage at attacks directed towards civilians and civilian objects, but did not detail specific incidents. The day-to-day oversight of forging a political solution to the Syrian crisis has been outsourced to the ISSG broadly, and specifically to P5 members Russia and the US, and has left very little space for the Council to bring new thinking or energy to help resolve the situation.

Russia and the US have invested a great deal of political capital in the Geneva talks and still seem to be on the path of engagement. However, some Council members are concerned that the contours of any deal the parties might be pressured to accept will be so far removed from the spirit and intent of the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué that it will be destined to fail. Some are also of the view that the Russian-US cooperation on Syria has reached its limits, resulting in familiar divisions reoccurring in New York in the Security Council. Russia's request to add Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam to the Al-Qaida/ISIL sanctions list was blocked by the P3 and Ukraine. Both Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam are parties to the cessation of hostilities and listing them would, de facto, broaden the range of legitimate targets for government offensives, since groups sanctioned by the UN Security Council are not included in the cessation of hostilities.

Tensions have also re-emerged on the chemical weapons track, where the P3 and many other Council members have blocked China and Russia's draft resolution that would expand the mandate of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism's (JIM)—the body mandated to determine responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in Syria—to also monitor and investigate the use of chemical weapons by non-state actors more widely. While all Council members agree this is a serious issue, the P3 and many other members believe it is a broad threat that should not be tied to the mandate of the JIM, which is a mechanism specific to Syria with limited capacity.

Most outcomes on Syria are agreed between Russia and the US prior to agreement by the Council. Egypt, New Zealand and Spain lead on humanitarian issues.

## UN DOCUMENTS

### Security Council Resolutions

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26 February 2016 S/RES/2268 Endorsed the cessation of hostilities and called for the resumption of political talks.

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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.

### Security Council Meeting Records

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27 May 2016 S/PV.7701 This was a briefing was a briefing on humanatarian situation.

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4 May 2016 S/PV.7687 This was a briefing on the situation in Aleppo.

### Security Council Press Statements

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24 May 2016 SC/12372 This was a press statement that condemned the ISIL attacks in Jableh and Tartous as well as indiscriminate attacks by all parties, called for the resumption of talks and expressed support for Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura.

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12 May 2016 SC/12360 This was a statement that expressed outrage at attacks against civilians and civilian objects.

### Security Council Letter

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12 May 2016 S/2016/438 This was the joint statement of Russia and the US that reconfirmed their commitment to Syria's cessation of hostilities.

### Secretary-General's Reports

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19 May 2016 S/2016/460 This was a report on humanitarian situation.

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27 April 2016 S/2016/391 This was a report on chemical weapons.

## OTHER RELEVANT FACTS

**ISSG Members:** Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Netherlands, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, UAE, UK, and the US and the Arab League, EU, OIC and the UN