

January 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In January 2019, the Council will receive the monthly briefings on the humanitarian situation and the use of chemical weapons in Syria. At press time, no briefing on the political situation was scheduled. Geir O. Pedersen will take office as the new Special Envoy for Syria in early January 2019.

Key Recent Developments

December 2018 saw the first Council decision on Syria since February. On 13 December, the Council adopted [resolution 2449](#), drafted by Kuwait and Sweden, which renewed for a year the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria. Through this authorisation, first established by the Council in resolution 2165 in July 2014, UN actors and implementing partners have been able to deliver cross-border life-saving humanitarian assistance to millions of people, only notifying the Syrian government, rather than awaiting its authorisation. Despite the changes in territorial control within Syria, this authorisation continues to be vital, particularly in northern Syria.

The resolution was adopted with the abstentions of China and Russia. In explaining its vote, Russia highlighted the need to eventually roll back a provision that had been devised originally as a temporary measure. Both countries emphasised the need to increase the monitoring and transparency of the mechanisms used to deliver cross-border aid. Russia proposed decreasing the frequency of the reports that the Council receives on the humanitarian situation in Syria. Resolution 2449 maintains the request for monthly Council briefings on the humanitarian situation, but the written reports will now be received bimonthly.

After welcoming the adoption, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock [briefed](#) the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria. He raised the critical situation in Idlib, where the fate of some 3 million people continues to depend on the restraint exercised by the parties. Recent shelling and fighting in areas in and around the demilitarised zone continue to result in civilian deaths and injuries, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and displacement that now numbers nearly 15,000 people. He described the limitations encountered by the UN and its partners in securing sustained humanitarian access, including to areas under the control of the government, and updated the Council on the situation in places such as Deir ez-Zor where up to 6,000

people remain trapped by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Following up on a successful delivery in November, a convoy was expected to reach 40,000 people stranded in dire conditions in the makeshift camp of Rukban by the end of the year.

At the request of the Secretary-General, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura focused the last weeks of his tenure on assessing the possibility of establishing a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. De Mistura has repeatedly told the Council that the main reason for the delay in convening the first session of a constitutional committee—which is expected to comprise 150 people, one-third each from the government, the opposition, and civil society—was the government’s refusal to accept the UN-prepared list of civil society participants. After several failed attempts, the guarantors of the Astana process—Iran, Russia and Turkey—agreed on a civil society list in mid-December, but this version was not acceptable to de Mistura. Briefing the Council on 20 December, he characterised the list as representing significant joint input, but declared that the UN did not feel comfortable accepting all 50 members of the list as meeting the necessary criteria of credibility and balance. During his briefing, de Mistura identified several elements regarding the constitutional committee that it should be possible to agree on, including having a balanced co-chairmanship arrangement and a 75 percent voting threshold.

A joint statement by the presidents of France, Russia and Turkey and the Chancellor of Germany after a summit held on 27 October 2018 in Istanbul had called for the “establishing and early convening, considering the circumstances, by the end of the year of the constitutional committee in Geneva”. However, an 18 December 2018 statement of the Astana guarantors said that the committee will convene in early 2019.

The situation in north-eastern Syria, particularly between Turkey and the YPG, a Kurdish militia that is part of the US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), continues to be tense, despite joint patrolling by the US and Turkey near Manbij. In mid-December, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to mount a new offensive east of the Euphrates River against the SDF. The announcement on 19 December 2018 by US President Donald J. Trump regarding the withdrawal of US troops from Syria may have negative consequences for the stability of that area.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed the Council on 4 December. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons continues to have concerns regarding the limited cooperation of the Syrian government in addressing the gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies identified in Syria’s initial declaration of its chemical weapons stockpile.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 28 November, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria issued a paper on death notifications in Syria following information released by the Syrian government on the deaths of numerous detained and/or missing persons. The paper “stresses the need to account for the fate and whereabouts of detained and missing individuals countrywide” and “notes that no progress can be made in reaching a political settlement and a lasting peace in Syria without urgently confronting the justice-based needs of Syrian victims and survivors as well as their families.” The paper, which was presented to Council members that same day in an Arria-formula meeting, contains six recommendations, including that “pro-government forces and primarily the Syrian State should reveal publicly the fates of those detained, disappeared, and/or missing without delay”; that “families must further be able to retrieve the bodies of their relatives who died in detention or by execution or be told where their remains are”; that “the Syrian state must ensure that all custodial deaths are promptly, thoroughly, transparently, and independently investigated in line with international standards”; that “those responsible...must be held accountable...[and] if the Syrian state is unwilling or unable to hold perpetrators accountable, a referral by the United Nations Security Council to the International Criminal Court should be made”; and that “a national reparations mechanism should be established”.

Key Issues and Options

Given the crucial role of Russia, Turkey and Iran 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 current and future efforts to avert a full-fledged military offensive in Idlib.

Some Council members question whether any effort on the political process is likely to yield results, given the Syrian government’s emphasis on regaining territory and consolidating control. As Pedersen assumes his role as Special Envoy in January 2019, Council members could hold an informal and frank discussion to consider how, individually and collectively, they can best support the prospects of a political process based on resolution 2254 which in December 2015 laid out the steps toward a political solution in Syria.

The issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons has not attracted much attention in the Council and is mostly considered under the rubric of confidence-building measures being discussed by the Astana guarantors. With little progress on this front and the Syrian government’s release of thousands of death notices for prisoners, the Council could hold a meeting on this matter.

The Council could request a briefing from 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 longstanding grievances.

Council and Wider Dynamics

Ahead of the negotiations on resolution 2449 on humanitarian cross-border access, there were concerns that renewing the authorisation would prove difficult. In the 2017 renewal, China and Russia had abstained, arguing that the measure was always intended to be temporary. Russia’s position became more nuanced in the lead-up to the negotiations in

2018, however, and at a 29 November [briefing](#), Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy merely called for the cross-border mechanism to be adjusted to respond to the concerns he raised about insufficient transparency regarding cross-border deliveries and the need to reflect significant changes in the situation on the ground. The role of Turkey, which had been critical in making the case for renewing the authorisation in 2017, was equally important this time around.

Among the areas Russia focused on in the negotiations on resolution 2249 were the inclusion of a reference welcoming the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and a call for the international community to increase its assistance to Syria by providing additional humanitarian aid and restoring humanitarian infrastructure assets. Elected members Kuwait and Sweden, the penholders on this issue, were able to act as a bridge between the P3 and Russia in exploring possible compromises in their positions. In the end, the final draft recalled "the need to create conditions throughout the country and facilitate the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and IDPs to their home areas in Syria, in accordance with international law". It also called upon the international community to increase its assistance to Syria by providing additional humanitarian aid.

In the negotiations, Russia proposed that the draft condemn unilateral coercive measures and that it requests the Secretary-General to consider the recommendations contained in the report of the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights in Syria, but these references were not included in the final text.

Belgium and Germany will succeed Sweden as co-penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria, along with Kuwait.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 December 2018 S/RES/2449	This was a resolution prepared by Sweden and Kuwait renewing the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access to Syria.
24 February 2018 S/RES/2401	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
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.
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.

Secretary-General's Report

11 December 2018 <u>S/2018/1104</u>	This is the Secretary-General's latest report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Security Council Letter

29 November 2018 <u>S/2018/1071</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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Security Council Meeting Records

13 December 2018 <u>S.PV/8423</u>	This was the meeting at which resolution 2449 was adopted.
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29 November 2018 <u>S/PV.8411</u>	This was a briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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