

February 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In February, the Council expects to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria and on chemical weapons.

Key Recent Developments

Council members continue to put forward divergent narratives regarding the humanitarian situation in Syria. On 9 January, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Ursula Mueller briefed Council members under “any other business”. The briefing had been requested by Russia to focus on the humanitarian situation of Raqqa and to call for the US-led coalition involved in liberating the city from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant to play a role in its reconstruction.

In early January, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock visited Syria. In remarks to the press in Damascus on 11 January he highlighted five areas where progress is needed. These were conveyed to Council members in a briefing under “any other business” on 22 January:

- The finalisation of the UN humanitarian response plan for 2018 to meet the needs of more than 13 million people in Syria.
- Reaching an agreement to allow for the medical evacuation for hundreds of people trapped in Eastern Ghouta.
- Ensuring consistent and regular cross-line access.
- Agreeing on UN-supported aid convoys from Damascus to the remote area of Rukban (the berm) in south-eastern Syria.
- Developing more effective arrangements to allow the UN to support the work of Syrian and international NGOs.

On 25 January, Kuwait and Sweden circulated a draft presidential statement calling for progress on these issues. The situation in Eastern Ghouta, where nearly 400,000 people are besieged by government forces and their allies, continues to be dire. Even though 29 critically ill persons were allowed to evacuate, along with some family members, more than 500 remain in need of urgent medical care. A government offensive in December 2017 targeting Al Nusra Front’s-affiliate Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib has led to the displacement of some 200,000 civilians. On 18 January, the UN special advisers on the prevention of genocide and the responsibility to protect, respectively Adama Dieng and Ivan Šimonović, issued a statement expressing concern about the devastating impact of

escalating hostilities in both places. They highlighted how even though these are designated as “de-escalation areas”, civilians are regularly and directly targeted in a violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. On 30 January, Mueller briefed the Council on the 23 January report of the Secretary-General on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The intra-Syrian talks held under UN auspices have failed to yield progress on the agenda established by resolution 2254—governance; constitutional issues; elections; and counter-terrorism, security and confidence-building measures. The UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has repeatedly expressed his disappointment at the government delegation’s refusal to engage in direct talks and the establishment of preconditions. De Mistura convened a special meeting of the parties in Vienna on 25-26 January in order to discuss the constitution-drafting process. A Russian initiative, with the support of Iran and Turkey, to hold a conference of Syrians in Sochi on 29-30 January, also to address constitutional issues, was boycotted by key opposition groups. Ahead of the meeting, de Mistura emphasised that final agreement on any constitutional committee that may come out of Sochi is to be reached in the UN-led Geneva process, including on the mandate and terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure, and selection criteria for its composition. Russian officials have repeatedly emphasised coherence between the initiative and the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva.

On 20 January, Turkey launched “Operation Olive Branch”, a military offensive into the territory held by the YPG, a Kurdish militia that is part of the US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and that Turkey considers a terrorist organisation. That same day, Turkey justified the operation in a letter to the Council on the grounds of article 51 of the UN Charter (self-defence) in order to respond to an increase in rocket attacks and harassment fire against the provinces of Hatay and Kilis from the Syrian region of Afrin. The operation was launched after the US announced plans to establish a 30,000-strong force to secure the area controlled by the SDF near the border with Turkey. The offensive was discussed at the 22 January briefing under “any other business”, for which France requested information on the situation in Afrin. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, who briefed Council members along with Lowcock, described the potential impact of the offensive and its ramifications in the conflict dynamics.

Despite the failure to renew the Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the UN in November, the Council continues to receive information regarding the chemical weapons dossier on Syria. On 9 January, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu briefed Council members in consultations on the efforts to eliminate Syria’s declared arsenal. She told Council members that 25 of the 27 chemical weapons production facilities declared by Syria had been verified by the OPCW Technical Secretariat as having been destroyed. Initial inspections had been carried out in the two remaining facilities and their destruction is expected. Nakamitsu told Council members that the OPCW fact-finding mission is expected to submit its next report to the Council in late February.

The polarisation among Council members on the chemical weapons file has continued even as indications of ongoing attacks emerged on 13 and 22 January in Eastern Ghouta. On 10 January, the US circulated a letter challenging Russia's criticisms of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and the JIM. On 22 January, Russia responded, circulating a letter criticising the US assessment of Russia's stance regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria. On 23 January, Russia called for a Council meeting in order to address the accusations made by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson the same day that Russia was responsible for shielding the Syrian government on this issue. At the meeting, Russia circulated a draft resolution aimed at establishing a new investigation mechanism to identify facts beyond a reasonable doubt that could lead to the attribution by the Council of the use of chemical weapons.

Also on 23 January, France convened in Paris the first meeting of an international partnership against impunity for the use of chemical weapons. A declaration of principles was signed by 24 member states (including Council members Côte d'Ivoire, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland and Sweden in addition to the P3).

Human Rights-Related Developments

In a 10 January statement, High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein condemned the upsurge in civilian casualties in Eastern Ghouta amid the recent escalation in airstrikes and ground-based attacks. The High Commissioner noted that "the suffering of the people of Syria knows no end. In Eastern Ghouta, where a crippling siege has caused a humanitarian catastrophe, residential areas are being hit day and night by strikes from the ground and from the air". According to the statement, since 31 December 2017, at least 85 civilians, including 21 women and 30 children, have been killed and at least 183 injured in Eastern Ghouta.

Key Issues and Options

Almost seven years since the start of the war, P5 divisions have limited the options at the disposal of Council members. However, the Council could tackle some of the issues that could contribute to building trust among the parties. At a 21-22 December 2017 meeting in Kazakhstan, Iran, Russia and Turkey established a working group to address the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons in Syria. Council members could hold an informal meeting to discuss with them, as well as other relevant actors, how confidence-building measures can be effectively implemented in order to support progress in the political process.

Following the circulation of the Russian draft to establish a new investigative mechanism for the use of chemical weapons, Council members could negotiate in an effort to achieve consensus. If reaching an agreement proves impossible, Council members could request options from the Secretary-General in order to devise such a mechanism taking into account the positions expressed by Council members in the failed negotiations to renew the JIM.

Council and Wider Dynamics

The divergent perspectives among Council members continue to limit the Council's work on Syria. The exchanges of letters and statements at the 23 January meeting show how Council members still blame each other for the demise of the JIM. Tensions over the characterisation of the humanitarian situation in Syria, the limited traction of the UN-led process in Geneva, and the emergence of initiatives that may provide an alternative platform to discuss political matters frame discussions in the other two tracks of the Syria dossier. Military escalation between Turkey and the SDF risks opening a new front in the conflict and further worsening the dire humanitarian situation.

In January, the US administration made several statements regarding its new policy on Syria. In a speech on Syria at Stanford University on 17 January, Tillerson stated that “[a] total withdrawal of US personnel at this time would restore Assad and continue his brutal treatment of his own people” and explained how “[a] stable, unified and independent Syria ultimately requires post-Assad leadership in order to be successful”. With its political engagement on Syria beyond counter-terrorism efforts, the US is also expected to aim to limit the regional influence of Iran.

Kuwait and Sweden are the penholders on humanitarian issues in Syria.

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

19 December 2017 <u>S/RES/2393</u>	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.
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18 December 2015 <u>S/RES/2254</u>	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 2013 <u>S/RES/2118</u>	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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Secretary-General's Report

23 January 2018 <u>S/2018/60</u>	This was the monthly report on the humanitarian situation.
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Security Council Letters

22 January 2018 <u>S/2018/54</u>	This was a letter circulated by Russia criticising the US assessment of Russia's stance regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria.
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20 January 2018 <u>S/2018/53</u>	This was a letter by Turkey informing the Council of a military operation against PKK-linked terrorist organisations.
10 January 2018 <u>S/2018/35</u>	This was a letter by the US challenging Russia's criticisms of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and the JIM.
27 December 2017 <u>S/2017/1119</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
3 November 2017 <u>S/2017/931</u>	This was a letter forwarding the OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission report concluding that sarin "was more than likely used as a chemical weapon" on 30 March in Lataminah.
Security Council Meeting Record	
23 January 2018 <u>S/PV.8164</u>	This was a meeting held at the request of Russia on the use of chemical weapons in Syria.