

February 2019 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In February, 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

The beginning of 2019 has been marked by increased regional tensions involving Syria. The 19 December 2018 announcement by US President Donald Trump regarding the withdrawal of US troops from Syria has contributed to this. The US actively supports the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the Kurdish militia YPG, and the US decision has introduced fresh uncertainty into efforts to prevent an escalation of violence between Turkey and the YPG, counter-terrorism operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), as well as the fate of the territory currently controlled by the SDF in the northeast. Along with Idlib, the northeast is one of the main areas outside Syrian government control. The decision sparked the resignations of the US Secretary of Defence and the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIL. Trump initially indicated that the US would withdraw its forces rapidly, but following considerable pressure from members of Congress and key US allies, he and senior officials have said the withdrawal will happen more slowly. At press time, the details of the withdrawal, including its timeline and conditions, remained unclear.

Tensions between Syria and Israel have escalated in recent weeks. On 20 January, Israel conducted airstrikes against Iranian and Syrian military targets throughout the country. The attacks reportedly killed 21 people, including 12 Iranian soldiers. A statement from the Israeli Defence Forces described the attacks as a response to the firing of a surface-to-surface missile aimed at the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights by Iranian forces stationed near Damascus, and said that this proved that “Iran is attempting to entrench itself in Syria”, thus endangering regional stability.

The situation in Idlib remains critical. In September 2018, Turkey and Russia agreed to establish a demilitarised zone 15 to 20 kilometres wide along the contact line between armed groups and government troops. The zone, which was aimed at preventing a military offensive, also facilitated the separation of forces of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (a Council-designated terrorist group) from other rebel groups. On 11 January, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham took over control of most of Idlib from the National Liberation Front, the Turkish-backed coalition of moderate armed groups.

The humanitarian situation in Syria continues to be dire, and has been exacerbated by harsh winter conditions, including torrential rains. On 13 December 2018, 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, which was renewed with the abstention of China and Russia, UN actors and implementing partners have been able to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance across the border to millions of people by notifying the Syrian government, rather than awaiting its authorisation. However, many humanitarian challenges persist, including the vulnerability of some three million people in Idlib, the fate of thousands of people who remain trapped by ongoing hostilities in ISIL-held areas in Deir ez-Zor and those who have fled the area, and difficulties in securing sustained humanitarian access, including to areas under government control. Efforts to reach 40,000 people stranded in harsh conditions in the makeshift camp of Rukban near the border with Jordan in December 2018 were unsuccessful.

Despite international pressure, efforts—ongoing since January 2018—to form a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee had not yielded results by the end of the year. The constitutional committee is expected to comprise 150 people, one-third each from the government, the opposition, and civil society. The Syrian government refused 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 at an 18 December 2018 ministerial meeting, but this version was not acceptable to the UN. [Briefing](#) the Council on 20 December 2018, then-Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura said that the list represented significant joint input but that the UN did not feel comfortable accepting all its 50 names 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. Geir O. Pedersen took office as the new Special Envoy for Syria on 7 January. Since taking office, he has had several meetings with the Syrian government, the opposition and relevant regional and international players involved in Syria.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed Council members on 8 January. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) 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. In the coming weeks, Council members expect to receive the report of the OPCW fact-finding mission regarding the alleged chemical weapons attack that took place in Douma (Eastern Ghouta) on 7 April 2018. According to a 23 July [interim report](#), no nerve agents or their degradation products were detected, but chlorinated organic chemicals were found in samples from two locations, along with residues of explosive.

Women, Peace and Security

The Syrian Women's Advisory Board continues to be included in regular consultations with the Special Envoy. According to the latest Secretary-General's report on the humanitarian situation in Syria, the group called for credible participation of women in the yet-to-be-established constitutional committee, as well as overall strengthened participation of women in the political process. During his 20 December 2018 final briefing to the Council, de Mistura said that one of the co-chairs of the constitutional committee should be a woman, considering that women represent over half of the Syrian population.

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.

Council members continue to be profoundly divided over Syria, and some question whether any effort on the political process is likely to yield results, considering the Syrian government's emphasis on regaining territory and consolidating control. As Pedersen initiates contacts with relevant actors, 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 prisoner death notices, the Council could hold a meeting on this matter.

A new concern is that the recent takeover of most of Idlib by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham could be used to justify a military offensive by the Syrian government and its allies.

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 long-standing grievances.

Council and Wider Dynamics

The potential for regional instability connected to the Syrian conflict has not featured prominently in Council discussions, which have mostly focused on three dimensions of the crisis: the political process, the humanitarian situation, and the use of chemical weapons. It remains to be seen whether developments on the ground will make this discussion unavoidable or if any Council members would like to pre-emptively request a meeting specifically on this question.

As the government consolidates its territory, some Arab countries—including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain—have started to reinstate their diplomatic presence in Damascus, and Jordan upgraded its level of representation in the Syrian capital.

Diplomatic relations between most of these countries and Syria had been severed at the beginning of the crisis in 2011.

Among the areas Russia focused on in the negotiations on resolution 2449 were the inclusion of references to the return of refugees and internally displaced persons and the need to increase the international community's assistance to Syria. Inclusion of this language has been systematically opposed by the P3 and other like-minded countries, which argue that there can be no international support for funding for development and long-term reconstruction until irreversible progress has been made in the political process.

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

UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

Security Council Resolutions

13 December 2018 <u>S/RES/2449</u>	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 <u>S/RES/2401</u>	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
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.
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.

Security Council Letters

27 December 2018 <u>S/2018/1166</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
19 December 2018 <u>S/2018/1138</u>	This was a joint statement by the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey on Syria.
23 July 2018 <u>S/2018/732</u>	Included a report of the OPCW fact-finding mission in Syria regarding the incidents in Al-Hamadaniyah on 30 October 2016 and in Karm Al-Tarrab on 13 November 2016 and an interim report regarding the Douma 7 April 2018 incident.

Security Council Meeting Records

20 December 2018 <u>S/PV.8434</u>	This was the last briefing by de Mistura.
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13 December
2018 S/PV.8423

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock briefed the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria. The Council adopted resolution 2449.