

March 2019 Monthly Forecast

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Posted 28 February 2019

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MIDDLE EAST

Syria

Expected Council Action

In March, 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

March marks the ninth anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire and has been exacerbated by harsh winter conditions, including torrential rains. Thousands remain trapped by ongoing hostilities in areas of the Deir ez-Zor region held by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and there are concerns about the well-being of civilians who have fled the area, including family members of foreign terrorist fighters.

The situation in Idlib remains critical. In January, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (a Council-designated terrorist group) took over control of most of Idlib from the National Liberation Front, the Turkish-backed coalition of moderate armed groups. Following an upsurge in attacks by government forces and in civilian casualties in Idlib, Turkey has reinforced the 12 ceasefire observation stations established as part of a deal with Russia in September 2018 to create a demilitarised zone. Divergences over the fate of Idlib became clear at a 14 February meeting of the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey, the guarantors of the Astana process. Their joint statement stopped short of justifying a military offensive and merely agreed to effectively counter the attempts by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to increase its control over the area as well as to take concrete steps to reduce violations in the Idlib de-escalation area.

The situation in the north-east of Syria remains fragile after the December 2018 announcement by the US regarding the withdrawal of its troops. The US actively supports the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the Kurdish YPG militia, and the US decision has introduced fresh uncertainty into efforts to prevent an escalation of violence between Turkey and the YPG, as well as counter-terrorism operations against ISIL and the fate of the territory currently controlled by the SDF in the north-east. While details of the withdrawal, including its timeline and conditions, remain unclear, the US has indicated that about 200 troops will remain in the north-east for some time.

After many delays, in early February the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent were able to reach the Rukban makeshift camp near the border with Jordan. The interagency convoy, which included 118 trucks with life-saving assistance, was one of the largest and

most complex humanitarian missions since the beginning of the conflict. UNHCR considered conditions in the camp to be “desperate” and “catastrophic”. Once in Rukban, humanitarian partners stayed for nine days to make sure that assistance was not diverted and to conduct a survey of camp residents’ intentions. Despite the interest of many interviewees in returning home, they have been unable to do so until now. Some of the families have been at Rukban for more than four years.

Since taking office as Special Envoy for Syria on 7 January, Geir O. Pedersen has travelled extensively, including to Damascus to conduct consultations with the government and to Riyadh to hold discussions with the opposition’s Syrian Negotiation Commission. In a press encounter on 15 February, he emphasised that his mandate remains the terms spelled out in resolution 2254, which provides for a Syrian-led, UN-facilitated process to establish credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, set a process for drafting a new constitution, and conduct free and fair elections. While he expressed his hope to convene as soon as possible a meeting of the constitutional committee in Geneva, which can be a “potential door-opener for the political process”, he highlighted that he also wants to work on other issues in parallel. He said there was a need to step up work on confidence-building measures, including the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons. Even though the Astana guarantors have established a working group to address these issues, and some dozens of prisoners have been swapped in November 2018 and in February, much work remains to be done. At press time, Pedersen was expected to brief the Council for the first time on 28 February, followed by consultations.

The High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, briefed the Council on 6 February. 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.

Human Rights-Related Developments

On 19 February, High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said in a statement that the intensified ground-based bombardment of Idlib and surrounding areas by government forces and their allies in recent weeks has led to numerous civilian casualties and left some one million people, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in an extremely vulnerable situation. The bombardment of the “demilitarized buffer zone” that includes Idlib and areas of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates started to escalate in December 2018 and has further intensified, the statement said. Bachelet called on “all parties involved, as well as external governments with influence, to ensure that the protection of civilians is held paramount in the planning and execution of all military operations in accordance with international law”. During its 40th session, the Human Rights Council is scheduled to hold an interactive dialogue on 12 March with the Commission of Inquiry on Syria and to consider its report (A/HRC/40/70).

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 starts his tenure, 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.

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 and call on the guarantors to use their influence on the government to engage in good faith 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.

Following up on the 6 February consultations, Council members could invite representatives of the OPCW and the Syrian government to discuss their cooperation, including on outstanding issues.

Council and Wider Dynamics

The Council continues to be divided over the Syrian conflict, but the arrival of a new envoy provides an opportunity to reinvigorate the political process. Council members are also divided over whether there can be international support for the reconstruction of Syria, an issue that is expected to feature in the EU-hosted Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, which will take place in late March. In the past, the P3 and EU countries have argued that there can be no international support for funding development and long-term reconstruction in Syria 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.
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24 February 2018 <u>S/RES/2401</u>	This was a resolution, adopted unanimously, demanding a cessation of hostilities in Syria.
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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 Reports

19 February 2019 <u>S/2019/157</u>	This was the bi-monthly report on the humanitarian situation in Syria.
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Security Council Letters

28 January 2019 <u>S/2019/91</u>	This was an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.
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