

# January 2018 Monthly Forecast

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MIDDLE EAST

## Syria

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### Expected Council Action

In January 2018, the Council expects to receive the monthly briefings on political and humanitarian developments in Syria and on chemical weapons.

### Key Recent Developments

December 2017 saw the first Council decision on Syria in a year. On 19 December, the Council adopted [resolution 2393](#), drafted by Egypt, Japan 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 life-saving humanitarian assistance to millions of people in northwest and southern Syria through Turkey and Jordan, respectively.

The resolution was adopted with the abstentions of Bolivia, China and Russia. In explaining their vote, they highlighted the importance of working through the government and eventually rolling back a provision that had been devised originally as a temporary measure. They also highlighted the need to increase monitoring and transparency of the mechanisms used to deliver cross-border aid. In an effort to address the concerns already expressed by these and other countries in the lead-up to the negotiations, the resolution requests the Secretary-General to conduct, within six months of the adoption, an independent written review of the UN humanitarian cross-border operations and provide recommendations for how to further strengthen the existing UN monitoring mechanism.

After welcoming the adoption, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock briefed the Council on the critical situation in Eastern Ghouta, which remains besieged by government forces and has seen an increase in fighting and a worsening in the living conditions of nearly 400,000 people. He described the extremely limited access allowed to humanitarian actors and the need for more than 500 urgent medical evacuations that are expected to be approved by the government. According to a 15 December 2017 [Secretary-General's report](#), aid delivery to besieged and hard-to-reach areas has been hindered by the removal of items, access restrictions as a result of bureaucratic impediments imposed by the government, and insecurity.

At the same meeting, Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura briefed the Council on the eighth round of intra-Syrian talks that were held between 28 November and 14 December 2017 in Geneva. He expressed his disappointment that the parties had not engaged in direct

talks as a result of preconditions imposed by the government. In particular, he mentioned the government's refusal to hold discussions with the opposition unless it withdrew a statement issued at the Riyadh II conference in November 2017 that does not foresee any role for President Bashar al-Assad during the political transition. At the talks, the opposition discussed with the envoy's team all four baskets of the agenda (governance, constitutional issues, elections, and counter-terrorism), but the government focused only on counter-terrorism.

Despite the absence of direct talks between the parties, de Mistura elaborated on the ways resolution 2254, which mapped out a political process, could be further implemented. He focused particularly on the process of drafting and deciding on a new constitution and the organisation of UN-supervised elections. He reiterated that any initiative, such as Russia's proposal to hold a Syria Peace Conference in Sochi in early 2018, is to be assessed as to whether it supports the UN-mandated political process and the implementation of resolution 2254. In the context of military victories against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), de Mistura has stressed how winning the war will not translate into winning the peace without a meaningful political process.

On 11 December 2017, Russia announced a partial pullout from Syria, claiming victory against ISIL. While much of ISIL's territory has been seized, counter-terrorism operations continue in eastern Syria, including Deir ez-Zor.

Despite the failure to renew the Joint Investigative Mechanism 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 7 December 2017, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu briefed Council members in consultations on the efforts to eliminate Syria's declared arsenal. Nakamitsu reiterated that the Syrian government's cooperation with the OPCW was limited. Among other issues, different perspectives emerged as to whether the JIM could transfer evidence to other UN bodies as it winds down. The Council did not reach any conclusion regarding proper follow-up to the November 2017 finding of the OPCW fact-finding mission that sarin "was more than likely used as a chemical weapon" on 30 March 2017 in Latamineh.

### **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. The adoption of resolution 2393, while not unanimous, constitutes an important Council decision against the backdrop of the demise of the JIM, the lack of direct talks between the government and the opposition, and the initiatives that may provide an alternative platform to Geneva to discuss political matters. On the latter, Council members could ask the sponsors of these initiatives to brief them on their plans and the mechanisms in place to ensure coherence with UN efforts sanctioned by the Council.

Council members could devise a mechanism for adequate follow-up to fact-finding mission reports and for preserving the evidence gathered by the JIM.

## Council and Wider Dynamics

Ahead of the negotiations, there were concerns about how difficult it would be to get agreement on resolution 2393. Russia had expressed its preference for rolling back the authorisation for UN cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid, highlighting the establishment of de-escalation areas and the need to work with the Syrian government. Council members were divided about how to characterise the security situation in Syria. While Russia and others advocated including language welcoming the creation of de-escalation areas and the improvement of security conditions on the ground, the P3 and others emphasised the continued violence, the ongoing sieges, and the critical humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta. It seems that the penholders' intention was to focus efforts on the operational aspects of the draft and not to be distracted by the divergent narratives put forward by Council members. In the spirit of compromise, while noting the ongoing work on de-escalation areas, the resolution acknowledges the severity of the devastating humanitarian situation and expresses grave alarm at the dire situation in besieged areas, including Eastern Ghouta.

Overall, Council members were constructive in the negotiations on the resolution, which made possible a compromise. Among the relevant factors were the efforts by the penholders (which are elected members of the Council) to facilitate and reach a compromise between the P3 and Russian positions. The role played by neighbouring countries in support of the renewal—particularly Turkey, which is a co-guarantor along with Iran and Russia of the ceasefire agreed to in Astana, Kazakhstan in December 2016—was worth noting as well.

## UN DOCUMENTS ON SYRIA

### Security Council Resolutions

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19 December 2017 <a href="#"><u>S/RES/2393</u></a>	This resolution renewed the authorisation for cross-border and cross-line aid delivery.
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31 December 2016 <a href="#"><u>S/RES/2336</u></a>	Welcomed efforts by Russia and Turkey to end violence in Syria and jumpstart a political process.
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18 December 2015 <a href="#"><u>S/RES/2254</u></a>	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 <a href="#"><u>S/RES/2118</u></a>	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

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15  
December  
2017  
S/2017/1057

This was the Secretary-General's monthly report on the humanitarian situation.

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#### Security Council Letters

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30  
November  
2017  
S/2017/1005

This letter transmitted an OPCW report on progress in the elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons programme.

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3 November  
2017  
S/2017/931

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.

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#### Security Council Meeting Records

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19  
December  
2017  
S/PV.8141

This was a briefing by Staffan de Mistura and Mark Lowcock on the situation in Syria and the meeting at which resolution 2393 was adopted.