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United Nations Special Envoy for Syria
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
22 November 2019**

Madam President,

1. On 30 October, 150 Syrian men and women gathered in Geneva to launch a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee facilitated by the United Nations. There were 50 members nominated by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic; 50 members nominated by the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission; and 50 civil society activists and experts and other independents, from inside and outside of Syria, in a so-called Middle Third.
2. This was a potentially historic moment. It brought Syrians together in one room within the formal political process mandated by this Council – for the first face-to-face talks in five years ... for the first time ever following a political agreement between the government and opposition ... and for the first time ever with civil society present.
3. This launch was a sign of hope for the Syrian people, and a chance for the Syrian parties to begin a direct dialogue that they lead and own on the future of a broken country. It opened a door to a political effort to overcome nearly nine years of conflict and chart a path to a new day for Syria in accordance with Security Council resolution 2254, which has all the elements required for a political settlement.

Madam President,

4. Over the next two days in Geneva, Members of the Large Body offered visions for Syria's future constitutional arrangements. They adopted by consensus a Code of Conduct and a set of Initial Procedural Practices. And agreement was reached on the 45 Members to work in the Small drafting Body.
5. Thereafter, the Small Body– 15 from each 50 – convened and reviewed ideas and proposals in the speeches delivered by members in the Large Body -- and offered other ideas too -- to identify potential constitutional principles. There were extensive exchanges and ideas put forward. And they agreed to return to Geneva this coming Monday 25 November.

Madam President,

6. I commend committee members for their courage and patriotism in participating in these initial proceedings, and for the way that they did so. It was not easy. There was mistrust

and suspicion, and strong feelings, among the members. There were deep feelings of anger and of loss, personal and national. Narratives, positions and proposals diverged sharply. At times, proceedings were painful, and emotions ran high.

7. And yet everyone stayed engaged. The members of the Committee agreed an initial agenda and listened to each other's discourse. And there were efforts in language, tone, gesture and positioning to signal an openness to dialogue. With each passing day there was a little more of this.
8. I appreciated the business-like approach of the two equal Co-Chairs -- Dr. Ahmed Kuzbari nominated by the Government and Mr. Hadi al-Bahra nominated by the Opposition. They respected their responsibilities and alternated the chairmanship of meetings. They enabled Committee members to speak openly and frankly. They dealt in good faith with me and my team.
9. Let me also observe that, while we will focus on what the parties say in the room, it is also important that public statements show commitment to the Committee's work based on the political agreement that both parties made to launch it. There is work to be done in this regard.
10. It would be too early to say there is agreement on constitutional principles. Nor is there yet agreement on which issues should be addressed in a future constitutional text and which should be addressed in other ways. But there was a solid initial discussion and there are commonalities on which to build. I have urged the Members during the recess to reflect on what was discussed and return ready to build on it. The Government and the Opposition 15 have been meeting with the remaining 35 of their respective groups to this end.
11. I have discussed with the Co-Chairs that we need them to propose a forward-looking agenda for the coming work, and they have agreed with me that this is important. My good offices are at their disposal.
12. Let me say a few words on the "Middle Third", whose members include civil society, independents, experts and other Syrians of standing. They have no formal political affiliations, and none of them speaks for any other of them. Like Syrian society in general, there are differences in their opinions, experiences, fears, objectives and connections.
13. Despite this, they sat together, worked together, and began their own long task of building trust and confidence with one another. As this effort proceeds, it will be important to enable the 15 in the Small Body to consult the remaining 35 in their group. I look forward to furthering initial discussions with them – and the Co-Chairs – in this regard.
14. Let me also recall that around 30% of members are women. They made their voices heard on all issues. Gender equality and women's rights issues were prominent in discussions -

raised by both men and women – and are areas where I sensed some potential for initial common ground.

Madam President,

15. I should add that the Women’s Advisory Board was convened in Geneva as the Constitutional Committee proceedings began, and its members showed once again an example of how a cross-section of Syrians can build trust and work together. I look forward to them convening again in Geneva in the not-too-distant future.
16. I also look forward to continuing the process of consultations by the United Nations with a wide cross-section of Syrian civil society from both inside and outside Syria through the work of our Civil Society Support Room, and we expect further engagement in that framework fairly soon as well.
17. Let me thank you, the Security Council, for uniting to support the Constitutional Committee. I was also glad to meet with the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey, and earlier with representatives of the Small Group, in Geneva before the launch of the Committee.

Madam President,

18. This brings me to the bigger picture. Undoubtedly, the work of the committee can build trust and confidence. But if confidence is to develop among the Syrian people in the political process, the dynamics on the ground need to begin to change – and that must start with fully respecting international humanitarian and human rights law and the protection of civilians.
19. I am extremely concerned about renewed violence in Idlib. As you know, there are 3 million civilians in Idlib, many of whom have fled from fighting elsewhere in Syria and who have suffered and continue to suffer. There has been escalation these past weeks in aerial bombardment, as well as ground-based attacks from both sides. Just two days ago, at least a dozen civilians were killed and 50 injured, including children, when a missile reportedly launched from Syrian-government territory struck an IDP camp and near a maternity hospital.
20. There have been significant developments in the north-east: a Turkish military intervention into Syria together with Syrian armed opposition forces; the Syrian Government deploying troops in the north-east following an understanding with the Syrian Democratic Forces; a US-Turkish ceasefire understanding; a Turkish-Russian understanding, [and] leading to joint patrols along the Turkish border; and of course the redeployment of US forces from large parts of the north-east to Deir-ez-Zor and Hasakeh, including close to oil fields. While these understandings have reduced violence in the

area, reports of clashes and shelling continue. More than 90 civilians have been killed -- and, while many have returned home, more than 75,000 remain displaced.

21. Meanwhile, Israeli air strikes near Damascus, which Israel said was in response to rockets launched towards Israel, reportedly killed two civilians.
22. Madam President, all these dynamics are extremely worrying. We must step away from any trend that could lead towards a deeper international conflagration over Syria, and the continued infringement of Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.
23. Resolution 2254 also calls for a nationwide ceasefire and a common approach to combatting terrorism. The unsolved challenge of HTS, the danger of ISIL resurgence, and the continuing threat of foreign terrorist fighters only underlines the need for a cooperative approach – one that ensures stability, protects civilians, fully upholds international humanitarian law, promotes real calm, and prioritizes a political solution.

Madam President,

24. As violence and suffering continues, Syrians, on all sides, demand concrete actions from this process to improve their lives. I continue to consider unilateral releases of detainees/abductees, and steps for clarifying the fate of the missing persons by all parties and at a meaningful scale, as crucial entry points in that regard.
25. But I also remain convinced that a broader set of concrete actions would likely have to follow a “steps for steps” model, with some element of reciprocity, building trust and confidence between Syrians and with the international community.
26. I continue to pursue a discussion with the Syrian parties on the wider dimensions of the process and to offer my good offices to the key regional and international players on these issues. Russian and American officials continue to meet to discuss steps that could be taken. I had a valuable discussion on this with German Chancellor Merkel and senior officials in Berlin last week. Within the Astana group, the dialogue among countries supporting different players in Syria continues. And I continue to support the convening of an international format that could bring the key players together in a common effort.
27. Ultimately, I believe that all of these efforts should lead towards the establishment of a safe, calm and neutral environment. This would allow any constitutional reform to be matched by emerging positive conditions on the ground – as well as an environment which would allow for inclusive free and fair elections administered under the supervision of the United Nations in line with resolution 2254. And clearly, the steps to create such an environment would also contribute to refugees having the confidence to return in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner.

Madam President,

28. It is my firm hope that, with the Constitutional Committee as a door opener, the government and the opposition will be able in time to establish a relationship; violence will abate and conditions on the ground will change; and a comprehensive and decisive solution will finally emerge for the benefit of all Syrians. The Syrian parties, who are leading and owning this process, must seize the opportunity that the launch of the committee offers. And they, and all of us, must build around it a mutually reinforcing dynamic for the sake of the Syrian people. I appreciate the support of all of you as I continue to work in this direction, in implementation of my mandate in resolution 2254.

Thank you.