

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA  
GEIR O. PEDERSEN**

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**BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

**Tuesday 16 June 2020**

Thank you, Mr. President (France, Nicolas de Rivière)

1. Last month, I told you how struck I was by the depth of concerns among ordinary Syrians at the current state and future of their beloved country.
2. A month on, I have heard these messages even louder -- including in continued consultations with Syrians participating in the Civil Society Support Room and with the Women's Advisory Board.
3. I have heard many of the appeals you are familiar with – a thirst for progress on the 2254 political process, for an end to all violence and terrorism and a nationwide ceasefire, for actions on detainees and abductees and missing persons, and for progress in creating conditions for Syrian refugees and IDPs to return to their homes in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner.
4. I heard a new level of alarm at the dramatic collapse in economic conditions throughout the country. It is easy to understand why. During just one week during the reporting period, the Syrian lira's market rate depreciated more than in the entire nine years prior, before rallying somewhat. But currency and price volatility remain acute. And the inflation rate has hit peak levels in the past six months.
5. The economic crisis is hitting every part of Syria, regardless of territorial control: from Damascus and the southwest ... to Aleppo and the northwest ... and to the northeast. Medicine is more expensive, and scarce. Food prices have skyrocketed and supply chains have been disrupted. The purchasing power of ordinary Syrians has seriously diminished as wages - both private and public sector - are vastly inadequate to meet the demands of the day.
6. Before this recent deterioration, over 80% of Syrians were estimated to be living below the poverty line. The situation is undoubtedly more severe today, and the intensity of that poverty is likely more acute. The

World Food Programme now estimates that some 9.3 million people are food insecure, with over 2 million more at risk, a rise of some 42 per cent in the past year. As WFP Executive Director Beasley recently warned: if this situation deteriorates, “famine could well be knocking on [the] door”.

7. Syrian women – the primary breadwinners in many families – are disproportionately affected and forced to shoulder caretaking responsibilities while financially supporting the household. Many women, including those in refugee communities, are facing higher risks of exploitation and abuse as they struggle to provide for the day-to-day needs of their families.
8. In recent weeks, we have seen many Syrians begin to express new fears - even panic in some quarters. We have heard of shops and pharmacies forced to close, unable to cope with the recent volatility; of jobs being lost; of remittances drying up. In some areas of northwest Syria, reports have emerged of locals increasingly using foreign currencies.

Mr. President,

9. The decade-long conflict in Syria has wrought destruction on Syria’s people, its environment, its infrastructure and the very fabric of its society – the bonds of trust that underpin any economy. Syria’s economic governance has also been characterized by recurrent fiscal and monetary mismanagement and corruption.
10. In recent months, new factors have joined these underlying structural problems, pushing the economy to the brink. The banking crisis in next-door Lebanon has had a significant impact. The repercussions all societies and economies have experienced from measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have also played their part.
11. Another factor in this context is significant sanctions by the United States and the European Union. These target individuals and entities affiliated with the government, and also restrict activity in the financial, banking, oil and gas and military sectors as well as exports and multilateral lending to and investments in Syria. Further US secondary sanctions - which have been foreshadowed since the passage of legislation 6 months ago - will begin entering into force as early as tomorrow, aimed at deterring foreign business activity with the Syrian government.

Mr. President,

12. Against this backdrop, we have seen some Syrians take peacefully to the streets in a few areas in recent weeks - such as Sweida, Daraa and Idlib - protesting a range of grievances.

13. Moreover, in Syria's southwest, what was set to be a major violent confrontation, centred around the town of Tafas, has been averted for now - with the assistance of Russian mediation. However, we are concerned that there have since been further security incidents and tensions that might result in renewed escalation of violence. This is an area where there are broader geopolitical tensions, which appear to be growing more acute. I further note that this month again saw reports of Israeli airstrikes inside Syria. Southern Syria is also an area where ISIL cells appear to remain active.

14. Meanwhile, in the northwest, the calm brought about by Russia and Turkey is by-and-large holding. However, we have seen worrying signs: increased mutual shelling, reports of reinforcements on both sides, the first reported pro-government airstrikes in three months; and reports of new civilian displacement. Last week, the extremist wa-Harid al-Mu'minin operations room launched another cross-line attack that resulted in the deaths of several Syrian soldiers. Two of its leaders were subsequently killed in a US drone strike on 14 June. It and other small extremist factions have now formed a new operations room - a likely harbinger for future attacks. I have been assured by both Russia and Turkey that they are working to contain the situation and sustain the calm, and I note there has been further progress in Russian-Turkish cooperation on the work of joint patrols on the ground.

Mr President,

15. I continue to appeal for calm to be sustained in Idlib and elsewhere and for a nationwide ceasefire, in line with resolution 2254. I underscore the importance of addressing the challenge posed by listed terrorist groups through a cooperative, targeted and effective approach that safeguards stability, protects civilians and fully respects international humanitarian law. The same is true regarding efforts to prevent ISIL's resurgence, whose attacks continued in and around the central desert.

Mr. President,

16. I am ready to convene and facilitate a third session of the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee. Conscious that global travel

restrictions remain in place, I am hopeful that a session in Geneva may be possible towards the end of August.

17. But obviously, the realities facing the Syrian people cannot be solely addressed by discussing the constitution. And the Syrian parties will face great difficulties in resolving Syria's problems without real diplomacy among the key international players with influence. After all, there are still five international armies operating across the country, and active measures by many countries as regards Syria.
18. There are real and substantive differences among those international players, as there are between the Syrian parties. Indeed, we have seen the depth of these differences in debates over sanctions in recent weeks. And we continue to see it in competing assessments regarding the political will of different actors to work to resolve the conflict. These issues are not going to be resolved by positioning. They need to be the subject of real discussion and diplomacy. Unlocking progress will need mutual and reciprocal steps, on the basis of clear understandings, by the Syrian parties and by international partners. I am convinced that there *are* common interests on which to build such a diplomacy, and there *is* a common stated commitment to advancing resolution 2254 and supporting the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process.
19. Let me also reiterate at this critical time the Secretary-General's emphasis on the importance of full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access, using all modalities, including scaled-up cross line and cross border access. Humanitarian access remains imperative, not only given the increasing suffering of the Syrian people, but also given that there is still a risk from the COVID-19 pandemic. Syria now has reported 183 cases in total.
20. Meanwhile, I reiterate my appeal for the Syrian government and all other Syrian parties to carry out large-scale and unilateral releases of detainees and abductees – especially of women, children, the elderly and the sick – and for more meaningful actions on missing persons. The COVID-19 pandemic is still a risk and should serve as an extra impetus for such action, as it has in other countries.

Mr. President,

21. Syria is going through a time of great flux. Nobody involved in the conflict should presume that time is on their side. Nobody should be sure there will be better openings down the road. What is required is the

readiness of all to deal seriously with the realities of the conflict. Guided by resolution 2254, with your support I will continue to work with the Syrian parties and all international stakeholders to facilitate a way forward that addresses all features and outcomes of the conflict, that restores the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, that ends the acute suffering of the Syrian people. and that enables them to shape their own future.

Thank you, Mr. President.