

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN ---
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
18 September 2020**

Thank you Mr. President (Ambassador Abdou Abarry, Niger),

1. I begin today's briefing recalling – as I did last month -- the deep suffering of the Syrian people, who in this almost full decade of conflict have experienced death, injury, displacement, destruction, detention, torture, terror, indignities, instability, de-development and destitution on a massive scale – and who have seen the country they love devastated – and who are now grappling with COVID-19 and economic collapse. Syrians, both those inside the country, and the millions of refugees outside, desperately need this suffering to be eased and to see a path out of this conflict.
2. Against these hard realities, and the deep distrust among the Syrian parties, a faint but real ray of hope shone from Geneva when, in the last week of August, we were able to convene, after a nine-month hiatus, a Third Session of the Small Body of the Syrian Constitutional Committee.
3. The discussions within the Committee were mostly substantive and on the agreed agenda. The Co-Chairs told me that they sensed that some common ground was emerging on some subjects. There were practical suggestions from members on how to identify such common ground and how the discussion could move forward. I was very pleased with this.
4. This said, there were very real differences on substance even at the quite general level of the discussions. And the Co-Chairs were not, as I had hoped, able to agree while in Geneva on an agenda for the next session. We need a proposed agenda if the Committee is to meet.
5. I worked hard in Geneva and since to assist the Co-Chairs to agree. These discussions are continuing on a compromise proposal. Given the realities of organizing meetings, we need to finalize the agenda without further delay if we are to meet in early October as we had hoped.
6. Beyond agreeing an agenda in line with the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure, it is important to remind ourselves of other features of this document. It provides that:
 - The delegations are nominated by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission (in addition to the Middle Third civil society delegation);
 - The mandate of the Committee is to prepare and draft a constitutional reform;
 - The Committee may review and amend the 2012 constitution or draft a new constitution;
 - The constitutional draft must embody the 12 living principles which emerged from the Geneva process and were approved in Sochi;
 - The Co-Chairs have a responsibility to promote the good functioning of the Committee;

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- This includes facilitating and proposing an agenda and workplans that enable all issues to be considered and do not make consideration of issues dependent on agreement on other issues;
 - The Committee is to work without preconditions;
 - The Committee is further to work expeditiously and continuously to produce results and continued progress without foreign interference, including externally imposed timelines.
7. I am continuing to urge that the Constitutional Committee proceeds in line with these already agreed Terms of Reference. If we can finalize an agenda and move forward in this way, I remain hopeful that we can deepen this process with a Fourth Session soon – and a Fifth and a Sixth in the coming months – as the COVID-19 situation allows.
 8. Here let me pause to thank the Swiss Federal and Geneva Cantonal authorities, and the United Nations Office at Geneva and its medical services, and indeed the Committee members themselves, for their support in ensuring a COVID-safe Third Session, something that will be a continuing priority for future sessions too.
 9. Yesterday, I invited the members of the Middle 50 of the Large Body of the Constitutional Committee to a briefing on the work to date and to hear views and suggestions on the process, and we will of course be following up on those discussions.
 10. Let me also note that during the Third Session, I had the opportunity to consult the members of the Women’s Advisory Board. They provided useful ideas that showed their keen belief in the possibility to find commonalities, and that safeguard the rights of Syrian women. They, like all Syrians, wish to see concrete progress. In their view, this must happen in parallel to tangible improvements in the lives of Syrians who have urgent economic and humanitarian needs, as well as security and health concerns. This is also a constant message echoed by a broad range of civil society actors with whom we engage. Both the WAB and our Civil Society Support Room will remain active in the coming period on all aspects of the political process envisaged in resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

11. The COVID-19 pandemic is emerging as a major challenge for the Syrian people, who are acutely vulnerable after 10 years of conflict. As Under-Secretary-General Lowcock told you two days ago: reports from inside Syria continue to point to a much broader spread of COVID-19 than the number of confirmed cases conveys. In some areas, existing healthcare facilities have faced challenges in absorbing all suspected cases – particularly as healthcare workers, already in short supply, are themselves struck with the virus. Syrian refugees, both inside and outside camps, remain at great risk as well.
12. The pandemic will only add to humanitarian needs, which remain acute. Many Syrians face food insecurity, poverty and deprivation, particularly in the face of unprecedented economic collapse and socio-economic strain. To give just one indicator: food prices remain at the highest level ever recorded – monitoring by the World Food Programme shows the price of a standard reference food basket increased

by over 250 per cent on last year. Some Syrians even struggled to access water. In the northeast, the supply from the Alouk water station was cut once again in August, before resuming following the constructive intervention of several member states.

13. I appeal once again for your support in securing both the necessary resources and humanitarian access for all those in need of relief, in accordance with international humanitarian law. And it remains imperative that any sanctions or measures that can undermine the capacity of the country to ensure access to food, essential health supplies and COVID-19 medical support are waived.

Mr President,

14. I continue to appeal for 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. I pressed this issue with the Astana guarantors when we met in Geneva. I note their stated intention to resume the meetings of the Working Group on this issue at the earliest opportunity – but I also note the deep dismay that lack of movement on this issue causes among Syrians of all backgrounds, and internationally as well. I will continue to press this issue with the Syrian parties, including in any forthcoming engagements.

Mr. President,

15. Syria remains a highly internationalized environment, with five foreign armies active in the theatre, and Syria's sovereignty compromised. Militarily, however, existing arrangements continue to sustain broad calm across Syria, relative to the intense violence of recent years. Indeed, the frontlines have barely shifted for half a year – the longest in the Syrian conflict – and a basic military status quo seems to be emerging.

16. However, while Syria is calmer than before, worrying incidents continue that could destabilize that calm:

- We have seen a vehicle altercation between Russian and US forces that left four US soldiers injured and mutual accusations of breaches of existing deconfliction arrangements.
- We have seen further rounds of airstrikes, attributed to Israel by the Syrian Government, on military positions in Syria.
- The southwest remains a theatre for regular security incidents stemming from local unrest and geo-political tensions.
- The March agreement between Russia and Turkey continues to sustain broad calm in the northwest – but we have also seen escalations, including mutual rocket and artillery fire and airstrikes, hitting near the frontlines as well as deep into Idlib, killing and wounding civilians in some instances – as well as increased military reinforcements on both sides of the line.
- We have seen another attack on a Russian-Turkish joint patrol, claimed by the Khattab al-Shishani Brigades, wounding two Russian soldiers.
- We have also seen at least one attack on Turkish soldiers in Idlib, resulting in casualties.
- We have seen IED attacks and mutual fire in and around Afrin, Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad, resulting in the killing and injuring of civilians.

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- There has also been continued worrying ISIL activity in the desert, and we saw an attack on a pipeline in areas where ISIL is active, which resulted in a nationwide electricity cut in late August.

Mr President,

17. I appeal to all relevant actors to contain these violent and de-stabilising incidents, build on the relative calm that exists, and, as resolution 2254 calls for, establish a nationwide ceasefire to protect civilians, maintain international peace and security, and support a political process. And we must, as 2254 says, counter the threat of internationally-proscribed terrorist groups active in some parts of Syria through a cooperative approach that is in line with international humanitarian law.

Mr. President,

18. As we seek to consolidate calm, we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to build a more meaningful political process.
19. The realities on the ground remind us that only by focusing on a political settlement can we meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and restore Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. A political process is also plainly vital if Syria's socio-economic challenges are to be addressed, and if conditions are to emerge in which millions of refugees would be able to return in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner.
20. And it is clear that no one actor or group of actors – Syrian or international – can determine the outcome of this conflict. In this regard, I believe there is a growing acknowledgement among many key actors that there truly is no military solution, and that the only way forward is a negotiation and a political settlement, however difficult that may be.
21. That is why I believe there is a common desire from all sides to get beyond a complete stalemate and see *some* movement. And there is a readiness for steps to beget steps, for goodwill to beget goodwill, and for us to move slowly but steadily along a 2254-path out of this conflict, supported by mutual and reciprocal measures.
22. In this regard, I have received strong support from key players for the UN efforts to facilitate the Constitutional Committee – a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process that can act as a door opener.
23. Beyond the Constitutional Committee, it is too early to say whether the increasingly shared assessments of the realities will turn into common diplomatic pathways for the implementation of resolution 2254. But the potential may be slowly emerging, and I will seek to nurture and support this.
24. I appreciated the recent presence in Geneva of senior representatives of Russia, the United States, Turkey and Iran for consultations on the margins of the Constitutional Committee. I have remained in close contact with them since, and with other European and Arab interlocutors, and this continues.

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25. I particularly appreciated the opportunity to visit Moscow recently for substantive and wide-ranging discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Defence Minister Shoigu, in advance of Foreign Minister Lavrov joining a high-level visit to Syria last week.
26. I encourage Russia and the United States to advance their dialogue and for them and other key players, including the Astana Guarantors and those who meet in the Small Group, and indeed the members of this Council, to work with me toward our common goal in Syria: a political settlement in line with resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

27. The immediate priority is for the Co-Chairs to agree an agenda so that we can resume the Constitutional Committee soon, and for the Committee to proceed in accordance with its Terms of Reference. Meanwhile, we must continue to work to bring about positive and mutually reinforcing steps among Syrian and international players and a wider political process in line with resolution 2254. With relative calm on the ground, and with the urgent need to alleviate the Syrian people's suffering, now is the time to press ahead.

Thank you, Mr. President.