

**DEPUTY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA KHAWLA MATAR  
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
25 November 2020**

Madam President,

1. It is an honor for me to address this Council today. The Special Envoy is continuing a set of engagements – he is, in fact, today in Riyadh – in support of the UN-facilitated political process.
2. I am pleased to be able to inform the Council that plans are being finalised for the fourth session of the Constitutional Committee Small Body to convene from 30 November to 4 December in Geneva.
3. This was made possible by the engagement and agreement of the two Syrian Co-Chairs that, in line with the mandate, the Terms of Reference and the Core Rules of Procedure, the Constitutional Committee Small Body will continue in session 4 to discuss the agenda of session 3 on national foundations and principles, and in session 5 will discuss constitutional principles (basic principles of the constitution). The Co-Chairs further agreed on the dates for session 4, COVID-19 situation permitting, and to hold session 5 in January 2021.
4. The COVID-19 challenges in Geneva are considerable right now, and the Special Envoy is very aware of that. We are very grateful to the Swiss authorities for all they have done and are doing to enable this meeting to move ahead in these extraordinary times. We will be ensuring that the strictest health and safety protocols are followed, and appreciate that the Co-Chairs and Constitutional Committee members have fully committed to the measures that will be in place. We continue monitoring the evolution of the epidemiological situation in Geneva ahead of the meeting.
5. We all know that the Committee has not yet made the kind of progress we had hoped. But the commitment of the Syrian parties to the package of two meetings and with agreed agendas presents an important opportunity for Committee members to engage in good faith in a businesslike manner to move forward the political process. If these sessions can proceed in a substantive manner and in a spirit of compromise, we believe it would help to build trust and confidence and make some progress. We also look forward to engaging with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board to benefit from their insights and support for all aspects of the constitutional process.

Madam President,

6. A constitutional track on its own cannot resolve the crisis, and the Syrian-led committee's work needs to be accompanied by mutual and reinforcing steps by Syrian and international players on the range of issues contained in resolution 2254.
7. It is important to note that, while falling short of the nationwide ceasefire called for by resolution 2254, the fragile and relative calm that the Special Envoy has spoken of in recent months continues broadly to hold. That calm however continues to be ever more challenged,

raising concerns. This month saw renewed elevated escalation in northwest Syria, with fresh airstrikes, mutual shelling and ground clashes between the Syrian Government and HTS and armed opposition groups, but we also continue to see Russian-Turkish cooperation in the effort to preserve calm and address terrorism. We also saw a spike in violence in the northeast, around the perimeter of “Operation Peace Spring” areas; new levels of turbulence in southwest Syria; Israeli airstrikes; and ongoing ISIL activity in the desert – a reminder of the magnitude of the terrorist challenge still confronting Syria.

8. On this the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, let me stress to the Council that Syrian women in recent consultations with us have emphasized that peace and security means ending all forms of violence. Syrian women continue to suffer from sexual and gender-based violence, which has been widely documented. Measures put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have increased the prevalence of domestic violence, child-marriage and sexual harassment. Syrian women have at the same time been at the forefront of initiatives to respond to the crisis.

9. Meanwhile, Syrian women, men and children are suffering profound economic hardship. The Syrian currency is beginning to experience another depreciation, causing a further rise in prices and diminishing purchasing power. In recent months, bread and energy shortages have affected Syrian livelihoods to an unprecedented degree. And as winter looms, families continue to face difficulties in providing home heating and farmers suffer from fuel shortages. COVID-19 remains a major challenge and has exacerbated vulnerabilities in all parts of the country. In this context, it is also paramount that any sanctions avoid aggravating the plight of Syrian civilians.

10. A particular focus of the Special Envoy’s engagement remains the plight of detainees, abductees and missing persons. Unfortunately, we have not seen the kind of progress we need on the release of the detained and abducted, and information on the missing. We will continue in every occasion to press for this as a humanitarian imperative and as a vital step towards building confidence. Most urgent is the release at scale of women, children, the sick and elderly, and humanitarian access to places of detention.

11. The plight of millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons continues to deteriorate. The United Nations supports Syrian refugees whatever their choices and seeks to engage all parties in the effort to enable safe, dignified, well-informed and voluntary returns. Higher numbers are likely only be achieved once the factors that refugees say prevent them from returning are addressed – including personal security, access to livelihoods, basic services and education as well as restitution, rehabilitation and post-conflict reconstruction of housing, land and property. Action on these fronts would help create an enabling environment for such returns, something that is anchored in the tenets of resolution 2254.

Madam President,

12. Resolution 2254 contains all the elements that are still commonly understood as required for a political solution: respecting the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria; a Syrian-led and owned political process, that includes a constitutional process culminating in free, fair and inclusive elections supervised by the United Nations, and that has the meaningful participation of women; a nationwide ceasefire; countering proscribed terrorist groups in compliance with international law; the protection of civilians; the release of detainees and abductees and information on the missing;

implementing confidence-building measures; conditions for the safe and voluntary returns of refugees and internally displaced persons; and post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation.

13. However, five years after the resolution, and with the Syrian people inside and outside Syria continuing to suffer deeply, the Special Envoy is taking stock of what has and has not been achieved in the implementation of this mandate. He is consulting widely as he does so, and in the process seeking to identify new or additional ways to move the process forward. He began this stocktaking when he met the now-late Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem, and in contacts with the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission. He has met senior Turkish officials in Ankara, Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry, and League of Arab States Secretary-General Aboul Gheit in Cairo, and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov as well as other senior officials in Moscow. He met Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and other senior officials recently in Tehran and is today in Riyadh, where he is meeting Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud. During this period, the Special Envoy also engaged by telephone with Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi and with other senior Arab, American and European officials. He appreciates the counsel and insight of all and seeks their strengthened support for the political process. He will be continuing this engagement in the period ahead with the Syrian parties and international partners. In that process, he will also continue to consult the Women's Advisory Board and seek the views and insights of a wide range of Syrian civil society interlocutors through ongoing consultations of the Civil Society Support Room.

14. As that wider exploration continues and deepens, we focus in the meantime on facilitating the Constitutional Committee meeting in Geneva next week. We trust that all members of the Committee will approach the two forthcoming sessions in a spirit of compromise and with a determination to engage seriously. They will have our full support in that regard.

Thank you, Madam President.