

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA
GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
20 January 2021

Mr President (Amb. Tarek Ladeb, Tunisia)

1. As the Syrian people face the year 2021, a decade of conflict has seen them experience death, injury, displacement, destructions, detention, torture, terror, violations, indignities, instability, intervention, occupation, division, de-development and destitution on a massive scale. Today, millions inside the country and the millions of refugees outside are grappling with deep trauma, grinding poverty, personal insecurity, and a lack of hope for the future.
2. For many, the daily struggle just to survive crowds out most other issues. According to OCHA – and Mark will brief you more in detail on the humanitarian situation - more than eight in 10 people in Syria are living in poverty. The World Food Programme assesses that 9.3 million people inside the country are food insecure. Humanitarian assistance by Member States and donors remains a lifeline for Syrians. But trends are expected to worsen. A perfect storm of factors - the impact of a decade of conflict, the global economic conditions due to the pandemic, the spillover from the Lebanese crisis, internal factors such as war economies, corruption, mismanagement, and external factors and measures – is producing a slow tsunami that is crashing across Syria. With rising inflation and bread and fuel shortages, we can expect the Syrian government and other *de facto* authorities to be increasingly unable to provide basic services and subsidies for basic goods. The pandemic continues to take its toll too. Syrians are suffering. It remains essential that any sanctions avoid worsening their plight. A torn society faces further unraveling of its social fabric, sowing the seeds for more suffering and even more instability.
3. At least, Mr. President, the Syrian people have seen less all-out violence than before. The last 10 months have been the calmest in the history of the conflict. Frontlines have barely shifted. But this is a *fragile* calm. It could break down at any moment. This past month again showed us this. We have seen an abrupt and significant escalation around Ein Issa in northeast Syria. An intensification of airstrikes attributed to Israel. Continuous ISIL attacks in the east and the central area. Mutual shelling and airstrikes in and around Idlib. And turbulence in the southwest. This is also a very *relative* calm. Civilians continue to be killed in ongoing cross-fire and IED attacks. And they continue to face a range of other dangers – from instability, arbitrary detention and abduction, to criminality and the activities of UN-listed terrorist groups.
4. As the Syrian people face poverty and insecurity, to say nothing of the unfulfilled hopes and dreams that so many of them have, I salute the work of all those Syrians in civil society. They continue to work to do what they can to improve the situation and to support a political process. I was pleased to be able to engage several of them during the late December via our Civil Society Support Room.

5. But as they stressed to me, the political process is not as yet delivering real changes in Syrians' lives nor a real vision for the future. Steps that could build confidence are not really being taken. Like full and unhindered humanitarian access. Progress on detainees, abductees and the missing – at the very least information on such persons, access, and the release of women, children, the sick and elderly. A nationwide ceasefire. A cooperative and effective approach to countering UN-listed terrorist groups. Steps to create a safe, calm, neutral environment. External and internal steps to address the socio-economic crisis. Moreover, there are no political talks among the Syrians other than on the constitutional track. And free and fair elections to be held pursuant to a new constitution under UN supervision, as envisaged in Security Council resolution 2254, seem far into the future.
6. As I continue to take stock of the implementation of resolution 2254, it is clear that no one actor or group of actors can impose their will on Syria or settle the conflict. They must work together. Yes, the process must be Syrian-owned and led. But the conflict is highly internationalized, with five foreign armies active in Syria. We cannot pretend that the solutions are only in the hands of the Syrians, or that the UN can do it alone.
7. That is why we need a more serious and cooperative international diplomacy. This really should be possible. After all, despite their differences, key states are committed to resolution 2254. And they have common interests – including on issues such as stability, containing terrorism, the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees, and preventing further conflict. We must be able to build on these together. I am more convinced than ever that we need a comprehensive approach – inclusive of all issues, and all actors, moving in mutual and reciprocal steps on all the issues outlined in resolution 2254. This could unlock genuine progress, and could chart a safe and secure path out of this crisis for all Syrians – men and women. I continue to engage widely on this front, with all key actors. I look forward to continuing to do so - including of course with the new U.S. Administration that takes office today.

Mr. President,

8. As I pursue this wider path, I continue to facilitate the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated Constitutional Committee. The Fifth Session of its Small Body will convene in Geneva next week, from 25 to 29 January, of course, COVID-19 conditions permitting. It will - as agreed and in line with the mandate, the Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure - discuss constitutional principles/basic principles of the constitution.
9. I note that there are still considerable COVID-19 challenges in Geneva. We will be ensuring that the strictest health and safety protocols are followed. We highly appreciate the cooperation of the Swiss authorities in enabling the meeting to go ahead. And we appreciate the commitment of the Co-Chairs and Constitutional Committee members to the measures put in place.
10. I do hope that I will soon be able to continue my consultations with the Syrian Government in Damascus and with the Syrian Negotiations Commission on the overall political process. Meantime, in preparation of the Constitutional Committee session, I have been virtually engaging the two co-chairs. I also met virtually the Middle Third civil society group yesterday.

11. Let me also note that I met Women's Advisory Board twice virtually in December. I look forward to engaging them virtually again this week and next. They have emphasised the importance of women's full participation. They stress that the core constitutional rights of women across political, social and economic spheres must be safeguarded in the process. They have pressed for more concrete and tangible progress in the work of the Constitutional Committee. The moment pandemic conditions allow I hope we will be able to reconvene the WAB in person.

Mr. President,

12. I do see this coming session of the Constitutional Committee as very important. For more than a year, many subjects have been discussed. I believe the time has come for the co-chairs to establish effective and operational working methods, so that the meetings are better organized and more focused. I believe that we need to ensure that the Committee begins to move from 'preparing' a constitutional reform to 'drafting' one, as it is mandated to do. This Committee can do this, I believe, by beginning to consider specific constitutional issues and draft provisions. I also believe that the co-chairs can and should reach agreement on a workplan for future meetings with clear agendas and topics, and there needs to be more urgency in the process.

Mr. President,

13. I believe that these are reasonable goals, but I cannot assure the Council that they will be met this time. My consultations are indeed continuing, and I have just before the beginning this briefing received an input from the co-chair nominated by the SNC and I will shortly be conveying it to the co-chair nominated by the Government. I will continue consultations with them including in Geneva this weekend before the Committee session begins. I strongly appeal to the co-chairs and to all members of the Committee to be ready to move to a new phase of work in this next session.

Mr. President,

14. This is no doubt a time of huge global and regional challenges. We must ensure that addressing the conflict in Syria is high among our shared priorities. Syria has a great and proud history. But it is enduring the most profound tragedy. We need to begin to unlock progress, step by step, in a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing manner, along the path of resolution 2254. If we do not, the dangers to Syria's civilians, to Syria as a state, to its society, and to the region, will only grow. This cannot be acceptable to Syrians or to any of us. That is why I count on the support of the Security Council and all key actors for maintaining calm nationwide, supporting confidence-building, and moving the political process forward.

Thank you, Mr. President.