

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA
28 April 2021**

Mr President (Amb. Dang Dinh Quy, Vietnam),

1. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board are meeting in Geneva this week - for the first time in person for a year. I thank the Swiss authorities for enabling this. WAB members have been very active in providing me and my team with vital information from the ground and counsel on the political process. Though they represent different views and backgrounds on many issues, they continue to find ways to work together and even reach agreement often. In their diversity and commitment they capture what many Syrians experience – and they focus on what many Syrians want to achieve for their country.
2. Let us not forget that, in addition to the challenges facing all Syrians, many women have also experienced sexual and gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, and trafficking. And with men killed and injured in large numbers, more women than ever are heading households - against the backdrop of violence, terrorism, displacement, instability, destitution and pandemic.
3. When I met the Women's Advisory Board members on Monday, they voiced a shared fear of Syria's permanent division, and worries that differences among external actors would perpetuate the Syrian conflict. But they also spoke with hope and determination for a renewal of the political process, for a lasting calm across the country, and for a new constitution that guarantees the rights and freedoms of all in Syria. They want to see an end to the conflict as a whole - and a sustainable peace achieved with the meaningful participation of Syrian women, with women's safety, basic needs, dignity, rights and equality at its core.

Mr President,

4. I want today to sound a warning to all – a warning to prioritize the proactive search for a settlement of the Syria conflict. Despite more than a year of relative calm by Syrian standards, this month reminded us of the potential for the situation to further disintegrate or rapidly deteriorate.
 - There has been a significant escalation in north-west Syria. This included strikes on a UN supported and notified hospital in western Aleppo close to densely-populated IDP camps, and on the Syrian-Turkish border where UN cross-border humanitarian deliveries take place, as well as shelling on residential areas of western Aleppo city.
 - On 22 April, airstrikes inside Syria were attributed by the Syrian Government to Israel for the second time in a month. The Syrian Government then activated its air defense system and Israel claimed that a missile emanating from Syria then struck Israeli territory. Israel said it then carried out further strikes inside Syrian territory.
 - ISIL continued to ramp up the scale and reach of attacks in central and north-eastern Syria – in one instance cells reportedly kidnapped dozens of civilians from rural Hama.
 - Afrin, Tel Rifaat and Ein Issa have all seen a steady rise in hostilities.

- Tensions in normally-peaceful Qamishli flared into violent confrontation last week, causing civilian casualties and displacement.
- And the south-west remains perennially unstable, with abductions, killings, detention, widespread criminality and troop movements that bring the spectre of imminent escalation.

Mr. President,

5. It is all-too-easy to become immune to these kinds of developments – and the dangers they could lead to. A nationwide ceasefire as per resolution 2254 is essential – as is a cooperative approach to eradicating listed terrorist groups.
6. I worry about the economic destitution facing the Syrian people – in the context of a decade of conflict and destruction, corruption and mismanagement, war economies, the Lebanese financial collapse, the pandemic, and sanctions. While the Syrian pound recovered some value this month, against a backdrop of Syrian Government measures, food prices remain at historic highs and inflation has not abated. 12.4 million Syrians are now food insecure - an increase of 4.5 million in the last year alone. Fuel shortages remain a concern as well.
7. I am sure Mark will highlight the humanitarian implications of this destitution in his intervention -- and of course also of flaring COVID-19 cases in some quarters and fresh cuts to water access for almost half a million people in Al Hasakeh. Let me also stress, as he will, the fundamental importance of full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of Syria, through intensified cross-line and cross-border deliveries. The Secretary-General stressed in his briefing to the General Assembly that a large-scale cross-border response for an additional 12 months remains essential to save lives. I appeal for the members of the Council to focus on achieving consensus to that end.
8. I also appreciate and continue to appeal for continued donor support to the pillars of the humanitarian response plan -- humanitarian assistance – protection – and resilience and access to services.

Mr. President,

9. The diverse civil society that I continue to engage via the Civil Society Support Room have conveyed shared concerns at the deteriorating situation for most Syrians. In a recent joint message delivered by some members at the Brussels conference at the end of March, they drew attention to the devastating impact of ten years of war on Syria's social fabric and the ongoing displacement and deteriorating situation for refugees. They also called for increased humanitarian and livelihoods programs and the application of all humanitarian exceptions to sanctions regimes. They stressed the need for progress regarding the thousands who remain detained, abducted or missing and called for a political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

10. Let me here reiterate the Secretary-General's appeal regarding the importance of avoiding and mitigating any effects of sanctions measures on the capacity of Syrians to access food, essential health supplies and COVID-19 medical support.

Mr. President,

11. Allow me to stress again the importance of unblocking progress on detainees, abductees and missing persons. As long as this file remains largely frozen, many Syrians will be unable to even begin to think of moving on, and Syria's social fabric cannot begin to be restored. I know first-hand the heavy toll this issue takes on families, through frequent contacts with family associations, women's groups and ordinary Syrian citizens. Together with my Deputy, and supported by dedicated staff, I have engaged directly with the parties to this end, and we are continuing to do so. My office also participates in a working group together with Iran, Russia and Turkey, and with the ICRC as an observer, though this group has only met once in fourteen months. Notwithstanding a modest number of detainees and abductees released in one-for-one simultaneous release operations, neither track has produced real progress. Specific ideas have been offered, including concrete procedures on clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, but these need to be operationalized. I reiterate my call for the Syrian government and all other Syrian parties to carry out unilateral releases of detainees and abductees, and to undertake meaningful actions on missing persons - at a scale that is commensurate with the scope of this tragic issue. The coming Eid al-Fitr would be the obvious occasion for this kind of action.

Mr President,

12. If this highly internationalized conflict is to move towards resolution, we need a more constructive and comprehensive international diplomacy on Syria to try to unlock progress step for step. I have spoken about this with the Syrian parties and I will continue to do so in future engagements. I have also spoken about it in recent engagements with key interlocutors in Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, the Arab World, Europe and others on this Council. I appreciate that key international interlocutors are expressing interest in this idea. At the same time, it is clear that mistrust and a desire for others to move first are prominent elements in the minds of many.
13. I understand this. But there *are* ways to overcome these concerns. A new means of international discussion or a new international format could bring *all* of those stakeholders who can put something *on* the table *to* the table. Exploratory consultations could help test possibilities and bridge the gap of mistrust that hinder such an effort. Key players could identify, with realism and precision, the mutual and reciprocal steps they can take and what they would seek, in order to promote progress on resolution 2254. Well defined packages without ambiguity, and parallel implementation and verification as relevant, could help. There are no guarantees of course that common ground would be found, but I am convinced that it could be. There is enough at stake and enough common interest for us to try. We must begin to lay the groundwork for such an effort – conscious that it will require time and effort to come to fruition. With a relative, albeit fragile, calm on the ground, and many capitals understanding the need for a way forward, we need to explore what is possible. We should not lose further time in exploring this seriously.

Mr President,

14. We take note that a presidential election in Syria has been scheduled for 26 May. The election has been called under the auspices of the current Constitution, and is not part of

the political process established by Security Council resolution 2254. The UN is not involved in this election and has no mandate to be. The UN continues to stress the importance of a negotiated political solution to the conflict in Syria. In this regard, resolution 2254 mandates the UN to facilitate a political process that culminates in the holding of free and fair elections in accordance with a new Constitution, administered under United Nations supervision to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.

Mr. President,

15. Let me now turn finally to the Constitutional Committee – and preface my remarks with two points of context.
16. First – the obvious – the Committee is Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. It was established and empowered by the agreement of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Negotiations Commission, as facilitated by the United Nations – namely, in its *Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure*. The Committee operates in accordance with the *Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure*. Committee members confirmed this in a *Code of Conduct* they adopted by consensus. I appeal to the Co-Chairs and all Committee members to respect the terminology in the *Terms of Reference* in their official dealings. I also appeal to them to adhere to the *Code of Conduct* in public statements.
17. Second, I have been clear that, in the interests of the Syrians themselves, a sixth session of the small body of the Committee needed to be carefully prepared. Assurances need to be in place to ensure that it implements the *Terms of Reference*, restores and builds some trust and confidence, and makes progress on the Committee’s mandate to prepare and draft for popular approval a constitutional reform. In other words, a sixth session needs to be different from what has gone before – with some clear goals, credible working methods, enhanced Co-Chair cooperation, and a future workplan.
18. I have worked patiently with the Co-Chairs to facilitate proposals between them and exchanges with me to find consensus on how such a Session could take place. Since my last briefing, terminology not consistent with the *Terms of Reference* and genuine differences on methodology led to an impasse that I assessed could not be overcome by further exchanges between the two Co-Chairs. I shared with both Co-Chairs on 15 April a compromise bridging proposal, building on good ideas that each had included in their proposals, and asking each to compromise. Let me note that it was regrettable that confidential elements of ongoing discussions found their way to the media. I am convinced that this proposal, if implemented, would help the Committee to move gradually forward on its work. I also recently engaged the Middle Third Civil Society Committee members.

Mr President,

19. Just before this briefing, I received a formal response to my proposal from the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Negotiations Commission. I was informed by the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Government that a formal response would be received next week. I will await having both Co-Chairs’ responses in hand and my engagement with

them before further commenting. For now, let me say that the United Nations stands ready to convene a sixth session as soon as logistically possible once Co-Chair agreement is in place.

Mr President,

20. The Constitutional Committee is part of what must necessarily be a broader process to implement resolution 2254 – the kind of process that a step-by-step process can help unlock. That broader process is needed to gradually create the kind of safe, calm and neutral conditions in which a consensual and broadly-supported constitutional reform could take place in Syria. These are the same conditions needed for safe, dignified and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and for the kind of elections resolution 2254 mandates. We cannot get there all in one go. But there are steps that could be taken to generate some movement, and it requires constructive international diplomacy to identify and implement them. I am open to any suggestions or advice, but I see no other path than this one to help the Syrian people to navigate out of their terrible crisis and towards a better future that meets their legitimate aspirations and restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.

Thank you, Mr. President.