

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

Thank you, Mr. President, (Amb. Zhang Jun, China),

1. Let me start by highlighting the grave situation of ordinary Syrians. It is a tragic irony that this time of relative calm, compared with earlier years of the conflict, is also a period of immense and growing humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people. It is a time of economic destitution, a pandemic, displacement, detention and abduction – all while violent conflict, terrorism and human rights abuses continue. These are the issues that are of deepest concern to Syrians today, that demand our attention, and on which a political process must deliver.
2. The military situation is relatively calm in some areas, with front lines frozen and Russian mediation helping de-escalate fighting in Qamishli. But recurring signs of a hot conflict are abundant:
 - spikes in mutual shelling and three airstrikes in the northwest;
 - a cross-line raid into Syrian Government-held territory;
 - more shelling in and around Afrin and Ain Issa;
 - the southwest as tense and turbulent as ever;
 - more airstrikes attributed to Israel in Quneitra, Latakia and Hama;
 - reports of rockets launched from southern Syria towards the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan;
 - and more attacks by Security Council-listed terrorist groups, including operations claimed by ISIL.
3. The economic situation for most Syrians has hardly improved. The Syrian pound has stabilized to some extent, including against a backdrop of new Syrian Government measures. But the price of essential goods and transportation costs are increasingly outside of the grasp of many Syrians. Basic services such as water, electricity and health remain compromised in many areas.
4. In short, Mr. President, we see the same suffering and the same pattern of events and dynamics month on month – a pattern which I fear is slowly inching Syrians towards an even deeper abyss.

Mr. President,

5. The solutions remain unchanging too. What is required is a Syrian-led and owned political solution, facilitated by the United Nations and backed by constructive international diplomacy. There are several things on which we have to work:
 - We need a lasting nationwide ceasefire, building on the existing calm brought about by international arrangements and understandings between key international actors.
 - It is important to combat Security Council-listed terrorist groups, through an approach that is effective, cooperative and inclusive of all relevant actors, and which upholds the principles of international law and prioritizes the protection of civilians.

- The humanitarian situation is dire and must be addressed with urgency. I am sure Under-Secretary-General Lowcock will elaborate on this in his intervention -- including flaring COVID-19 cases in some quarters, water cuts and restrictions, and low water levels in the Euphrates, impacting millions of Syrians. Let me also stress, as Mark surely will, the fundamental importance of full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of Syria, through intensified cross-line and cross-border deliveries. As the Secretary-General told the General Assembly, 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.
 - It is important to avoid and mitigate any humanitarian effects of sanctions that could exacerbate the plight of ordinary Syrians, for example by overcompliance – something that needs to be worked on.
 - A key priority must be unblocking progress on detainees, abductees and missing persons, including through unilateral releases and meaningful action regarding the missing, at a scale commensurate with the scope of this tragic issue. I have recently engaged the Syrian government again, seeking information on the latest presidential decree of 2 May, and proposing several concrete steps that could be taken on various aspects of this crucial file. We will continue to pursue that discussion.
 - Steps are needed that can create a safe, calm and neutral environment inside of Syria.
 - And a conducive environment is required for refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their homes, safely, voluntarily and in dignity.
 - We must continue to work for the meaningful participation of Syrian women in the political process.
 - We must also facilitate the involvement of a wider range of Syrians, including Syrian civil society in the process.
 - Constructive and comprehensive international diplomacy on Syria is essential, so that all key stakeholders, with the influence and authority to promote progress towards peace in Syria, can be at the same table.
 - This can help develop a step-for-step approach, so that those international stakeholders, and Syrian parties too, can overcome their mistrust, by laying out and agreeing precise, realistic packages of mutual and reciprocal steps to be taken, with parallel implementation and verification.
6. These are all well-known elements that, if realized, would help implement my mandate, resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

7. A credible Syrian-led and Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee, under the facilitation of the United Nations, is an important component of a wider process. I continue to facilitate efforts to hold a sixth session of the Small Body of the Committee. Such a session needs to be carefully prepared, built on assurances that it adheres to and implements the *Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure*. It needs to restore and build some trust and confidence, and produce results and continued progress on the Committee's mandate to prepare and draft for popular approval a constitutional reform.

8. On 28 April the Co-Chair of the Syrian Negotiations Commission communicated his acceptance of my 15 April compromise bridging proposal. The Co-Chair nominated by the Government of Syria has sent his formal response on 5 May. Deputy Special Envoy Matar will be traveling to Damascus in the coming days to pursue a clear understanding on my compromise proposal. We will of course brief the Middle Third when we reach such an understanding. The United Nations remains ready to convene a further session in Geneva as soon as a clear understanding is in place.

Mr. President,

9. As Security Council resolution 2254 provides, a political process for a solution of the conflict would include free and fair elections, 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.
10. We take note that today a presidential election is being held under the auspices of the current constitution. As indicated previously, this is not part of the political process called for in Security Council resolution 2254. The UN is not involved in this election and has no mandate to be involved. The UN continues to stress the importance of a negotiated political solution in Syria to implement resolution 2254. This remains the only sustainable path to ending the conflict and the suffering of the Syrian people.

Mr. President,

11. It is a source of regret that, despite our best efforts, there has been little progress this month, and indeed at all, in advancing the different dimensions of resolution 2254.
12. The broad contours of a political solution to the conflict are well understood by key stakeholders, yet none is willing to take the first step. If we continue like this, if key players are more invested in conflict-management than conflict resolution, I fear that Syria will become another protracted conflict, lasting generations.
13. As recent weeks have shown, unresolved conflicts tend to explode in ways we cannot predict. There are great dangers in not seizing the opportunity that the current period affords us. Despite the many catastrophes that Syrians face, there is more relative calm on the ground than there has been in previous years. There is a shared sense that no one can dictate the conflict's outcome. And there are common interests in many key areas.
14. Syria needs serious attention so that we can build on this dynamic. As I continue my efforts to get the Constitutional Committee back on track, I will also be continuing a series of consultations with key stakeholders to look at ways to narrow the differences among them, particularly on a new form of constructive international diplomacy and a step-for-step approach. As I said to you last month, I believe more and more players are receptive to this idea, and want to see if it can be operationalized. I am convinced that it can be.

15. Meantime, we continue to benefit from our engagement with the Women's Advisory Board following their meeting in Geneva from 26 to 29 April.
16. We will also continue to consult the widest range of Syrian voices, communities, groups and parties from all areas of the country. Just this past month, we consulted some 200 Syrian civil society representatives through the Civil Society Support Room. Our interlocutors remain steadfast in their demand to end the conflict, and the suffering of the Syrian people.

Mr. President,

17. I count on the support of this Council. I, as always, remain open to your advice. And I hope that our joint efforts can bring about a lasting political settlement for Syria, that meets the legitimate aspirations of its people and fully restores its sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, in line with resolution 2254.

Thank you Mr. President