

**AS DELIVERED**

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

Mr President,

1. I am very grateful to speak to you in person on Syria – it's been 18 months since I have been able to do so.
2. An imminent priority is of course the humanitarian situation, and let me fully reiterate the Secretary-General's appeal when he briefed you on Wednesday. Civilians across the country desperately need life-saving assistance and help building resilience. It is absolutely vital to maintain and expand access, including cross-border and cross-line operations. A large-scale cross-border response is essential for an additional 12 months to save lives. Your unity on this will be critical.

Mr President,

3. The same unity is needed for the political process. I think we are all disappointed that we are not making real advances on the political track to implement resolution 2254, including a new constitution and elections administered under UN supervision. Regrettably, the gulf of mistrust between the parties and the complexity of the situation on the ground makes early progress towards a comprehensive settlement unlikely. But we must find ways to unite around advancing elements of the resolution, so that in time the situation will be ripe for a more comprehensive resolution of the conflict. I sense there is widespread support among you for this.
4. Trust and confidence will be built through actions not words. Key players need to be ready to come to the table with the necessary good will and something to deliver. I believe we need a new constructive international dialogue on Syria, to discuss concrete steps – steps that should be reciprocal and mutual, defined with realism and precision, implemented in parallel, and which are verifiable.
5. My idea is to deepen exploratory substantive consultations that help identify the very first steps that Syrian and international players could deliver - to explore not only what they ask of others, but what kind of specific steps each can entertain.
6. I know this will not be easy. But I sense that all key players are interested in deepening this conversation. I have been in regular contact with senior officials from the Russian Federation and the United States before and since the recent Geneva Summit. I have been in regular contact also with many other members of this Council and key states in the region. From here, I will fly to Rome for consultations with Foreign Ministers participating in a Ministerial Meeting on Syria convened by Italy and the United States. I am hoping to be in Moscow soon, and to consult Turkey and Iran and as well - there will be an Astana format meeting in Nur Sultan in early July.

Mr President,

7. I believe there are several areas where the initial steps might be found. These are areas of vital concern for average Syrians, where there is potential common ground among key players, and where progress would promote internal and regional stability and build trust and confidence.
8. Take resolution 2254's call for action on detainees, abductees and missing persons, for example. Yes, we continue engaging the Syrian parties and participating in a Working Group on this issue. But these efforts have not so far delivered, commensurate with the nature and scale of the issue. This is tragic, because families from every corner of Syria have seen loved ones detained, abducted or gone missing. Women are particularly impacted when detained or when their family members are, as we regularly hear from the Women's Advisory Board. All sides – Syrian and international – say that they agree that action is needed. All sides stand to benefit from progress. We have recently engaged the Syrian government again on this subject, following up on a number of suggestions that we have made, while also seeking information on the latest presidential decree of 2 May and recent reported releases. I believe a steps-for-steps discussion could help unlock more serious progress.
9. Resolution 2254's call for a nationwide ceasefire is another area for potential cooperation. I need not remind you that there are five foreign armies jostling inside Syria. Syrian territory is split into a number of de facto zones, with the country's sovereignty seriously compromised. A patchwork of regional de-escalation and ceasefire agreements - in which Russia, Turkey and the United States are key players - have brought about 15 months of relative calm between those zones. But Mr President, there is a danger that existing arrangements could unravel. They could be slowly eroded by the near-constant tempo of limited violence across front-lines. Even worse, they could swiftly collapse by a much more dramatic escalation. A nationwide ceasefire should therefore be a common cause -- to avert these dangers, to keep civilians safe, and to serve as the first step toward the ultimate reunification of Syria and restoration of its sovereignty.
10. There were alarming signs of escalation this month in the attack on al-Shifaa hospital in Afrin city. Civilians, including medical personnel, were killed and injured, and parts of the hospital were destroyed. Let me reiterate here my strong condemnation of this appalling attack, and stress that all parties must fully comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and civilian objects. We also saw another escalation in southern Idlib, with mutual shelling, airstrikes inside Idlib, reports of civilian fatalities and significant displacement. Elsewhere, this month has seen more airstrikes attributed to Israel, more turbulence in the southwest, and more attacks by Security Council-listed terrorist groups, including operations claimed by ISIL.
11. Indeed, countering listed terrorist groups is another priority area for common effort. There are worrying signs that ISIL may be strengthening, given the increased frequency and reach of its latest attacks. Other listed terrorist groups remain at large and in control of territory. Key international players can and should cooperate on countering listed terrorist groups, in an effective way that protects civilians and promotes stability, in line with international law.
12. Recovering from the economic impact that most Syrians face after a decade of war and devastation is another area of potential common focus. By some measures – particularly the currency – the situation has stabilized somewhat in recent weeks. But many Syrians

are struggling to put food on their table, to find medicine and healthcare for loved ones, to find fuel for transport, to sustain their businesses, to access electricity and water. Indeed, water cuts and restrictions, and the worst water deficit in the Euphrates basin, continue to impact millions of Syrians in the north-east. The convergence of an economic crisis and a humanitarian crisis will continue to have dramatic consequences if not addressed. The result will not only be more human suffering and hopelessness but also instability. This cannot be in anyone's interest. For things to change, we need real reform and international engagement.

13. Let me note here that it is important that any humanitarian effects of sanctions exacerbating the plight of ordinary Syrians are avoided and mitigated, in particular in terms of overcompliance. I note measures taken in this direction recently by relevant players. But continuous action on this is indeed needed.
14. Let us also focus on the displacement crisis in Syria. It is almost incomprehensible in scale, with 13 million people forced to flee their homes, within Syria and abroad – half the country's pre-war population. This is a profound humanitarian and national tragedy and also a ticking-time bomb for regional stability. We need to see actions that create the necessary conditions and confidence for safe, dignified, and voluntary return. UNHCR has laid out protection thresholds and parameters in this regard. I believe there are steps that could be taken by the Government, and there are steps that could be taken by others too, to promote concrete progress.

Mr President,

15. These are the kinds of issues – and there may be others too - that I believe could be seriously discussed, and where mutual and reciprocal actions could begin to make a positive difference for Syrians, and give impetus to a political process.
16. In the meantime, let me stress that I continue to seek to facilitate the Constitutional Committee as an important contribution to a broader process. It is no doubt difficult to work on a new constitution in a situation of unresolved conflict. But that is what the two parties – the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Negotiations Commission – agreed to, when they concluded the *Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure* for a credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee, facilitated by the United Nations in Geneva. This Council welcomed that agreement in a Presidential Statement on 8 October 2019. I think most Syrians and most of us here in this Chamber are disappointed that the Committee, which has met five times, is not yet working expeditiously to produce results and continued progress on its agreed mandate to prepare and draft for popular approval a constitutional reform.
17. Further to my update in my last briefing, I continue to seek to facilitate the agreement of the Syrian Co-Chairs on how to ensure that the existing challenges are addressed, based on my April bridging proposal. Deputy Special Envoy Khawla Mattar is currently in Damascus in the context of that effort. When Co-Chair agreement is in place, we will brief the Middle Third of the Constitutional Committee and immediately set in motion the planning for a Sixth Session in Geneva and the work of the Committee going forward.

Mr President,

18. As we seek to advance a political process, we should engage the many Syrians who work to ameliorate the consequences of this conflict and to build bridges in their society. That is why it is a high priority of me and my team, as it was for my predecessors, to involve the widest spectrum of Syrian civil society in the political process, including via our Civil Society Support Room.
19. I am pleased to report that, this month, we deepen this effort in two ways. First, we have launched the first in a series of Thematic Working Groups, to give participants in our Civil Society Support Room a more structured way to contribute their expertise and inform my mediation efforts, aided by a virtual platform.
20. Second, earlier this week, Deputy Matar and our team, began a series of virtual regional consultations of the Civil Society Support Room. Around 120 Syrian civil society actors are taking part, more than a third of them women, participating from across all Syrian governorates and from abroad. I look forward to engaging them myself next week.
21. My own thinking continues to be shaped by these encounters with Syrians, and the common messages they bring forth. There is a thirst for a political resolution of the conflict, as the only means to put the country back together again. There is a sense that this is not just desirable but possible and that the United Nations must preserve and facilitate the political process for that purpose. There is also a sense that, at this juncture, the most important priority should be to address the issues that cause more and more daily suffering to Syrians themselves. And there is a very strong sense that many of the issues have fallen out of Syrian hands and require international attention.
22. Syrian civil society – and indeed I think the vast majority of Syrians – are desperately looking for signals that the international community, despite their differences, can work together. I urge you all to assist me on that in the weeks and the months ahead. In doing so, I hope we can ease the suffering for many millions of Syrians, promote stability, and move forward, step by step. Our goal remains a lasting political settlement that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, in line with resolution 2254.

Thank you, Mr President.