

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

Thank you, Madam President,

1. Last week, a grim announcement reminded us of the appalling suffering and losses of the Syrian people. The High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that more than 350,000 people can be confirmed, individually - by name, date and location - as having been killed in the first decade of the conflict. Given the vast numbers still unaccounted for, the actual figure is likely much, much higher.
2. To this horrific death toll, we may add other measures of deep suffering from more than a decade of conflict. More than 12 million Syrians are displaced – that's half of Syria's pre-conflict population. Tens of thousands remain detained, abducted or missing. Poverty levels are approaching 90% after a decade of conflict, mismanagement and corruption, and now the impact of the Lebanese economic collapse, COVID and, indeed, sanctions. Syria is divided into several de facto zones, with international players jostling in the theatre, as well as violent episodes that continue to test the relative calm of the last 18 months.

Madam President,

3. The Syrian people desperately need a Syrian-led and owned political process to deliver. And as part of that, they also need the sustained attention of the international community in support of a wider effort that could solidify calm, ease their suffering, and carry us forward along the path of restoring Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity and meeting the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people to determine their own future - the pillars of Security Council resolution 2254.
4. With military frontlines largely frozen for eighteen months, and concerns from parties regarding the status quo, the time to push for a political process is now. Resolution 2254 recognizes the close link between a nationwide ceasefire and a parallel political process, and I continue to call for this – particularly given episodes of violence and the dangers of this spiraling into all-out confrontation.
5. In Idlib, many who returned to their homes in the south of the province have now been displaced once more, against a backdrop of sustained mutual shelling, rocket fire and increased airstrikes, amid reports of civilian fatalities. Many strikes have been concentrated south of the M4, but there have also been strikes deep inside the de-escalation zone – including alarming strikes near IDP camps. Meanwhile, an agreement has brought calm in Deraa al-Balad, and I hope that it proves sustainable. I welcome the reduction in violence and resumption of humanitarian access. I hope that civilians are protected without any further escalation there or in other parts of the southwest where similar agreements are being

replicated. I also hope that there can be safe, dignified and voluntary return of all civilians to their homes.

6. Elsewhere in Syria, there are multiple sources of concern: ongoing shelling and skirmishes among non-state armed groups and the Turkish military on front-lines across the perimeter of northwest Syria and northern rural Aleppo; reports of an increase in Turkish drone strikes in Syrian territory; and yet another round of airstrikes attributed to Israel on targets near Damascus.
7. Multiple listed terrorist groups continue to operate across all quarters of Syria. ISIL attacked a gas pipeline supplying the power plant in Deir Ali, causing a power outage across the country – a reminder of the dangers these groups still pose. Counter-terrorism action in accordance with international humanitarian law, conducted in a manner that is effective while protecting civilians and safeguarding regional security, is possible and indeed needed. It will require greater international cooperation among key stakeholders.
8. I am sure that the situation on the ground in Idlib and elsewhere will be an important issue when Presidents Putin and Erdogan meet tomorrow, and I continue to appeal for those with influence to promote calm. So much depends on that.
9. Meanwhile, Russian-American contacts to pursue humanitarian progress in the framework of resolution 2585 have continued, and indeed the United Nations is committed to doing all it can to fully implement the resolution in all its aspects.

Madam President,

10. Let me also remind you that any humanitarian effects of sanctions that could exacerbate the plight of ordinary Syrians need to be avoided and mitigated, particularly in terms of over-compliance.
11. But I hope that the issues being discussed in recent international contacts are the floor, and not the ceiling, of what we collectively want to achieve in Syria. This has been my message during recent weeks, including trips in the region and here in New York. I have engaged intensively with the Syrian parties – the Syrian Government, and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission. I also met, or was able to join the Secretary-General when he met, several Foreign Ministers and senior officials of key countries. I have seen several other senior officials recently, including in Geneva. I will be traveling from here to Washington as my consultations continue.

Madam President,

12. It is clear from all our engagements that trust is low – but it is also clear – and let me emphasise this – that common interests do exist, that things are not static, and that there is every reason to try now to build a more effective political effort.

13. On the Constitutional Committee, we are at an important moment. It has now been exactly two years since the Committee was agreed by the Government of Syria and the Syrian Negotiations Commission. Regrettably, the Committee has not yet begun to make steady progress on its mandate.
14. But today, there is some good news to report. Following eight months of intensive facilitation with the Co-Chairs, I am pleased to announce that agreement is in place on methodology, and invitations have been issued for a 6th Session of the Committee. While we are still in the process of confirming logistics, the Small Drafting Body will convene in Geneva as of 18 October, and the Co-Chairs will for the first time meet the day before together with me to prepare the session.
15. The Co-Chair's agreement on methodology is based on three pillars that formed the basis of my engagement with them: 1/ respect for the *Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure*; 2/ the submission of texts of basic constitutional principles in advance of the meetings; and 3/ regular Co-Chair meetings with me before and during the coming session. The Co-Chairs are also committed to setting provisional dates for future meetings and discussing a workplan.
16. In short, we should all now expect the Constitutional Committee to begin to work seriously on a process of drafting – not just preparing – a constitutional reform. If it does that, then we will have a different and credible constitutional process. We need that if we are to build a modicum of trust. All three delegations – the delegation nominated by the government, the delegation nominated by the opposition, and the middle third civil society delegation, who Deputy Special Envoy Mattar briefed yesterday – have important contributions to make in that regard.

Madam President,

17. We need, indeed, to find a genuine intra-Syrian political dialogue - something that was reportedly discussed when President Putin met President Assad in Moscow recently – and through this, a genuine process of Syrian political reform. I am convinced that Geneva can be the place where Syrians committed to durable peace can begin to work with each other in a constructive manner.
18. Let me recall here that resolution 2254 also encouraged the meaningful participation of Syrian women in the political process. Without this no solution in Syria can be complete. My office has continued to consult with the Women's Advisory Board. In fact, the WAB is currently convening in Helsinki, and Deputy Special Envoy Mattar will be joining them there. While there, the WAB have been invited to meet with Finnish officials to gain insights on the Finnish experience in education and conflict resolution.
19. Let me underline the importance of action on the crucial file of detainees, abductees and missing persons. All sides say that they agree that action is needed, and all sides stand to benefit from progress as families from every corner of Syria have seen loved ones detained, abducted or gone missing. I remain absolutely convinced that if we could make inroads here,

it would be a vital confidence-builder, a signal to all Syrians that peace is possible, and a circuit-breaker in the context of international diplomacy.

20. My hope is that this concerted international cooperation could also help to focus on the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees. Clearly the conditions are far from being ripe for most of them. But we can start to look at how to remove some of the obstacles to returns – whether they be in terms of the security situation, legislation, resources, livelihoods and with the relevant authorities sending clear and credible signals. That would send a signal of concrete hope to millions of Syrians. And I believe that it would help decrease tensions across the region – tensions that are intimately linked to the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict.

Madam President,

21. As I have often stressed, the issues are not solely in the hands of the Syrians. We need a constructive Syria diplomacy to help save lives, ease suffering, promote stability and further the implementation of resolution 2254. In this regard, I am continuing to ask key states to work with me in exploratory discussions on concrete, mutual and reciprocal steps that are defined with realism and precision, and that are implemented in parallel and are verifiable. I am continuing my consultations to seek real buy-in in the form of relevant players being ready not only to identify what they seek, but also what they can deliver on, in a reciprocal process.
22. I remain ready to use the convening power of the United Nations in Geneva if this can help create prospects for incremental progress. I will continue this work on the wider process, while focusing in the weeks ahead on facilitating the next session of the Syrian-led and -owned Constitutional Committee.

Thank you, Madam President.