

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

Thank you so much, Mr. President (Amb. Abdou Abarry, Niger)

1. We meet at another year's end, and we can only look back on 2021 as a year of deepening suffering of the Syrian people.
 - Despite no shift in front lines, we have seen continuing violence against civilians and systematic human rights abuses -- including against women and girls.
 - Levels of hunger and poverty have escalated as the economy has continued to implode, with 14 million people in need, the highest number since the conflict began.
 - Many tens of thousands remain detained, abducted or missing.
 - Thirteen million Syrians remain displaced inside and outside the country – many of their children not knowing their homeland – their prospects for safe, dignified and voluntary return not improving – and a continuing challenge for Syria's neighbours.
 - Syria remains fragmented into several areas that seem to be drifting apart, as *de facto* authorities entrench their control on the ground, and five foreign armies continue to jostle in the theatre.
 - And Syria continues to radiate instability -- a haven for mercenaries, drug trafficking and terrorism.

Mr. President,

2. Six years since its adoption, we are regrettably a long way from implementing Security Council resolution 2254 in a manner that could ease the suffering of the Syrian people, meet their legitimate aspirations, and restore Syria's sovereignty and unity.
3. But I do believe there are possibilities for progress that need to be explored in 2022. Why do I say this? There are two main reasons for this.
 - First: because all parties confront what I call a strategic stalemate on the ground that has now continued for 21 months, with no shifts in front-lines – making it increasingly clear that no existing actor or group of actors can determine the outcome of the conflict, and that a military solution remains an illusion.
 - And second: because there are grave risks and costs to all by simply trying to muddle through with the unacceptable status quo -- especially given the humanitarian suffering,

the continuing displacement crisis, the collapse of the economy, the de facto division of the country, the dangers of renewed escalation, and the continued threat of terrorism.

4. I have been highlighting these dynamics in all my engagements. With each passing month, I have sensed a wider realization than before that political and economic steps are needed -- and that these can really only happen together – step-by-step, step-for-step.
5. I have travelled extensively in the region, meeting with the Foreign Ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, in November, and the Government of Lebanon earlier this month.
6. I recently travelled to Damascus for wide-ranging discussions with the Syrian Government.
7. I also recently briefed American, European, Arab and Turkish envoys when they met in Brussels. And my Deputy, Khawla Mattar, is today as we are speaking en route to Nur-Sultan, where she will meet with Russian, Turkish and Iranian officials and others participating in an Astana-format meeting.

Mr. President,

8. My sense from all these engagements is that there is still great mistrust on all sides. A common message I hear from many is that “we have made steps, but those on the other sides have not”. Nevertheless, there is enough interest from all sides to test what could be possible via a wider political process.
9. To further explore this, I have begun consulting senior officials from key stakeholders – Syrian and international – in bilateral consultations with me in Geneva. These are now underway and will continue in January. This is a first set of consultations in what I believe needs to be a rolling process.
10. So far, the Russian Federation, the European Union, Turkey and Qatar have participated in bilateral consultations with me in Geneva. I look forward to engaging further participants in the New Year. I am asking each stakeholder not only their priorities and demands, but also what they are prepared to put on the table in that context, to help move the process forward.

Mr. President,

11. In time, I would hope that we can begin to identify and agree on incremental, reciprocal, mutual, realistic, precise, and verifiable steps that could be taken in parallel to build trust and confidence and help to move the political process forward in line with Security Council resolution 2254.
12. Let me recall here that, while the political solution in Syria must be Syrian-owned and Syrian-led, many issues are not solely in the hands of the Syrians. Moreover, we have

seen that when key stakeholders work together with mutual steps on issues of common concern, at least some progress has been possible.

13. For example, US-Russian channels helped lay the groundwork for Security Council resolution 2585, and it is important that we maintain and build on this. As the Secretary-General has stated in his recent report: “We must continue to take every opportunity to address humanitarian needs, including through further increasing access and further expanding early recovery efforts.” I’m looking forward to hearing more from [Under-Secretary-General] Martin [Griffiths] on these issues.
14. And the meetings I mentioned earlier – in Brussels recently and in Nur-Sultan tomorrow – are important for the signals they send and because they can address issues on the ground - especially of a humanitarian or security character. These efforts will doubtless continue.
15. But, Mr. President, the truth is that existing channels or formats all exclude at least one of the critical players – Syrian or international.
16. I am convinced that we need all of those with a stake in the conflict involved in a common political effort, if we are to see concrete progress on the issues that matter most – both to Syrians themselves and also in terms of regional stability. Steps that could actually move us towards a safe, calm, and neutral environment ... steps that could reinforce a Syrian-led political dialogue.
17. And we must channel frustrations at the lack of progress and the desire to take initiatives into a coordinated strategy on a broader process. I hope that, in this way, we can set in motion a virtuous cycle of reciprocal steps and build trust and confidence – and that a process could unfold that could meet the aspirations of the Syrians, that could enable refugees to return voluntarily and in safety and dignity, and that could fully restore Syria’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

Mr. President,

18. Let me note here that, while in Nur-Sultan, my team will attend a meeting of the Working Group on the Release of Detainees/Abductees, the Handover of Bodies and the Identification of Missing Persons, where we continue to urge meaningful progress on the various aspects of the file. They will also review the most recent release operation under the Working Group’s umbrella when, on 16 December – in an operation observed by my office – five persons from each side were simultaneously released in northern Syria.
19. What is absolutely clear is that vastly scaled-up action with regard to releases – particularly women, children, the sick and the elderly – and sharing of information on the fate and whereabouts of missing persons is needed to move forward. I urged this during my recent visit to Damascus.

Mr. President,

20. As I work to advance a broader process, I am actively engaged in seeking to reconvene the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated Constitutional Committee. In October and November, Deputy Special Envoy Mattar went twice to Damascus for consultations regarding a new session and also met in Istanbul with the Syrian Negotiations Commission and the Co-Chair it nominated. Just over a week ago, as I have mentioned, I travelled to Damascus, where I met with the Foreign Minister and the Co-Chair nominated by the Syrian Government.
21. It is important that the delegations not only table constitutional texts but that they all – including the delegation that has not yet done so – are ready to commit to revising them in light of the discussions. We need a productive drafting process according to the Committee’s mandate. The Committee must work, as its Terms of Reference outline, “expeditiously and continuously to produce results and continued progress”. I have discussed concretely with both Co-Chairs what this would look like, and I am continuing to engage in an effort to produce a clear understanding. After my discussions in Damascus, I am awaiting a further communication from them before I am reaching out to the SNC.
22. To be clear: I am ready to convene a Seventh session of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva as soon as understandings are in place. And once they are, we will of course brief the Civil Society Middle Third in preparation for a Seventh Session.

Mr. President,

23. Let me add that I continue to engage widely with Syrian women and men in civil society, who have diverse networks in Syria and the region, including the members of the Women’s Advisory Board, and participants in the Civil Society Support Room. I value their contribution to all efforts to promote sustainable peace in Syria.

Mr. President,

24. Now is the time to explore whether a political process can meaningfully move forward in 2022. The status quo has many dangers, and it would be folly only to manage an unacceptable and deteriorating stalemate. Equally, the realities facing all parties should promote an interest in compromise, and open opportunities for concrete steps forward on the political track. No one should expect miracles or quick solutions – the path forward will be necessarily incremental. But, Mr. President, I hope that this coming year we can work on concrete steps towards the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254. I count on the support of the Security Council.

Thank you.