

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA
26 January 2022**

Thank you so much, Madam President, good to see you. And it is good to be here back in New York in person and to be able to greet you all.

1. Let me at the outset stress that Syrians continue to suffer deeply and that violence in Syria is indeed continuing. This past month alone has seen:
 - airstrikes in Idlib, reportedly killing civilians and damaging civilian infrastructure;
 - mutual shelling across front-lines;
 - a flare up of hostilities in the northeast;
 - IED attacks killing civilians in northern Syria;
 - airstrikes attributed to Israel damaging Latakia port;
 - continued violence in the South;
 - a growing number of security incidents related to drug smuggling;
 - and ISIL attacks, including on civilians and humanitarian actors, in northeastern and central Syria.

2. In recent days, as you will have seen from news, we have seen an unprecedented attempt at a prison-break by thousands of detainees with suspected ISIL affiliation in Hasakah, sparking clashes with airstrikes from the US-led global coalition in support of the Syrian Democratic Forces on the ground. There have reportedly been dozens of fatalities. We understand that, in the last few hours, the SDF have taken back control, and all or most ISIL fighters seem to have surrendered. However, the situation is still unfolding. We are still very concerned for the safety and security of civilians caught up in this situation, many of whom have been displaced. UNICEF drew attention to reports of ISIL members being holed up in dormitories for minors, putting hundreds of children in detention at risk. Even if this particular ISIL uprising might have been quashed, this episode brings back terrible memories of the prison breaks that fueled the original rise of ISIL in 2014 and 2015. Madam President, I see this as a clear message to us all of the importance of uniting to combat the threat of internationally-proscribed terrorist groups -- and to resolve the broader conflict in which terrorism inevitably thrives.

3. We must remember in this context that the tragedy of the Syrian people is only deepening. 14 million civilians now need humanitarian assistance. More than 12 million remain displaced – and many are right now facing freezing winter conditions. Tens of thousands are detained, abducted or missing. The economy of Syria has collapsed. Criminality and smuggling are flourishing. And there are reports of young people seeking any opportunity to leave the country, sometimes falling prey to traffickers and warlords. Education is fragmented and severely degraded – as indeed are institutions and infrastructure across the board. The country remains de facto divided and society is deeply fractured. Syrians see no concrete progress towards a political solution.

Madam President,

4. Despite the continued violence and suffering, it is also clear that a strategic stalemate does exist. There has been no shifts in front-lines for nearly two years. It is clear that no existing actor or group of actors can determine the trajectory or outcome of this conflict, and indeed that the military solution remains an illusion.
5. I have continued to engage widely on these realities, including in visits this past month to Tehran and Doha, and in a meeting with the Syrian Negotiations Commission. On Monday, I briefed Foreign Ministers meeting in the European Union Foreign Affairs Council. In addition, in late December, Deputy Special Envoy Mattar attended an Astana format meeting, where she met senior officials from Russia, Turkey and Iran, the Syrian Government and opposition, and regional observers.
6. She also participated in a meeting of the Working Group on the Release of Detainees /Abductees, the Handover of Bodies and the Identification of Missing Persons. Some positive proposals were made by participants in that meeting - ideas which, if implemented, would mark some genuine progress on this file. But what is absolutely needed is for these ideas now to be followed up on, as we are urging all stakeholders to do.

Madam President,

7. More broadly, I am calling anew for serious diplomatic discussions on a range of steps that could begin to impact the conflict dynamics, build some trust and confidence between and among Syrians and international stakeholders, and make progress step-by-step, step-for-step, within the framework of resolution 2254.
8. I have been convening senior officials from key stakeholders in bilateral consultations in Geneva. The Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission are of course invited to Geneva for these consultations, and I hope to engage them further soon. Meanwhile, following bilateral consultations with Russia, the European Union, Turkey and Qatar in December, I consulted the League of Arab States, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and United States during January in Geneva. I will be continuing these consultations with further interlocutors in the coming period. This is a rolling process where it will be necessary to revert to interlocutors repeatedly over time.
9. My question to all interlocutors is the same: can you identify not only what you demand, but also what you are prepared to put on the table, in exchange for steps from the other side? Frankly, I welcome fresh ideas from any quarter that could bring about action on issues such as:
 - detainees, abductees and missing persons;
 - humanitarian assistance and early recovery – building on the progress made in passing and continuing to implement Security Council resolution 2585;

- conditions for safe, dignified, and voluntary refugee returns;
- restoring socio-economic conditions – which, as you all know, have collapsed after more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption, mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, and, indeed, sanctions;
- solidifying calm throughout Syria and interim stabilization is of course a key aspect, and at the same time, cooperating in countering terrorism;
- and then what I call diplomatic issues.

10. 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 in areas like these. This would build trust and confidence, make an impact on the suffering of the Syrian people, and help to move the political process forward. Our goal remains to create the kind of safe, calm, neutral environment where a constitutional process could take hold, and ultimately elections can take place administered under UN supervision – as envisaged by Security Council resolution 2254 -- All of this in the context of respecting and restoring Syria’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, and enabling the Syrians to determine their own future.

Madam President,

11. As part of this, I am actively engaged in seeking to reconvene the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated Constitutional Committee. The Committee’s work so far remains disappointing. The present challenge is to ensure that the delegations not only table constitutional texts but are prepared to revise them in light of the discussions, to try to find some common ground, or at least narrow differences. We need a productive drafting process according to the Committee’s mandate. And let me remind you, the Committee must work, as its Terms of Reference outline, “expeditiously and continuously to produce results and continued progress”.

12. I am continuing to engage, including with both Co-Chairs, in an effort to produce a clear understanding, and there are some ideas that have been floated. I am ready to convene a seventh session of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva as soon as understandings are in place – and it remains my wish that we could then have several sessions in the months ahead, and indeed do serious work. When we have Co-Chairs agreement, we will of course brief the civil society Middle Third in preparation for a seventh session.

Madam President,

13. You will be pleased to know that from here, I fly to Oslo to meet the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board. I thank the Norwegian Foreign Ministry for its kind and generous invitation to the WAB, and NOREF and UN Women for their logistical support. The members of the WAB continue to advise me on a broad range of questions related to the crisis in Syria, and indeed its resolution. Their suggestions are serious and practical. My team also continues to engage Syrian women more broadly, and I value their contributions to resolving the conflict.

14. We equally look forward to convening participants in the UN's Civil Society Support Room in Geneva in the coming weeks. And we continue constant engagement with a diverse group of civil society actors through a dedicated digital platform.

Madam President,

15. I can promise you that I will continue to spare no effort to engage the Syrian Government and opposition, and all sectors of Syrian society, men and women, and all key international stakeholders, in pursuit of my mandate in line with Security Council resolution 2254. It is an enormous challenge to make real progress that can make a difference to the Syrian people, but that is what we must do. And, I will need all your guidance and support.

Thank you.