

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

Madam President [Amb. Barbara Woodward UK],

1. Syria is a hot conflict, not a frozen one. We have seen airstrikes in the northwest pick up again and intensified clashes around Afrin and the northeast, amid continued exchanges of rocket fire and shelling across all frontlines, IEDs, car bombs and other security incidents.
2. The conflict also still gives rise to threats to international peace and security of the first order. Notwithstanding their legal status, the sheer fact that five foreign armies operate on different sides of the Syrian conflict is concerning. Regular incidents between or involving international actors are troubling. For instance, this month saw, once again:
 - strikes in Syria attributed to Israel;
 - drone strikes in the northeast attributed to Turkey;
 - airstrikes in Idlib and west of the Euphrates attributed to Russia;
 - reports of rocket fire on US troops in Deir-ez-ZorI worry that any of these flashpoints could be further exacerbated by heightened geopolitical tensions outside of Syria.
3. Terrorism is still a significant threat, with at least two listed terrorist groups carrying out operations or holding territory. It is worrying that ISIL attacks are picking up once again, following a relative lull in February.
4. As you have heard just now from OCHA, Syria is still among the greatest humanitarian crises of our era. We should be appalled about what this means for Syrian civilians, who continue to be killed by violence, whose humanitarian suffering is at its highest levels since the conflict began, and millions of whom are displaced inside and outside of the country. And we should be deeply concerned about what this scale of suffering will translate into, in terms of the fabric of Syrian society and Syrian and regional stability, if there is no political path out of this conflict.

Madam President,

5. Therefore my message today is simple: focus on Syria. The current strategic stalemate on the ground and Syria's absence from the headlines should not mislead anyone into thinking that the conflict needs less attention or fewer resources, or that a political solution is not urgent. Indeed, a conflict of this scale requires a comprehensive political solution in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

Madam President,

6. A constitutional track could contribute to such a solution - but to do so, it must build trust and confidence. On 25th March, we concluded the 7th Session of the Syrian

Constitutional Committee. The session was underway when I briefed you last time – by that stage, the Committee had spent four days discussing draft constitutional texts presented by delegations on four basic constitutional principles.

7. The expectation was that, on the 5th and final day, delegations would submit revisions to the texts they submitted to reflect the content of those discussions and these revisions would then be discussed by the Committee members. I can report that delegations offered at least some revisions to some of the texts presented. Some of these embodied amendments indicating an attempt to reflect the content of the discussions and narrow differences. Still, others contained no changes.
8. Deputy Special Envoy Khawla Matar has since been in Damascus and Istanbul for further discussions with the two Co-Chairs, and I have today issued invitations for the 8th session from 28th May to 3rd June here in Geneva. In doing so, I have affirmed the methodology, including the expectation to submit revisions on the 5th day to reflect the content of the discussion, and I stress the importance of this expectation being fulfilled. I am also appealing to both Co-Chairs and their delegations and the Middle Third to submit any new titles to my office as early as possible before the next session, and to make a good faith effort to identify titles - and prepare texts for them for discussion during the session and revision on the 5th day - that focus on matters on which most Syrians could agree. This spirit would make meaningful the commitment, stated in the Terms of Reference, that both the Government of Syria and the SNC opposition has agreed to, that the Constitutional Committee's work shall be governed by a sense of compromise and constructive engagement aimed at reaching general agreement of its members. Madam President, only with this positive intent will the process move forward.
9. I have spoken of the suffering of the Syrian people, and on the humanitarian front, I urge all concerned to expand cross-line and cross-border assistance, to enhance efforts for early recovery to build resilience in line with resolution 2585, and to be generous with the resources needed for humanitarian work.
10. But, Madam President, we have to go beyond stemming the tide of deepening suffering. Many of the things that Syrians suffer from most are inherently political in nature. They require difficult steps by political actors, involving negotiations and give-and-take. They ultimately require a comprehensive implementation of all aspects of Security Council resolution 2254.
11. Tens of thousands of Syrians remain detained, abducted or missing, and their plight is a central element of suffering among Syrians. As High Commissioner Bachelet told the General Assembly this month, the impact of this unresolved issue on women relatives and children is particularly severe. As we are often reminded, without progress on this file, many Syrians will be unable even to begin to think of moving on, and sustainable peace will remain elusive. The lack of progress is frustrating because all sides say that they indeed agree that action is needed, and all sides stand to benefit from progress. We need modest but concrete steps on this file, that can help build the necessary confidence for bigger steps.

Madam President,

12. The displacement crisis that I have already mentioned is another key layer of suffering. While the displacement caused by the war in Ukraine is tragically catching up, Syria remains the biggest displacement crisis in the world, with 6.8 million refugees and 6.9 million IDPs – half the pre-war population, a whole generation born and brought up in displacement. And yet even as conditions worsen in many places of displacement, we see little sign of returns; indeed some data shows that the rate of return continues to decrease. We need to start to address the fears and concerns that Syrian refugees and IDPs express, and which prevent them from returning. This will require concrete steps from a range of Syrian and international stakeholders in a variety of different areas, including on issues inherent in resolution 2254.
13. Syrians across the country still face a devastating economic crisis after more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption, mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, and sanctions – and now the war in Ukraine and its economic spillover. The World Food Program notes that between 2019 and 2021, the price of basic food items increased by a staggering 800 percent. Syrians have been forced to ration energy products, or to choose among buying food, fuel or medicine. This economic predicament will only fuel the displacement crisis and humanitarian crisis, with knock-on effects for stability in the region and beyond. We can always do more to alleviate the worst effects of this crisis with humanitarian assistance, and indeed we should continue to do so. But there are plainly also other steps that can be taken to address the various measures and dynamics, internal and external, that are contributing to this crisis.
14. I believe in areas such as these, and potentially others too, it should be possible to identify concrete, reciprocal, verifiable measures that could be taken in parallel and that could begin to shift conflict dynamics and create a more safe, calm and neutral environment – and in the process, to explore how a broader political process could be constructed to tackle all the issues in Security Council resolution 2254.

Madam President,

15. We must remain focused on achieving a comprehensive political resolution to the conflict, in line with resolution 2254, respecting the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, and enabling the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations.

Thank you.