

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA
29 August 2022

Thank you so much Mr President,

1. Let me start by informing you that Deputy Special Envoy Najat Rochdi has joined my team this month and hit the ground running. I look forward to working closely with her.

Mr President,

2. I have since early 2020 stressed that frontlines have been frozen, and I have urged that this relative calm provided the window to build a credible political process. However, this opportunity has so far not been seized. And I am worried that we have in recent months seen troubling signs of military escalation on several axes. This last month alone saw an increase in strikes attributed to a wide range of actors:
 - On 11 August, the SDF publicly acknowledged killing Turkish soldiers on the border, inside Turkish territory, stating that these strikes were in response to an escalation in Turkish drone and artillery strikes. Türkiye has reiterated its security concerns, and made renewed statements threatening further military intervention inside Syria.
 - Syrian State media said that the Government carried out strikes on Turkish and armed opposition sites inside Syria, in response to what it said were Turkish strikes on 16 August that targeted and killed Syrian Government soldiers near Ain Al Arab. Strikes on al-Hasakeh on 18 August caused civilian casualties, including women and children.
 - On 19 August, strikes hit a crowded market in al-Bab, causing significant civilian casualties including women and children. And on 22 August there were reports of a round of pro-government airstrikes in Idlib, with ongoing mortar, rocket and artillery exchanges across frontlines, causing a rise in civilian casualties.
 - On 23 and 24 August, U.S. strikes targeted what they said were Iranian-backed groups and their infrastructure in Deir-ez-Zor, in what it says was a response to two attacks on sites where U.S. forces are present in al-Tanf and Deir-ez-Zor.
 - August also saw further airstrikes in Tartous, Damascus and Hama, which Syrian state media attributed to Israel and said killed several Syrian Government soldiers.
 - Meanwhile, there was escalation in the southwest, including tit-for-tat security incidents, a Syrian Government offensive in Tafas, and infighting in Sweida.
 - And Mr President, listed terrorist groups continued to launch attacks on Government, SDF, and other forces.

Mr President,

3. These are just some of the recent incidents of particular note. I am concerned that an escalatory cycle could see events further unravel, with civilians continuing to pay an already immense cost. And international peace and security will be at risk, given the international nature of many of these latest clashes. I take note of the various diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation. I hope that these different efforts can unite to restore the calm across Syria, towards a nationwide ceasefire, something which we will underline to Ceasefire Task Force participants here in Geneva. And, of course, a ceasefire would also require parallel efforts to address the extensive presence of listed terrorist groups, in a cooperative manner that is in line with international law and which protects civilians and civilian infrastructure.
4. Meanwhile, the members of the Humanitarian Task Force here in Geneva were extensively briefed last Friday on action needed to support humanitarian priorities on the ground – more relevant than ever given that military escalation will only increase needs and inhibit humanitarian access. Let me also note that the continued support of all members of the Council for the implementation of all aspects of Security Council Resolution 2642 is important – via all modalities, whether cross-border or cross-line, and with support for early recovery. And let me 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.

Mr President,

5. We need a political process that moves steadily forward – and we do not have that at present.
6. Last month I briefed you in detail on why plans for a 9th session of the Small Body of the Constitutional Committee are temporarily on hold. In Moscow last week, I met Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, who assured me that Russia remains focused on Syria and expressed support for advancing the work of the Constitutional Committee. We agreed to continue discussions to resolve the issues that are preventing the holding of a 9th session. I also had direct communications from Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, and interactions with senior Turkish officials. I appreciate these engagements. It is my hope that the Committee will soon reconvene in Geneva.
7. But, Mr President, let's be frank: the key challenge facing the Committee is not the venue, but the lack of progress on substance. I reiterated my appeal to Minister Lavrov, already conveyed to him and the Foreign Ministers of Iran and Türkiye ahead of the Astana format summit in Tehran on 19th July, to support the Co-Chairs in ensuring political will, a faster pace and better working methods. This is how the Committee could become credible. This is how it could fulfil its mandate and become a door-opener for a wider political process.

Mr President,

8. We also need to move on a broader process, on the many other aspects of resolution 2254. A series of step-for-step confidence-building measures could help unlock progress and build a more safe, calm and neutral environment – if done with precision, and in a coordinated manner, within the framework of the UN process.

Mr President,

9. I have nothing new to report to you on the Syrian presidential amnesty decree of 30th April. I look forward to further engagement with the Syrian Government on this decree and the other areas of confidence-building measures that I have raised with them. I have continued to work with outside players to be ready to meet a real step with a real step. I appeal to the Syrian Government not to miss this opportunity to make progress via its own sovereign moves. This was my message to Minister Lavrov in Moscow too, who took note of the initiative.

Mr President,

10. Let me add a note on the critical issue of missing persons – an enduring source of suffering for tens of thousands of individuals from all over Syria, who remain arbitrarily detained, abducted or forcibly disappeared. Their families have the right to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. The Secretary-General will shortly release a study, commissioned by the General Assembly, that points the way forward by proposing pathways to fulfil the families' right to know the truth.
11. I also wish to inform you that we are convening the Women's Advisory Board in Switzerland this week, whose members continue to present insightful analysis and remind us of the imperative role women play in preserving the resilience of the Syrian society.
12. The Civil Society Support Room also continues its valuable work, with meetings planned soon for two new thematic working groups so that a spectrum of Syrian experts can make substantive contributions to the political process.

Mr President,

13. We clearly face mounting challenges in implementing resolution 2254. I regret that we have not taken advantage of over two years of relative calm to advance the process further. We need relative calm to be restored and we need to work towards a nationwide ceasefire. We will continue to work intensely to resolve issues and resume the Constitutional Committee in Geneva. And we will continue to look for opportunities for step-for-step confidence building measures, while paying special attention to the file of the detained, the abducted and the missing.
14. But, Mr President, we need to be honest about the mismatch between the scale of our collective political efforts and the scale of the challenge at hand. The degree of fragmentation in Syria, the region and internationally – and deficits of trust and will – are preventing us from doing what needs to be done – addressing this conflict in a comprehensive manner, with serious compromise and investment, involving all players. I will continue to remind you that this is the only way to avoid another dangerous collapse. This is the only way to reunite and repair a fragmented country and people, to genuinely restore Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, to end the displacement crisis and to allow the Syrian people to chart their own future.

Thank you, Mr. President.