

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
30 May 2023

Madam President (Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl of Switzerland),

1. Last month, when I briefed you in New York, I said that new diplomatic activity in the region *could* be an opportunity, *if* seized. It *could* act as a circuit breaker in the search for a political solution in Syria – *if* there is constructive Syrian engagement, and indeed *if* key regional and international groups and players can work together.
2. This past month has seen diplomatic activity quicken: a meeting in Moscow of the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria and Turkiye; a meeting in Amman of the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria; resolutions adopted in Cairo and Jeddah by the League of Arab States; the establishment of an Arab Ministerial Liaison Committee to follow up on the implementation of the statement adopted in Amman and continue the direct dialogue with the Syrian government; and the Arab Summit in Jeddah, with the participation of the President of Syria. There have also been meetings in Brussels of European and American officials on Syria.
3. I take note that the meetings in Amman, Jeddah and Moscow considered, in dialogue with the Syrian Government, issues in resolution 2254, including humanitarian aid and access, safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees, restoring Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, countering-listed terrorist groups, and post-conflict reconstruction. The importance of a political solution was underlined, and there have been appeals to reconvene the Constitutional Committee and to work for national reconciliation. Common attention to these themes and points could present a real opportunity to move forward.

Madam President,

4. This has been the key message I have brought during my intensive engagement during the reporting period. After consulting a wide range of stakeholders when in New York last month, I visited Iran to meet the Iranian Foreign Minister and other senior officials, and Turkiye for senior-level engagements. I met the Jordanian and Egyptian Foreign Ministers in Geneva, spoke to the Saudi Foreign Minister by phone, and was in touch with a range of other players. I spoke on the phone with Syrian Foreign Minister Mekdad and saw Syrian Negotiations Commission President Jamous in Istanbul.
5. In these engagements, Madam President, I have made clear that I appreciate the dangers of the status quo, both for the Syrian people and for regional and other actors, who want to curb instability emanating across Syrian borders, including from narcotics, and who continue to host millions of Syrian refugees. I have long sought to bring about reciprocal, concrete and verifiable confidence-building measures to unlock progress on Security Council resolution 2254. I can only welcome intensified regional consultations and work in the same direction. My goal is to enhance the coordination, complementarity and coherence of the efforts underway, and I welcome that this same goal is also clearly stated by regional actors. After all, even minimal progress on some issues of resolution 2254 would require the confidence and resources of many different players and serious actions too.

6. It is vital that the recent diplomatic moves are matched with real action. Because let us remember that the Syrian people continue to suffer on a massive scale. While they have observed recent diplomatic developments, they have not yet seen any improvement in the reality of their lives, whether they live inside Syria or outside Syria. Nor have the Syrian people seen renewed signs that the intra-Syrian political process will actually resume and start to move forward. It will only be if these two things change – confidence-building on the ground and a genuine political process – that we can say that the current opportunity has been seized.

Madam President,

7. There has understandably been much focus on the question of Syrian refugees and indeed the internally displaced. We continue to uphold and further the principle of safe, dignified and voluntary refugee returns. Let me bring to you all the voice of Syrian refugees themselves, as expressed to UNHCR in their annual surveys from refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. The latest survey was published last week. It tells us that most Syrian refugees still hope to return one day, and a sizeable number hope to return within five years. But this year, as in previous ones, only a small fraction indicated their intention to return in the next 12 months. Why is that? The top two factors cited by refugees were lack of livelihoods and work opportunities on the one hand, and lack of safety and security on the other. And respondents also cited as high concerns inadequate basic services and housing on the one hand, and concerns regarding military service, conscription or recruitment and fear of arrest, detention, harassment and retaliation on the other hand.
8. Why is this important also for confidence-building and the political process? Because it tells us that *if* the Syrian Government were to start to address in a more systematic manner the protection concerns of the displaced, working closely with the United Nations, and *if* donors were to help the United Nations to do more to address the concerns all Syrians have about livelihoods, then this could help to do what we all say we want to do – build confidence, and begin to change realities on the ground for all Syrians – not only the displaced. It could help bring about movement towards a more safe, calm and neutral environment in Syria, and it could help alleviate hardship inside the country. In all of this, a UN presence and access in all relevant areas would be an essential component, of course. We also continue to stress the importance of being generous in responding to funding requests related to the Syrian refugees. And we continue to underline the importance avoiding inflammatory rhetoric regarding Syrian refugees.

Madam President,

9. Let me also strongly emphasize that addressing the fate of the detained, the disappeared and the missing is a core issue for moving forward in Syria. It is hard to see how there could be genuine confidence-building without some progress on this issue, which impacts nearly all Syrians and is fundamental to families, communities, and repairing Syria's social fabric. We continue to call on all parties in Syria to take concrete and meaningful steps on this file – something that would do so much to change the dynamics, if done at scale and the right way. We also continue to urge Member States to support the UN's efforts towards the establishment by the General Assembly of an institution dedicated to the search for missing persons, as per the recommendation of the Secretary-General.

Madam President,

10. Let us also remember that, for the Syrian people, the economy continues to reach new lows. The Syrian lira reached its lowest level ever this last month, and inflation is on the rise. And the recent earthquake's impact has worsened the country's economic crisis – there are reports of a further increase in poverty, including an ILO assessment of around 170,000 workers losing their jobs. The cumulative effects of a decade of war and conflict, corruption, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, sanctions, illicit drug trafficking, and the war in Ukraine means that the economic morass of the Syrians has never been more acute. Changing this must be a key priority of any confidence-building process too.

Madam President,

11. Let me also underline the heightened importance of resuming a credible intra-Syrian political process, starting with reconvening the Constitutional Committee. A way must be found to overcome the non-Syrian issues that have arisen, and resume the Committee's work, and to see it develop in a positive direction. I appreciate the ideas of many on ways out of the impasse, and it is a priority to seek to resolve the challenges. In this spirit, I am in close touch with relevant authorities in a renewed effort to overcome obstacles and to reconvene the Constitutional Committee in Geneva.

Madam President,

12. Meanwhile, too many Syrians are still affected by violence. This month alone saw ongoing exchanges of rocket and mortar fire across front-lines, airstrikes from Israel, Turkish drone strikes, airstrikes attributed to Jordan against drug-smugglers, the first pro-government-suspected airstrike in Idlib in over five months and listed terrorist group attacks. Yes, Madam President, there is a broad military stalemate, but violence continues to cause civilian deaths on all sides and a renewed escalation of hostilities is not off the table. The engagement of all actors to sustain calm, and to work on a nationwide ceasefire, remains of vital importance.
13. Let us also remember that the level of humanitarian suffering has never been higher, as my OCHA colleague will no doubt shortly brief you on. Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi convened the Humanitarian Task Force again during the reporting period, appealing for humanitarian access via all modalities, whether cross-line or cross-border, as well as resources to meet emergency humanitarian needs including early recovery and livelihoods. Here let me reiterate my welcome of the Syrian Government's extension of Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra-ee crossings for three more months, to allow continued much-needed aid from the United Nations. Let me also remind you of the Secretary-General's call for a 12-month extension of the Security Council's authorization to operate the cross-border mechanism.

Madam President,

14. Meanwhile, we continue to consult with the broadest spectrum of the Syrian people, including through the Civil Society Support Room, which convened in Geneva this month in the form of Thematic Working Groups. At the core of their messages was the need for a safe environment and a comprehensive and sustainable political process in line with

resolution 2254 that would create the conditions for Syrians to return home. This Syrian-Syrian dialogue is an essential element to rebuilding social cohesion and identifying entry points that unify all Syrians. Likewise, the Women's Advisory Board met virtually this month and with wider networks of Syrian women, and continues to share with us the concerns and aspirations of all Syrians.

Madam President,

15. Last month, I said we were entering a period of renewed probing and testing, in a new context, with an enhanced regional engagement, and with many ideas that have long been on the table, and some new ones too. There are now common and concrete points that many players are focused on and that could be meaningfully discussed and advanced. If substantive issues begin to be addressed, even if incrementally, this new dynamic could create much-needed momentum. I therefore look forward to engaging the Syrian parties, the Arab, Astana, and Western players, and indeed all of you in this Council, in the spirit of promoting coordination, coherence and complementarity on Syria, and eliciting positive progress, step-for-step and step-by-step, in a reciprocal and verifiable manner, consistent with my mandate in Security Council resolution 2254. Alongside that, it is time to see the Syrians engaged in dialogue and return to discussing their own future together in the Constitutional Committee. I will continue to work to facilitate a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political resolution that restores Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

Thank you, Madam President.