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UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA  
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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
24 July 2023

Madam President (Ambassador Barbara Woodward, United Kingdom),

1. For several months, we have been urging and advising that the new diplomatic context surrounding the Syrian conflict could act as a circuit breaker – if there was substantive engagement. With substantive engagement, diplomacy could begin to see important issues addressed incrementally in a manner that would move us along the path envisaged in Security Council resolution 2254. I have sought to engage the Syrian parties, the Arab, the Astana, and Western players, and the Council to build positively on this, to promote coordination, coherence and complementarity on Syria, and to urge everyone to be ready to offer a genuine contribution.
2. The goals are clear: to resume the intra-Syrian political process facilitated by the United Nations, most particularly by reconvening the Constitutional Committee and making incremental progress when we do; and, also, to elicit from all key parties confidence-building measures, step-for-step and step-by-step, in a reciprocal and verifiable manner, consistent with my mandate in Security Council resolution 2254. And I have consistently stressed that addressing the dire and worsening humanitarian situation is not only a humanitarian necessity, but would give some confidence that progress on political issues is also possible.

Madam President,

3. After the earthquakes, as you remember, we *did* see positive humanitarian gestures. I can therefore only share the Secretary-General's disappointment that the Security Council could not agree to extend its authorization of UN cross-border relief operations - a lifeline for millions of Syrians. How are the Syrians meant to believe that some broader progress is possible, and how are they meant to be encouraged to overcome their own deep differences, if consensus on humanitarian basics among international parties is elusive?
4. As the political envoy, I profoundly hope that all doors are kept open to resolve this issue, and that the Council and all stakeholders put the needs of the Syrians first. We must redouble efforts to find a solution that ensures that the continued delivery of cross-border and cross-line humanitarian assistance continue. Nothing is more important right now for the most vulnerable Syrians than this.
5. Let me also note we need a redoubled effort to secure sufficient humanitarian resources and rapid disbursements, at a time when funding is more stretched than ever: this year's Humanitarian Response Plan is some 13 percent funded, while the Regional Refugee and Resilience Fund is less than 10 percent funded. I urge donors to step up and stand with the millions of people in Syria and in the region in host countries, who depend on lifesaving humanitarian aid, as well as early recovery and livelihood support, after decades of war. I also call on sanctioning countries to continue to mitigate any effects of sanctions that could worsen the living conditions of Syrian civilians. I am glad that the European Union and the United Kingdom have extended their new humanitarian

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exemptions on Syria which they issued in the aftermath of the earthquake. Such types of exemptions together with enhanced attention to countering over-compliance are much needed.

Madam President,

6. On the political front, let's be honest: so far, months of potentially significant diplomacy have not translated into concrete outcomes for Syrians on the ground – at home or abroad – or real moves in the political process. I hope they will soon, because if not, it will be another missed opportunity to help the Syrian conflict to come to a negotiated end, at a time when the impact of the crisis is deepening. A Syrian-Syrian track, and a wider process of steps-for-steps confidence building: both are needed now if we are to move forward.

Madam President,

7. I welcome the fact that reconvening the Constitutional Committee is a clear point of consensus among many key players. But I am disappointed that disputes over the venue – which have arisen entirely due to issues unrelated to Syria – so far have prevented this from coming to pass. We need political will to overcome the issues that so far prevent it from reconvening in Geneva and to ensure that it resumes and makes credible progress.
8. Let me pause here to remind you why this is important. While not all issues are solely in the hands of the Syrians, one issue that can and must be only in their hands is the future constitution of their country: the social contract that must underpin the ultimate reconciliation of Syrians, and that would set for a post-conflict future the powers and duties of the State and the rights and obligations of its citizens. This is why the constitutional basket is core to resolution 2254 which inter alia sets a constitutional process to develop a new constitution. The Constitutional Committee brings together nominees of the Government, the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and a middle third civil society on a basis they have formally agreed in the Terms of Reference: “to prepare and draft for popular approval a constitutional reform, as a contribution to the political settlement in Syria and the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254”.
9. In the eight sessions to date, progress has been very slow – no doubt about it. And there are reasons for that that I have referred to in the past. But I am convinced, as I believe are most stakeholders, that it is better for all the Syrian people that this process resume, continue, deepen, and gradually build some trust, and move forward on substance. This last point – substance – is essential. I and my team are fully engaged in the effort to unblock the impasse and find a way forward.

Madam President,

10. A second area I have long sought to unlock is how to move forward incrementally towards a safe, calm, environment in Syria – something that obviously overlaps heavily with the question of the refugees and the internally displaced, which has gained heightened attention in the region. At present, conditions are simply not in place for safe, dignified and voluntary refugee returns. And refugees must be protected, including from re-outright – just as all civilians inside Syria, including IDPs, must be protected. That is why we need the Syrian Government doing more to address the very real and continuing

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protection concerns – something that is absolutely fundamental and on which I have continually underlined. We will at the same time continue to engage donors on doing more to address the concerns all Syrians have about livelihoods. Such a step-for-step dynamic could begin to change realities on the ground for all Syrians – not only the displaced, but including for them – and also build confidence, and political space for a broader set of issues related to resolution 2254, bringing us towards a safe, calm and neutral environment. In this context, I have continued to coordinate closely with the High Commissioner for Refugees and the Emergency Relief Coordinator.

Madam President,

11. Let me stress that this is one among several topics where a wider steps-for-steps discussions could be productive. There are many others, as I have flagged in the past. We need engagement on them, because, as Syrian civil society constantly reminds us, while diplomacy has continued, many things remain entirely *unchanged* in this war.
12. Syria remains territorially divided with Syrian society too divided on many issues. Five foreign armies are present in Syria, and we have seen concerning tensions among these armies on the rise this past month.
13. Civilians continue to be arbitrarily detained, tortured and forcibly disappeared. They continue to be injured and killed, amid violent clashes, regular exchanges of mortar, rocket and artillery fire across north-east and north-west Syria. This month also saw airstrikes attributed to Israel, reports of Turkish drone strikes, reports of pro-Government airstrikes north of Aleppo, and the U.S. saying it carried out drone strikes on an ISIL leader near al-Bab. Tensions in the south-west spilled over into military escalation once again. Sustained calm leading to a nationwide ceasefire remains essential. And the threat posed by listed terrorist groups remains very real and it must be addressed in a cooperative manner.

Madam President,

14. Meanwhile, Syria's economic crisis is deepening. Just one example: this month the Syrian pound hit record lows, with the unofficial rate for the first time crossing the 12,000 Syrian pound mark relative to one US dollar. The impact of this on all Syrians, 9 out of 10 of whom are living below the poverty line, is extremely serious. Just to take one indicator: this means some workers now earn less than 8 US dollars a month, when in June this year they were earning some 18 US dollars a month. This means that a family can hardly afford one meal a day. Basic services and other critical infrastructure are now on the verge of collapse. In the scorching summer heat, some households can only access less than three hours of electricity and primary water supplies a day on average – some have less access or even no access at all. When they are unable to secure basic needs, some families adopt negative coping mechanisms: they reduce meals, they resort to child labour, and of course, as a last resort many simply find ways to leave Syria.

Madam President,

15. The tragedy of the detained, the disappeared and the missing remains unchanged too. At least here, the General Assembly's decision to establish the Independent Institution on

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Missing Persons is a sign of hope. I urge the parties to the conflict to cooperate with it, as well as to share information with families on the fate of the missing. Just as it would if action were taken to release detainees at scale, and to cease practices – which are still very much reported – of arrests of returnees, or of children forcibly taken to military training camps, or the continued practice of torture in detention leading to deaths.

Madam President,

16. If we are to move forward, I would appeal to the Syrian Government to work proactively with the United Nations in pursuit of a political path out of this conflict. I will also continue to work with the Syrian Negotiations Commission, who my Deputy Najat Rochdi met this month in Geneva. I thank the many in region and beyond who have sought to reinforce the UN's core message in this regard, and I continue to prioritize working closely with the actors in the region. And as we all do this, we will continue to consult widely with Syrian civil society and Syrian women, including through the Civil Society Support Room and Women's Advisory Board.

Madam President

17. To shift the dynamics requires engagement in a spirit of pragmatism and flexibility, and a greater sense of urgency and pace. It requires a constructive and coordinated international diplomacy in support of genuine confidence-building. And it requires regional and international unity in support of the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process to restore Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and to meet the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. The more you can work together despite your differences, the more you can encourage and support the Syrians to do the same.

Thank you, Madam President.