

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

Mr President, (Ambassador Ferit Hoxha, Albania)

1. I have engaged in several weeks of intensive diplomacy on Syria in Geneva, Beirut, Damascus, and New York, meeting the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission several times, and all key international actors. In parallel, Deputy Special Envoy Najat Rochdi, and our team, have been engaging Syrians widely, through the Women's Advisory Board which recently met in Rome, through consultations with Civil Society Support Room participants in Istanbul, and through holding virtual engagements with actors on the ground, including from Deir-ez-Zor and al-Sweida.
2. As the Secretary-General told the General Assembly, Syria is in ruins and peace remains remote. Tragically, a comprehensive solution of the Syrian conflict remains elusive. Gaps of political will, the distance between substantive positions of the parties, deep distrust, and the challenging international climate - all play a part in the deadlock.
3. But the suffering and the sense of hopelessness among Syrians are deepening. We cannot simply accept the status quo, because it will get worse and worse, it could well unravel, and this will lead to new challenges. We need the political process to start to deliver on the ground and to deliver hope. We see this when we turn to the alarming trends on the ground.

Mr. President,

4. A dozen years of conflict, corruption and mismanagement, external economic shocks, illicit drug trafficking and sanctions have all collectively seen the Syrian economy go into a free fall. This year, the Syrian pound halved in value while food prices doubled. Half the population is food insecure – *half* the population. And more than 600,000 children under five are stunted. Doctors and nurses earn less than 20 US dollars per month – not enough to cover transport. Many essential healthcare workers are leaving the country. Whole sectors are in danger of being hollowed out.
5. Meanwhile, instead of conditions being created for the displaced to return voluntarily and in safety and dignity, civilians continue to be killed and injured by violence, and tens of thousands were displaced this last month.
6. Indeed, we have seen in this period some of the most serious threats to the relative calm that has prevailed since 2020. This has included:
 - Some two weeks of armed clashes between Arab tribes and the SDF in Deir-ez-Zor.
 - Armed opposition groups attempting to advance into SDF-held territory, prompting further clashes and exchanges of fire between the SDF and armed opposition and Türkiye, as well as Turkish and pro-Government airstrikes.
 - Security-Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham conducting multiple crossline raids into northwest Syria, with an allied group seeking to take and hold

territory from the Government – challenging the March 2020 Russian-Turkish ceasefire lines.

- And a dramatic escalation of pro-Government shelling and airstrikes on northwest Syria.
- Further reports of Israeli airstrikes.
- Further reports of Jordanian airstrikes.
- Further security incidents in the southwest.
- Reports of infighting among pro-Government forces in the northeast and among armed opposition groups and within HTS in the northwest.
- And further reports of ISIL attacks.

7. It should be no surprise that there are new manifestations of popular frustration in Syria. For well over a month, protests have continued in al-Sweida governorate, with participants citing economic, social and political grievances and demands. In footages, we have seen many placards calling for the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

8. Let me stress the need to respect the right to peaceful protest in all areas of Syria, and the need for protests to remain peaceful. And let me also stress the need for an end to all violence against civilians, for full respect of international human rights and humanitarian law, and for work towards a nationwide ceasefire.
9. Meanwhile, and as you will hear more from OCHA, I take note of the resumption of UN humanitarian deliveries from Türkiye into northwest Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. All modalities must be utilized, including crossline. Resources are desperately needed too – for all pillars, including enhancing early recovery in the Humanitarian Response Plan and for refugees and host countries. And we need to ensure that any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians be avoided and mitigated, including through the full use of existing humanitarian exemptions and efforts by sanctioning states to counter overcompliance.

Mr. President,

10. Beyond this, we must focus with urgency on political movement to change the dynamics I have now described in quite some detail. To do this requires a shift in mindset. I know this is a big ask. But as the Secretary-General told the General Assembly last week: “Politics is compromise. Diplomacy is compromise. Effective leadership is compromise.” The Syrian parties and all key international actors need to entertain compromise in a more fundamental way than many have to date. If they do, it would be possible to act in parallel and urgently to reverse negative economic, security, and political trends, and to relaunch a Syrian-led and -owned political process as called for in Security Council resolution 2254.
11. But to do that, we would need concrete moves with contributions from all sides, step-for-step. This could help us move towards a safe, calm and neutral environment -- one that begins to create conditions that arrest further displacement, that opens up towards safe, dignified, voluntary returns of IDPs and refugees, that sees real measures to address protection and livelihood concerns of Syrian civilians, and that creates some trust and

confidence. This would require serious commitments to be implemented to begin to address the concerns of Syrian civilians inside and outside the country.

Mr. President,

12. Those who have been arbitrarily detained could be released, with steps taken to ensure anyone in detention is treated in line with their right to due process. More Syrians could access their properties, or the birth, marriage and death certificates and other documents they desperately need. Syrians who have fled and fear conscription would have their concerns addressed. Syrians abroad could find more ways to access the consular services they need. Power cuts could become fewer and less prolonged and clean water made more available. Patients could access medicines that are currently not available. Farmers could import more supplies needed to become self-sufficient again. Those devastated by the earthquake could access the supplies needed for recovery. Payments for legitimate humanitarian activity could flow into Syria more easily.

Mr. President,

13. In short: as Syrians saw protection concerns meaningfully addressed, donors, including those in the region, could in parallel step forward with more support, and sanctioning states could make moves to facilitate this. Meanwhile, the various de facto arrangements for calm could be bedded down into a more nationwide and sustainable ceasefire, and a more common approach to supporting the efforts to combat Security-Council listed terrorist groups still active in Syria.

Mr. President,

14. In parallel, the Syrian parties could be in a process of a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political dialogue facilitated by the United Nations, working seriously in the Constitutional Committee. They would be tabling and reacting to concrete proposals, working through the Constitution chapter-by-chapter, and identifying the makings of a future social contract for all the citizens of a deeply divided country. They would put behind them any attempts to avoid dialogue with the other and would be putting forward proposals designed to gain some support across the divide that exists today in Syria. They would at the very least be working continuously and expeditiously and exploring the makings of a future together.
15. And as all of this was being worked on, we in the United Nations would be engaging continually with Syrian civil society, men and women and youth from inside and outside Syria, on their full range of issues, concerns, and priorities, and connecting them with each other and the process.

Mr. President,

16. Progress on these fronts is not yet the political solution Syrians need and deserve. But moving on them and actually achieving them would be a *start* to addressing core issues of concern to Syrians today and move us along the path of resolution 2254. And there are mechanisms and pathways that can help us move forward if indeed they are being utilized.

17. As you know, I have been working with all parties, and coordinating closely with the Arab Contact Group in particular, to seek urgent progress on steps-for-steps. There are clear ideas on the table. There is an invitation to a genuine engagement and to concrete discussions – this opportunity should be seized. For this to work, each side should engage with precision, we would need to coordinate reciprocal steps, and there needs to be verification.
18. On the Constitutional Committee: the Syrian parties have informed me they wish to see the Constitutional Committee be reconvened. The Astana Format and the Arab Contact Group, as well as the Western capitals all tell me they support its resumption under the facilitation of the United Nations. I believe a way forward is indeed possible, and I will continue in this regard to stress and seek to enhance the Syrian-ownership and leadership of the process, away from any foreign interference or external agendas. And I will seek to ensure the substantive nature of the sessions. I am continuing my consultations with the aim to issue invitations so that we can resume the work before the end of the year. We will of course keep the Middle Third apprised when there are concrete developments.

Mr. President.

19. There is a path forward for Syria, and I appeal to all to engage. But let me issue a stark warning. If this path is not taken, the alternative is not a grim but containable status quo. It is not a miraculous change for the better from the perspective of this or that Syrian party. It is, rather, a future of deterioration across humanitarian, security, and institutional fronts, with significant implications for all. That is a recipe for disaster for the Syrian people and the region. And it goes against the common interests of the international community for stability and progress in Syria.
20. The way forward would see real confidence-building via mutual and reciprocal steps – step-for-step, addressing protection and livelihood concerns. It would see a gradual deepening of a Syrian-owned and led constitutional dialogue. It would see the deepened engagement of Syrian civil society. And the key circles of international effort would align priorities behind this way forward – and here let me appeal to all to put aside any blocking or conditioning of this or that aspect of the UN effort and provide strong support for the strategy that I have outlined.

Mr. President,

21. In this way, we would arrest the downward slide of Syria, see incremental progress, and build some trust and confidence. In so doing, we would set the scene for what is ultimately needed and what resolution 2254 calls for: a fundamental attempt at conflict resolution that respects and restores the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and enables the Syrian people their legitimate aspirations. It is time to act together, determined that the Syrian people see a change in their lives and a ray of hope for the future.

Thank you, Mr. President.