

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

Mr. President, (Ambassador Sérgio França Danese, Brazil)

1. Since March 2020, the Syrian conflict has been in a kind of strategic stalemate characterized by static front lines, persistent violence and sporadic escalations, with de facto authorities entrenching their control and five foreign armies present and active. However, I have long warned that this status quo leaves Syria at risk of drifting into deeper and prolonged fragmentation – and that it involves escalation risks of the most frightening kind. My warnings have grown louder this year as we have seen growing instability and violence, exacerbated by the lack of a meaningful political process. Today, I am sounding an alarm that the situation is now at its most dangerous for a long time.

Mr. President,

2. I say this because on top of the violence emanating from the Syrian conflict itself, the Syrian people now face a terrifying prospect of a potential wider escalation, given the alarming developments in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the region. Spillover into Syria is not just a risk; it has already begun.
3. Airstrikes, attributed to Israel, have hit Aleppo and Damascus airports several times during the reporting period, temporarily halting the UN's Humanitarian Air Service which operates from those airports and services Syria's humanitarian programs. In addition, Israel says it has responded with artillery, mortar and airstrikes towards what they said were a number of launches from Syria toward Israel on the Occupied Syrian Golan – with further exchanges again this morning. The Syrian Government says some of its soldiers were killed and injured in these strikes, as well as civilian workers in the strikes on the airports.
4. Meanwhile, the US says its forces have faced multiple attacks by groups that it claims are backed by Iran, including on Syrian territory. Last week, the US then carried out strikes on facilities in Syria that it claims are used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and groups that it backs. Further exchanges were reported again this morning.

Mr. President,

5. With the wider region at its most dangerous and tense in a very long time, fuel is being added to a tinderbox that was already beginning to ignite. Even before the regional developments, Syria was seeing the worst surge in violence in more than three years. And I deeply deplore the fact that this violence has already left civilians killed, maimed and displaced in higher numbers than at any point since 2020.

6. There has been a significant intensification of attacks on Government-controlled areas. This includes a deadly attack on the graduation ceremony of a military academy in Homs, which remains unclaimed and which the Government attributed to terrorist organizations, as well as further attacks in subsequent days. It also includes reports of rocket attacks throughout October from Security Council-listed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Hundreds were reportedly injured and many dozens killed, among them civilians, including women and children.
7. Pro-Government bombardment in the northwest has escalated to levels echoing those at the height of the conflict before 2020. This displaced more than 120,000 civilians at its height and caused significant damage to critical services and infrastructure, including health facilities, schools and camps. Hundreds of civilians have reportedly been injured, with dozens killed, among them women and children, as well as aid workers.
8. Following a terrorist attack on Turkish Government facilities in Ankara, the northeast has seen one of the largest escalations in years, with reports of Turkish strikes, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and reports of casualties, including civilians. The Syrian Democratic Forces claim they subsequently killed Turkish soldiers inside Syrian territory, with reports of SDF strikes on civilian areas too.
9. Meanwhile, Security Council-listed terrorist group ISIL remains active [and] continued its attacks on forces, particularly in Deir-ez-Zor, Raqqa and the central desert region in Homs governorate.

Mr. President,

10. This is what the Syrian civilian population has endured in this past month alone. Let me remind you that all of the other sources of pain and instability, that I have consistently briefed on, remain unchanged and as acute as ever:
 - the Syrian economy remains in a dire and worsening state;
 - critical infrastructure remains degraded and destroyed;
 - the humanitarian situation is alarming as you will hear from OCHA shortly;
 - reports continue of arbitrary arrests, of torture and deaths in custody;
 - there is no meaningful movement on the file of the detained, disappeared and missing;
 - refugees do not see conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary returns emerging – quite the opposite in fact, with the reemergence of extensive hostilities – though, I should mention, a recent Syrian Government statement on refugees contains elements that need further exploration;
 - and popular frustration clearly remains heightened, with protests in al-Sweida ongoing now for more than two months.

Mr. President,

11. Syria, the Syrian people and the wider region are in no position to endure new explosions of violent conflict in Syria, whether caused by internal or external dynamics. And we are

seeing now the hard reality that, without real engagement and progress toward a political solution of the Syrian conflict, any stability is only wafer-thin, and when it breaks apart, it can unleash mass forces of violence and instability. There is a real and growing danger of this in Syria. The only antidote would be an immediate de-escalation to stem the tide of violence and to refocus on a credible political process that charts a path forward in a framework that fully respects and restores Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, and that enables the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations, in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

12. I fear complacency has set in about the lack of such a process today. Regrettably, months of intense efforts have still not yielded consensus on a venue for resuming the Constitutional Committee nor on its substance, but my consultations continue. Proposals to advance step-for-step confidence-building measures are on the table. The recent regional developments have temporarily slowed down consultations on these matters, but we need to come back to them without delay.
13. Indeed, I continue to work with the same commitment as ever on advancing these and all other aspects of the political process to implement Security Council resolution 2254. I have been engaging and will continue to engage with the Syrian Government and Syrian Negotiations Commission. I also continue to engage a wide range of Syrians, including through the Civil Society Support Room and Women's Advisory Board, with whom I met last week – and who, once again, demonstrated the importance of women's full and effective participation in the political process.

However, Mr. President,

14. Right now, today, I have four immediate messages to you.
15. First, we need urgent de-escalation within Syria. We urgently need to work to reinstate calm, towards a nationwide ceasefire, alongside a cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups, in line with international law.
16. Second, we need all actors – Syrian and non-Syrian – to exercise maximum restraint. It is particularly indefensible that Syria seems to be treated as a free-for-all space, in which different actors can settle their scores with one other, with impunity. Decisions that are outside of Syrian hands cannot be allowed to drag Syria into another war.
17. Third, we need all actors to operate in full compliance with international humanitarian law, including protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure, and strictly upholding the principles of distinction and proportionality .
18. Fourth, we need all key international actors to keep channels open and cooperate, despite the rising tensions on multiple fronts. I will make every effort to contribute to promoting

this. I will continue to prioritize contacts with the Astana, Arab and Western players, individually and collectively, and work to foster joint efforts at de-escalation and advancing the political process.

Mr. President,

19. This is the only way to de-escalate the current violence and protect the possibility of a political process to implement Security Council resolution 2254. Complacency cannot be the answer. If it is, then I fear the already-fraying status quo may fully collapse, bringing untold misery to the Syrian civilians and radiating further instability across a region that is already at breaking point. We must de-escalate and de-escalate now, for the sake of Syria.

Thank you, Mr. President.