

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

Thank you Mr. President,

1. 2023 has been another very difficult year for Syria. A year that saw devastating earthquakes, humanitarian needs reaching new highs, the economy plummeting to new lows, and the worst violence in three years. The year also saw new diplomatic openings, but did not lead to tangible changes on the ground for the lives of Syrians. In short: this has been another tragic year for Syrian civilians, who were killed, injured, displaced, detained and abducted in alarming numbers, and who saw no tangible moves towards a better future. Instead, on top of everything else, Syrians now face the danger of regional spillover adding further fuel to the fire.

Mr. President,

2. These last weeks have seen a re-intensification of spillover effects from the developments in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel. We have seen the following
 - Multiple airstrikes attributed to Israel across Syria, The Syrian government reported that Israeli airstrikes rendered Damascus and Aleppo airports non-operational. Currently, only Latakia airport is functional, affecting both civilian air traffic and the UN humanitarian operations.
 - We have seen Multiple reports of missiles launched from southern Syria over the Occupied Syrian Golan towards Israel, and on IDF fire.
 - And near-daily attacks on US positions in northeast Syria.
3. And in parallel Mr President, violence in all theatres of Syria continues and is even escalating once again in some respects, with alarming reports of civilian casualties. Just these last few weeks have seen:
 - Escalating violence in north-west Syria. Pro-Government airstrikes intensified, as did front-line clashes, with very serious incidents of shelling by Government forces on Idlib. Intensified shelling was also carried out by listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and armed opposition forces, including on Nubl and Zahra in Aleppo.
 - Further drone attacks on Government areas attributed to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and other actors based in Idlib, which the Government says it intercepted.
 - Turkish drone strikes amid intense artillery exchanges between Turkish and armed opposition forces on one side, and SDF on the other.
 - A continued trend of attacks by some Arab tribes on SDF positions in Deir-ezZor and now reports of Government shelling on SDF positions too.
 - Continuing ISIL attacks in the northeast and central desert region.
 - Intensification of clashes between the Jordanian Army and smugglers on the Syrian-Jordanian border with several Jordanian official announcements about incidents on the border leading to several casualties among members of the Jordanian Border Guard Forces.
 - And ongoing assassinations and other security incidents as part of continued instability in the southwest.

Mr. President,

4. There is an urgent need for maximum restraint by all actors, Syrians and non-Syrians. No one should delude themselves that this worrying new-normal of ongoing escalation is in any way sustainable. Any major escalation would have devastating consequences in a deeply fragile situation, where de facto authorities and the presence and actions of foreign armies are key features of the landscape.
5. We need instead to see sustained de-escalation in and on Syria, towards a nationwide ceasefire, and a cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups. And we need all actors to operate in full compliance with international humanitarian law to ensure protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Mr. President,

6. The socio-economic conditions in Syria are also unsustainable and on the brink. Funding is dwindling while humanitarian needs are higher than ever, even threatening food security. We will hear more from OCHA on this. Let me issue here a strong appeal to donors to fund all pillars of the UN response. Following the expiry of this Council's cross-border resolution, we must continue to seek solutions to ensure the continued delivery of cross-border and cross-line humanitarian assistance.
7. Meanwhile the economy is in increasingly dire straits, due to a wide range of factors, that I have outlined to this Council, and critical infrastructure including electricity is under major strain. It is vital to ensure that any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians be avoided and mitigated including continuous and active efforts by sanctioning states to counter overcompliance.
8. Likewise, the core concerns that displaced persons continue to cite – namely livelihoods on one hand and protection issues on the other – mean that refugees and IDPs have not yet seen forthcoming conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary returns. Nevertheless, channels of dialogue continue as we and our humanitarian colleagues continue to assess Syrian Government announcements.

Mr President,

9. The challenges on the ground are symptoms of a conflict that no one actor or existing group of actors can solve alone. These challenges cannot be sustainably addressed without a political process that makes genuine progress towards a political solution addressing the issues contained in Security Council resolution 2254.
10. I had occasion to review the state of the political process and to stress the importance of moving the process forward when I met with the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister in Geneva, and with the President of the Syrian Negotiations Commission in Doha. And I carried similar messages to key stakeholders this month, meeting senior Russian, American, Iranian, Arab, European and Japanese officials. I reminded all that international cooperation is essential to get the Syrian political process back on track.

Mr. President,

11. The blockage of the Constitutional Committee for a year-and-a-half – largely over what should be a secondary issue, the venue – has sent the wrong signal and been a setback. Despite the non-Syrian nature of this issue, I have exerted every effort to facilitate a solution, and I have appreciated the efforts of others too. However, I can confirm from my wide consultations that there is no venue in the region that is both on offer and attracts consensus, and indeed, there is no signs this will change soon.
12. In these circumstances, I have been appealing to all that we should find a pragmatic way forward. Let us all respect the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated nature of the Constitutional Committee. The commitments made by the Syrian parties when they agreed to launch the Committee - namely to a continuous process in Geneva – should guide the way forward. Yes, we can continue to explore alternative consensus locations. But in the meantime, we should come together to enable the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva .
13. Let me also remind the Council that proposals for step-for-step confidence building measures are on the table which would benefit all Syrians and give an important political impetus in the political process. Engagement, coordination and information sharing is needed to move from ambiguous signalling to real confidence-building via coordinated, reciprocal, verifiable actions. There are concrete moves that could be made if we work in this way. My good offices are ongoing with the Syrian parties, the regional players and the international stakeholders in this regard.

Mr. President,

14. A credible political process equally depends on the participation of the widest spectrum of Syrians. In the eight years since the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room, significant progress has been made in Syrian civil society of many kinds and perspectives increasingly working together. They are acting as a source of advice and inspiration, and supporting grassroots peacebuilding and humanitarian relief and advocacy. I was extremely pleased to have an extensive exchange in a virtual townhall format with over 130 Civil Society Support Room participants from all parts of Syria, whether currently based inside Syria, in neighbouring countries or in the wider diaspora.
15. I was equally pleased to engage with the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board this month. They remain very concerned at the potential for violence spiralling in the region and the relative lack of focus on Syria. WAB members also engaged with members of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network and examined ways to reinforce women’s political role across various contexts in Syria and the region.

Mr President,

16. As 2023 draws to a close, it seems no coincidence that renewed violence and popular frustrations, including protests, peaked later in the year. This took place at the same time as raised political hopes on different sides were unmet following various diplomatic moves, and momentum began to fade.
17. This should remind us that the status quo is unsustainable and it is unacceptable and that this conflict cannot be left unattended. It also shows that partial approaches are unlikely

to address the depths of Syrians' despair or contain the conflict sustainably. In 2024 there is a clear need to refocus on the political process called for eight years ago in resolution 2254.

18. The year ahead needs to see a new momentum injected into the search for compromise for a political path forward. I appeal for all to act in a manner that enables the Constitutional Committee to resume, at least initially in Geneva, and for reciprocal, verifiable, parallel CBMs measures to be agreed and implemented. Equally, I remind you all that these entry points cannot in themselves resolve the conflict. We must look to engage across a comprehensive set of issues of concern to relevant parties, with new energy and new thinking, and lay the ground for a realistic and comprehensive multilateral approach inclusive of all actors and all the issues at the heart of the conflict. This is the way to stem the tide of violence and fast deteriorating socioeconomic and humanitarian situations and move towards a negotiated political settlement that could enable the Syrians to realize their legitimate aspirations and indeed restore Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity in line with Security Council resolution 2254.