

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

27 February 2024

Madame President (Amb. Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett, Guyana)

1. Let me first express my deep concern about the situation on the ground in Syria and the devastating impact it is having on civilians.
2. This month, we have seen further spillover effects from regional conflict. Multiple airstrikes attributed to Israel, including on residential areas of Homs and Damascus, reportedly resulted in both civilian and military casualties, including advisors from Iran's Revolutionary Guards. In some instances, Israel confirmed it carried out airstrikes in what it said was a response to ongoing rocket attacks launched from southern Syria towards the Occupied Syrian Golan.
3. The US carried out what it described as retaliatory strikes for a drone attack on a US post in Jordan near the border with Syria that resulted in military casualties. The US claimed that Iranian-backed groups were behind this and other attacks on US bases – a claim Iran denies. The US strikes hit dozens of what they say were Iran-linked targets in Syria and Iraq, with Syrian state media reporting both military and civilian casualties.
4. Meanwhile, all other vectors of the Syrian conflict itself continue, and remain the biggest cause of civilian casualties and displacement. This month, the entire north of the country, containing millions of civilians, has seen multiple front-line skirmishes, exchanges of artillery, rocket and sniper fire, along with pro-Government and HTS drone strikes and Turkish drone strikes. ISIL attacks continued to rise in quantity and impact, particularly in the central and north-eastern regions. Southern Syria remains violent and unstable, with further killings and clashes in Deraa, as well as fresh confrontations between the Jordanian army and what they say were armed smugglers on the Syrian-Jordanian border.
5. Plainly the tensions in the region need to be urgently de-escalating, starting with the immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza that the Secretary General has called for. And we equally plainly need urgent de-escalation inside Syria, building on existing ceasefire arrangements, towards a nationwide ceasefire in line with resolution 2254. Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Security-Council listed terrorist groups must be fought in a manner that is cooperative and firmly in line with international law and that prioritizes the protection of civilians.
6. I impressed these points on key international stakeholders when I convened an International Syria Support Group Ceasefire Task Force plenary meeting in Geneva earlier this month. All voices around the table assured that none wish to see further escalation - a welcome sentiment I heard in engagements with regional ministers too. It is vital that all stakeholders act accordingly.

Madam President,

7. A year after the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye that killed thousands and displaced millions, Syria's humanitarian crisis has only deepened. On the one hand, we have received some good news, with the Syrian Government's recent extension of its authorization for the UN to use the Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam and Al-Ra'ee border crossings. But the broader humanitarian trends are bleaker than ever. I am sure Martin will give you quite a few details on how serious the situations really are, but just to give you a couple of headlines, what is needed is more access by all modalities, including crossline convoys; more donor support, including for early recovery and livelihoods; and greater efforts to mitigate any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians.
8. Meanwhile, we still see no concrete results in addressing the situation of an estimated one hundred thousand arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared, and missing persons, as called for in resolution 2254. This month, I met once again with families of missing and detained persons, hailing from all areas of Syria, who continue to live both in agony and hope of seeing their detained loved ones released or at least knowing their whereabouts and fate. On this, let me reiterate my support for the General Assembly's decision to establish the Independent Institution on Missing Persons. We have indeed a collective responsibility to help its work.

Madame President,

9. Over eighteen months ago, I issued invitations for the ninth session of the Constitutional Committee to take place in Geneva. That session did not take place because, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed this month, Russia no longer considers Switzerland a neutral venue, and the Syrian Government did not accept Geneva as a result.
10. From the outset I have been clear about several points. Let me remind you about four of them: first, I have reminded all that the Syrian Government and Syrian Negotiations Commission, in the Terms of Reference for the Committee, agreed on Geneva, and stressed that the process should take place without foreign interference; second, as a facilitator I would be creative in trying to find a way forward for all parties, including exploring all possible alternatives; third, if the Syrian Government and Syrian Negotiations Commission reach consensus on a venue other than Geneva, I will support this; and fourth, this non-Syrian issue needs to be overcome so that the Syrian-led and owned, UN-facilitated process could continue.
11. Guided by this approach, over eighteen months, with the support of various outside stakeholders, including the Astana Guarantors and the Arab Contact Group, various venues have been floated. But, I am sorry to say, the reality is this: not one has yet enjoyed the minimum consent required – of both Syrian parties and the potential host itself. I had warned that this may be the case when these issues were first raised eighteen months ago.
12. I myself have recently proposed a further option: that the ninth session could be convened in the UN Office at Nairobi. I appreciate my UN colleagues in Nairobi being ready to do all that was required to help us host. I recently commended this way out to the Syrian parties. I also relayed a further suggestion from one Syrian party to the other on an alternative regional venue. However, I regret to say that consensus among the Syrian parties was not found on either venue, just as it had not been on earlier suggestions.

13. Having left no stone unturned to find an alternative venue, I believe the only way forward at this time is to reconvene in Geneva – at least as a bridging proposal while there is no consensus on an alternative venue, while *also* remaining open to an alternative venue for future sessions *if* consensus is found. This is something I have flagged for some time may be the only way forward if no alternative could be found. Therefore, I am today issuing formal invitations for a ninth round in Geneva in late April. I appeal today to the Syrian parties to respond positively and to all key international stakeholders to support the UN's actions as a facilitator and refrain from interfering regarding a venue the Syrian parties themselves had formally agreed.
14. I believe it is important for the Constitutional Committee to meet as soon as possible and to continue its work. An indefinite hiatus can only undermine the Constitutional Committee's credibility and work.

Madame President,

15. At the same time, I have always said that the Constitutional Committee cannot, alone, solve this conflict. Resolution 2254 speaks to a wide range of issues. Let me remind this Council, once again, that clear ideas for step-for-step confidence-building measures, addressing core elements of resolution 2254, remain on the table. I stand ready to enter into discussions to flesh out all details and operational aspects with all Syrian parties and other stakeholders where willingness is shown on the proposals tabled, or to receive alternative ideas.
16. As we look to find ways to fully implement resolution 2254, we continue to draw on the insights and advice of a broad spectrum of Syrians, including the Women's Advisory Board and Civil Society Support Room who convened in Geneva this month and met with each other too. It was heartening to see a wide spectrum of Syrian women and men discuss common ground and practical ways forwards – despite significant differences among them. They discussed essential issues, such as local governance and possibilities for a coherent decentralized approach for the whole of Syria, in line with national sovereignty and territorial integrity and resolution 2254. WAB members held insightful discussions on other challenges and opportunities, including areas for commonalities such as in the field of education.

Finally Madame President,

17. I have outlined some elements for immediate action: getting the Constitutional Committee back on track, traction on step-for-step confidence building measures and immediate de-escalation. However, we must be honest with ourselves. Such entry points cannot, in and of themselves, solve the Syrian conflict.
18. I continue to hear from many Syrians and outside players too, on different sides of the conflict, that we must embed the initiatives we have developed in a broader approach and package - one that puts *all* of the needs and concerns of Syrian and international stakeholders on the table; one that involves *all* necessary stakeholders; and one that involves compromise from *all* players. Ultimately, this is how to ensure the protection of Syrian civilians and allow the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations, while

also, in lockstep, ensuring Syria's socio-economic recovery and restoring Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.

19. I know this may seem to be an inopportune time. I know very well that international attention is focused on multiple other crises. But there might also be a sense in some quarters that the conflict is easier just to manage and far too difficult to solve. Such thinking is mistaken. Look at the trends: regional spillover is only the latest accelerant to a conflict that is growing in complexity with each passing year. The situation is worsening on almost all indicators and the *status quo* is unsustainable and unmanageable. As I discussed with you all last month, we have to prepare the ground and work for a broader approach to resolving this conflict, in line with resolution 2254.

Thank you, Madame President.