

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

30 May 2024

Thank you, Mr President (Ambassador Pedro Comissário Afonso, Mozambique).

1. Before I start my briefing let me take this opportunity to thank my dear colleague Martin because he has just told me that this will be his last briefing on Syria. A profound thanks Martin, for all the cooperation and your really tireless efforts to support the Syrian people and alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. We will miss you and the Syrian people will miss you and we hope we will continue to work in the same spirit that you have shown us is possible. So, thanks a lot Martin. Let me start my briefing now Mr. President.

Mr. President,

2. The Syrian people remain trapped in a profound crisis, which is becoming more entrenched with time, with no clear political path to implement resolution 2254 emerging, and threatening prolonged division and despair. This is not just tragic – it is dangerous. In the absence of a comprehensive political process, all kinds of negative trends are festering, presenting terrible risks for Syrians and the broader international community.
3. Take the security situation. A dizzying array of local and international actors and listed terrorist groups remain engaged in conflict, inside and over Syrian territory, across multiple theatres. There have been further reports of Israeli airstrikes inside Syria, as well as rocket and drone attacks from Syrian territory towards the Israeli-Occupied Syrian Golan and Israel – the same dynamic that preceded previous escalatory spirals. Across the entire north of the country, front-lines remain active, with clashes and exchanges of shelling involving pro-Government forces, Security-Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, armed opposition groups, and SDF. And reports continue of pro-Government drone strikes in the northwest and Turkish drone-strikes in the northeast.

Mr President,

4. Security tensions are not just between areas of control, but also within. Let me mention just four examples: protests in Idlib triggering a violent crackdown by HTS, and resulting in several casualties and reports of scores of arbitrary detentions and serious ill-treatment of detainees; ongoing insurgent activities by some tribal elements against SDF in the northeast; incidents of Kurdish National Council offices being burned down in northeast Syria; and tensions in the southwest, with Government forces reportedly deploying reinforcements around Sweida, after local militias detained Syrian Government officers who were then released following the release of a local student detainee, and with reports also of arrests of individuals supporting the Sweida protests or criticizing the economic situation. And let me remind you this is only four examples – there are many more that could be mentioned.

5. Meanwhile, emerging in the background is the constant threat of ISIL, whose attacks in Syria have increased this last month – particularly in the northeast.
6. If these dynamics simply continue, we will inevitably see even more civilian suffering. And we could also see major escalations and further instability radiating across the region. Instead of this, we urgently need de-escalation across all theatres of the Syrian conflict. Obviously, regional de-escalation efforts starting with a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza is absolutely essential. All actors must comply with international humanitarian law and protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including when combatting Security-Council listed terrorist groups.
7. Moreover, the longer current dynamics continue, the deeper the concerns grow as to what it means for a territory to be divided for a generation or more in such unstable conditions. We are already seeing a second generation of children deprived of continued access to education, or subject to entirely different curricula – threatening children’s futures, the unity of Syria, and fueling the potential for radicalism all at the same time.
8. In the coming months, we are likely to see parliamentary elections in Government-controlled areas conducted pursuant to the current Constitution – and also local elections for *de facto* authorities in areas in the northeast outside Government control. These processes Mr President, are no substitute for an inclusive political process which leads to a new, agreed, Syrian Constitution, and the kind of subsequent elections that resolution 2254 envisages. In the absence of such a political process, we face the grave risk that Syrians will simply drift further apart, further eroding Syria’s sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity.

Mr President,

9. Syrians themselves are sounding the alarm bell on the risks of this entrenched division and the absence of genuine political process. In Brussels this month, I met with diverse participants in the Civil Society Support Room, who delivered a clear message: on the dangers of the current stage in the conflict, the urgent and extraordinary efforts that are required, and the need for a genuine political process that ensures security and peace, lays the foundations for Syria's recovery, provides for stability, and brings an end to bloodshed, societal fragmentation and divisions. Women’s Advisory Board representatives appealed for entry points to implement resolution 2254 and for early recovery assistance, urging all to seek the advice of Syrian women on priorities and needs - particularly as gender-based violence increases. In Gaziantep this month, Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi heard civil society representatives stress the need for a comprehensive political solution and an array of urgent concerns: on protection particularly for women; mounting fears of forced deportations; lack of education opportunities; the devastating impact of drugs; and the urgent need to address housing, land and property violations.

Mr. President,

10. The critical economic situation compounds civilian suffering and perpetuates the risk of instability. There is no sign of Syria's catastrophic economic situation improving. Indeed just one example: WFP now says the cost of living has increased by 104% over the last year.
11. Martin will obviously say more on the immense humanitarian suffering, but let me use this opportunity also to thank the European Union for hosting the recent Brussels Conference. And let me welcome the pledges made there for the Syria response and for the region. But let me also emphasize, the importance of the urgent early disbursement of pledges including for early recovery. This will be absolutely vital. Maintaining humanitarian access is also critical, both cross-border and cross-line. And any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians must be mitigated and avoided, in particular by sanctioning states ensuring their active engagement to counter overcompliance.
12. Let me also highlight the terrible plight of Syrian refugees which, as we see with recent events and volatile political debates, needs a solution more desperately than ever. As High Commissioner Grandi said in Brussels, we must recognize the scale and seriousness of the predicament of host countries and support them, while also reiterating the need for practical ways forwards to protect Syrians, and appeal for all to stop, rather than inflame, anti-refugee rhetoric and actions. The UN's position remains clear and consistent, defined by international protection standards: resorting to artificial formulas like defining certain areas of Syria safe for returns will not address the problem. We must support refugees who do choose to return. But for most, the truth is there *are* obstacles to safe, dignified and voluntary refugee returns: one set of obstacles relates to protection, including security and legal impediments; and another set relates to material and economic concerns, which require work on livelihoods and the accelerated mobilization of resources for livelihoods. We need more decisive work resulting in real confidence building measures on *both* sets of concerns. This is both essential and possible.

Indeed Mr President,

13. There are many specific and concrete ideas for confidence-building measures on the table, ready to be discussed and fleshed out. Alternative ideas can be explored and put on the table too. I am aware of views arguing that this or that step from this or that party has not been sufficiently noted or responded to – I hear this on both sides of the divide. But the fact in my opinion is that given the lack of trust, experience tells us that it will only be via very concrete engagement, coordination and action that a steps-for-steps process could bring genuine reciprocal and verifiable progress. This would help address the immediate concerns of Syrians and outside stakeholders too, stabilize the situation on the ground, inch us towards a safe, calm and neutral environment – and indeed also help address the concerns of refugees and the displaced.
14. Another issue: resuming the Constitutional Committee would also bring the Syrian parties back into the same room to address many of the underlying issues that drive this conflict. However, despite my best and ongoing efforts, its meetings have yet to resume. Let me

emphasize once again: I remain open to any alternative venue to Geneva that secures the consensus of both Syrian parties and the host. I am continuing to work on this. But in the meantime, I continue to appeal for sessions to resume in Geneva as a bridging option and for the parties to prepare on substance, including Constitutional proposals.

But Mr President,

15. As important as they are, these initiatives are door openers to a political solution but alone cannot suffice. We all agree there is no military solution. Many understand that the situation in Syria is dangerous, that the current piecemeal approach will not suffice to stem the tide, and that a strategy of containment and alleviation will not stabilize the dangerous and unpredictable situation in Syria – just as it hasn't elsewhere in the region.
16. And Mr President this is for me a key message today: deep and complex conflicts cannot be simply managed or contained in perpetuity – there must be a political horizon for resolving them too. That is why preparing the ground for a new and more comprehensive approach makes sense.
17. For such an engagement, we need the Syrian parties: the Government and the Opposition, of course, and also the broad voices of Syrian civil society. Equally, we also need all key international actors – Iran, Russia, Türkiye, the United States, the Arabs, the Europeans, this Council. No actor on its own can solve the crisis, and none of the existing diplomatic groupings can either. Constructive international diplomacy with the contribution of all is the only way forwards.
18. It goes without saying that this is of course a major challenge with the current geopolitical climate – we will not get all players together anytime soon. But we may be able to prepare the ground. And that is why I and my team will be continuing to seek and welcome constructive engagement of the Syrian parties and key stakeholders with us for what a comprehensive solution to the crisis could actually look like, across all areas where key parties have major differences.

Mr President,

19. What I am asking for requires pragmatism, realism, frankness and compromises from and with all parties. It means de-escalating the situation on the ground and in the region, implementing step-for-step confidence-building measures, and reconvening the Constitutional Committee. But it also means serious engagement on a comprehensive approach too: one that meets the legitimate aspirations of Syrians, restores the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, and addresses the concerns of key stakeholders, in line with resolution 2254. Yes I know it's difficult, but it's not impossible, and it is absolutely necessary. My appeal to all of you today is: engage and work with us on this way forward.

Thank you, Mr. President.