

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
22 July 2024**

Mr President,

1. I have four key messages for you today. *My first message is a reminder that Syria remains in a state of profound conflict, complexity and division.* Syria is riddled with armed actors, listed terrorist groups, foreign armies and front-lines. Civilians are still victims of violence and subject to extensive human rights abuses, a protracted state of displacement and dire humanitarian conditions. We have seen further indications of the monumental scale of the crisis this month.
2. The threat of regional conflict cascading over Syria has not abated, particularly with an uptick in Israeli strikes on Syria. Last week, Israel carried out strikes that the Syrian Government said hit military sites in southern Syria and a residential building in Damascus. Israel said its strikes were in response to the launch of two drones from Syria towards Israel. Further Israeli strikes were reported in Tartous, Damascus, rural Damascus, and near the Lebanese border. There is a profound risk, Mr President, of this dynamic escalating further – particularly if the situation in Lebanon worsens.
3. The threat of escalation within Syria’s own borders remains undiminished, with hostilities over frontlines across all of the north, resulting in civilian casualties. This has included clashes involving Syrian Government forces and aligned militias, the armed opposition, SDF, tribal elements and listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham - alongside pro-Government, Russian and Turkish air and drone strikes. The south has seen clashes erupt in Deraa, displacing civilians. The need for de-escalation, leading towards a nationwide ceasefire remains as acute as ever. And, Mr President, the threat of listed terrorist groups is resurging, with ISIL attacks on track to double this year according to some counts, demanding cooperative action.
4. With the conflict continuing over more than 13 years, people are still taking to the streets to express grievances, often facing repressive action. In government-controlled areas, a nearly year-long protest movement in Sweida continues, voicing economic and political demands; some protestors smashed ballot boxes for parliamentary elections this month, and there were reports of Government forces firing on a crowd and wounding one civilian, along with the assassination of a protest and armed faction leader. Some protestors also took to the streets in Jeramana, Damascus, protesting economic conditions. Meanwhile, outside of Government-controlled areas, a months-long protest movement in Idlib continues against listed terrorist group HTS. New protests also erupted across many locations in northwest Syria after attacks on refugees in Türkiye, Turkish statements on Syria and the brief opening of a commercial crossing with Syrian Government-controlled areas; protestors were fired on, resulting in some fatalities. And, Mr President, parents in SDF-controlled Qamishli are holding sit-ins to demand the release of their children.
5. Meanwhile, repressive practices including arbitrary arrests, torture in detention and disappearances continue in all areas of Syria. Such practices also contribute to a generalized reality of lawlessness, fear, and violence.

6. So too does drug production, use and smuggling, which continue to be a source of concern for Syrians and the region.
7. More and more Syrians are struggling to sustain themselves, amid humanitarian and economic crises of epic proportions. My OCHA colleague will no doubt say more on that, including the welcome news of the Syrian Government's extension of the authorization of cross-border access via Bab al-Hawa. I reiterate the messages I always emphasize on access, funding, and sanctions when it comes to the humanitarian situation.

Mr President,

8. *My second message today is related to the situation of Syrian refugees.* Syrians outside of Syria are facing worrying developments. Tensions in host countries reached new heights this month, with alarming reports of attacks on Syrian refugees sparking significant violence. Refugees are worried at the prospect of being forcibly returned, or pushed to return through increasingly restrictive measures. We fully recognize the tremendous predicament that host countries face, and strongly call for them to be supported even more. We continue also to stress the importance of supporting Syrians who do choose to return voluntarily. At the same time, we also call for anti-refugee rhetoric and actions to end. Mr President, Syrians *must* be protected wherever they are, and efforts must continue to create the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified returns.
9. There is continued dialogue between the Government and UNHCR, including on access inside Syria. We also take further note of communications and announcements by the Syrian Government related to military service, which we are following closely. The key is for work to develop into action on the range of concrete and verifiable steps needed to address the fears that refugees themselves express, both on the protection and livelihoods side – the latter also requiring the actions of donors too.

Mr President,

10. Given the scale and complexity of the conflict, there is no easy or quick-fix solution. The path to peace will be long and arduous – which is why we must start to walk it with purpose. I continue to explore ideas on how to prepare the ground for a new and comprehensive approach. At the same time, I continue to push for urgent de-escalation, towards a nationwide ceasefire; for breaking the deadlock on reconvening the Constitutional Committee; and on confidence-building measures moving forward step-for-step.
11. This brings me to my third message today: *a Syrian-led and owned process facilitated by the United Nations that is essential.* This is the path described in Security Council resolution 2254, and remains the only internationally-agreed way forward. A process to implement it needs to be led and owned by the Syrians and address the concerns of all Syrians. Syrians remain profoundly divided, politically and territorially, with millions still living outside of Government control. Bringing them back together and reconciling their visions is only possible through a negotiated political solution. The conflict is ultimately a political one that can only be resolved when the Syrian parties are able to realize their legitimate aspirations and Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity are respected and restored.

12. I have appreciated the recent engagement of the Syrian parties with us. My Deputy was recently in Damascus, and I look forward to my next visit. And I look forward to my next engagement with the Syrian Negotiations Commission as well.
13. We note that on 15 July the Government of Syria organised parliamentary elections in line with the current constitutional and legislative arrangements. As I have said previously, such elections are not a substitute for the political process established by resolution 2254, which envisages the holding of credible and inclusive elections pursuant to a new constitution and administered under UN supervision.
14. And that Mr. President, leads me to my fourth and final message is this: *All major international stakeholders must be involved and their relevant concerns would need to be addressed within the framework of a comprehensive approach to implementing resolution 2254.* An approach is needed that does not exclude any of the military, political or economic actors – many of whom hold essential keys to the solution or means to spoil it – and that addresses the full range of issues that continue to drive the conflict or are directly relevant to its resolution.
15. This month we have heard new statements from the Governments of Syria and Türkiye on the potential for renewed diplomatic contacts between them – and statements from the Governments of Russia and Iraq on their efforts to support this. Discussions also continue on the next stage of work of the Arab Contact Group. We continue to engage all partners who seek to participate in the efforts to move issues forwards. And we continue to appeal to all players, whether they have contacts or not with Syrian parties, to act in a manner that contributes to unlocking the long-stalled effort to implement resolution 2254. We believe it is in the common interest of all and the overriding interest of the Syrian people for all to work with the United Nations towards a broader set of coordinated actions that move us towards a new and comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict. A Syrian-led and owned effort cannot succeed without cooperative international diplomacy among key stakeholders in support of the UN-facilitated political process.

Mr President,

16. I share the deep frustrations of many Syrians at the lack of progress towards their legitimate aspirations and the restoration of their country. These concerns were also voiced very strongly to me last week by members of the Women’s Advisory Board who met in Geneva. To be sustainable and fruitful, a solution must address the aspirations, grievances and security concerns of the Syrian sides and the broader spectrum of the Syrian people. I also share the frustrations of regional and international stakeholders – particularly host countries – who feel that the status quo is dangerous and unsustainable and that there is waning interest in Syria in some quarters. Mr President, I stress the importance of overcoming obstacles and of finding ways forward. This *can* be done, and it requires the contributions of the Syrian parties and of outside stakeholders. My appeal to all is to engage with the United Nations in a spirit of pragmatism, realism, frankness and compromise, to move forward the political process in line with Security Council resolution 2254.

I thank you, Mr President.