

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

28 August 2024

Thank you, Mr. President,

1. This month marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Geneva Conventions – a timely reminder to all parties in the Syrian conflict of their obligations under international humanitarian law, which must be adhered to in both letter and spirit. It is deplorable that civilians continue to be killed and injured almost daily in Syria and across the region.
2. Violence this last month has not only taken a toll on civilians, but also presented new threats to international peace and security. Tensions in the region have reached dangerous new levels with a series of incidents, including: the attacks on a soccer field in the village of Majdal Shams in the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan, which resulted in civilian casualties, including children; Israeli strikes in Beirut; the targeted killings of leaders of Hamas in Tehran, and then Hizbullah in Beirut by Israel; and the significant escalation of hostilities witnessed last week which saw Hizbullah strikes in Israel and Israeli strikes in Lebanon.

Mr. President,

3. Syria and Syrians have not been exempt from this escalation. In mid-August we saw Syrians killed in Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon, including children. There were further airstrikes in Homs, Hama, Deraa and then again today on the Syria-Lebanon border by Israel. July and August also saw attacks on US military positions in northeast Syria after a months-long lull - attacks which the US claimed were carried out by armed groups backed by Iran and which resulted in injuries of US servicemen. We have also seen reports of rocket and drone strikes from Syrian territory towards the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan.

Mr. President,

4. We must redouble our efforts towards regional de-escalation in the interest of long-term peace and stability for all – including with an urgent ceasefire in Gaza, a return to calm in Lebanon and across the Blue Line, and wider regional de-escalation.

Mr. President,

5. It is extremely important that same de-escalation is needed in the Syrian conflict itself. I remain deeply concerned about the ongoing tense and violent situation across many fronts in the country.
6. This month, there were again multiple clashes, air and drone strikes, exchanges of artillery and rocket fire, across northeast and northwest Syria – including a brief uptick in pro-Government drone strikes on Idlib, and a spike in hostilities involving the SDF and armed opposition forces near Azaz.
7. A significant escalation in hostilities took place between the SDF and some Arab tribal forces in Deir ez-Zor, with reports of dozens of deaths and injuries, displacements, and strikes on civilian infrastructure. The SDF claims that pro-Government forces were involved in some of these hostilities.

8. Southwest Syria remains turbulent, with multiple security incidents in Deraa, and further tensions in Sweida, where a peaceful protest movement continues for more than a year now.

Mr. President,

9. Meanwhile, as Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism Voronkov recently briefed you, ISIL has increased its operational pace in Syria, with a surge of attacks, especially in the central desert area.

Mr. President,

10. All of the above realities are why I reiterate my long-standing call for an immediate and sustained de-escalation of hostilities in Syria, towards a nationwide ceasefire, and a cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups in line with international law.

Mr President,

11. The file of the detained and missing still demands urgent action, with arbitrary detention and arrest, torture in detention and disappearances continuing in all areas of Syria. Such repressive practices must stop. I continue to call for unilateral releases, including as a priority of women and children and people who are old or sick.
12. Meanwhile, let me stress the need to address the dire situation of camps and places of detention in northeast Syria. I reiterate my call on Member States and relevant authorities to significantly step-up efforts on repatriations from Al Hol and other places of detention.

Mr. President,

13. The humanitarian situation remains dire. Let me welcome the Syrian Government's decision to extend authorization for the use of Bab al-Salam and al-Ra'ee border crossings. Unimpeded aid access through all modalities is needed, both cross-border and cross-line. The financial pledges made in Brussels must be urgently disbursed, including for early recovery.

Mr. President,

14. Let me also stress the need to mitigate and avoid any adverse effects of sanctions, in particular by the active engagement of sanctioning states to counter overcompliance.
15. And let's not forget the economic catastrophe that Syrians still face. Syrians are struggling to put food on the table: World Food Programme says that the minimum wage in Syria only covers 11% of a household's basic needs.
16. Meanwhile, the situation for refugees and the displaced, across Syria and the region, remains alarming. Syrians *must* be protected wherever they are, including in host countries. Anti-refugee rhetoric and actions *must* cease. And equally, we must collectively redouble efforts to address the obstacles that refugees themselves say inhibit their return: both material and livelihood concerns *and* protection concerns, including in relation to

safety, security and mandatory military conscription. Here let me again note that we are closely following the ongoing communications and announcements by the Syrian Government, including those related to military service.

Mr. President,

17. Syria's *de facto* division, its ongoing military conflict, the deep involvement of outside actors, the presence of listed terrorist groups, the myriad human rights abuses, the humanitarian suffering, its economic collapse, its institutional degradation, its social disintegration, its continuing displacement tragedy, the fate of the detained and disappeared – none of these problems are separable from the deep political cleavages among Syrians and regarding Syria. These problems cannot be meaningfully addressed without a political process in line with resolution 2254 – a process, I stress, that is realistic, sustainable, and inclusive; that involves genuine compromise away from absolutist positions or demands; that realizes the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people; and that restores the sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity of Syria.
18. At its core must be a UN-facilitated intra-Syrian political process. I continue to work to foster joint efforts to advance such a process. I recently had an in-depth discussion with the Syrian Negotiations Commission here in Geneva, and I look forward to engaging with Syrian Government officials in Damascus at the earliest. Equally, we continue to engage with the broader voices of Syrian women and youth and more broadly Syrian civil society, whose inclusion is essential.

Mr. President,

19. My message on the immediate priorities remains consistent: urgent work on de-escalation in the region and in Syria, towards a nationwide ceasefire; and breaking the deadlock on reconvening the Constitutional Committee; and confidence-building measures moving forward step-for-step; and exploring ideas on how to prepare the ground for a new and comprehensive approach to resolving the conflict.
20. I am also continuing to work on bringing better coordination among international stakeholders: the political process must be Syrian-owned and led, but this requires the unified and cooperative support of key international stakeholders.

Mr President,

21. In conclusion, let me state the following: We have no illusion that any of this will be easy. But it would be a mistake to conclude that it is impossible, that the conflict can only be managed and not resolved. There are clear and realistic ideas on the table on what all parties could do to make progress. What is needed is political will, for the Syrian parties to come together and for international cooperation. I of course realize that geopolitical alignments on Syria remain challenging, but there *is* a way forward. I hope I can count on your collective support for that approach in the period ahead.

I thank you, Mr. President.