

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

Mr. President (Slovenia, Amb. Boštjan Malovrh),

1. I have repeatedly warned of the risks of regional spillover and regional escalation dragging Syria into even deeper conflict. This week has seen a major escalation of regional tensions. I share the Secretary General's deep alarm at the reports of a large number of communication devices exploding across Lebanon as well as in Syria on 17 and 18 September, resulting in casualties including children, and subsequent Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon and Hezbollah rocket fire into Israel. I understand you will meet on this later today. And indeed there are reports just in of an attack this morning on a vehicle at Damascus International Airport. Let me repeat the Secretary-General's strong appeal for maximum restraint at this extremely dangerous moment for the entire region. And let me add that this latest escalation followed an earlier significant attack on a military site in Syria – not acknowledged by Israel but widely attributed as such – which reportedly caused one of the largest number of casualties in many months. There is a clear and present danger of a wider regional war that drags the Syrian people into its crosshairs.
2. And this when, within the Syrian conflict itself, violence remains very high. This last month has once again seen tragic barrages of drone strikes, artillery, rocket and sniper fire and skirmishes across frontlines. We have seen attacks attributed to pro-Government drones on markets west of Aleppo, resulting in civilian casualties, including children. Listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launched cross-line attacks killing ostensibly the highest number of Government soldiers this year. Meanwhile, the northeast and southwest continue to see serious tension and violence. And the threat of listed terrorist group ISIL in Syria continues to grow, with the group increasing its attacks in quantity and gravity, including their first publicized beheading in several years.
3. The utmost need of the hour is for de-escalation, now, across the region -- including a ceasefire in Gaza. In Syria itself, we also need de-escalation in a nationwide calm and towards a nationwide ceasefire, as called for in Security Council resolution 2254, alongside a cooperative approach to combating Security Council-listed terrorist groups in accordance with international law. In all situations, all parties must fully comply with international humanitarian law and its obligations to protect civilians.

Mr. President,

4. As violence and instability continues, Syrians also grapple with skyrocketing humanitarian needs; a broken economy dramatically affecting all Syrians and their livelihoods; damaged and destroyed infrastructure; degraded or closing school and medical facilities; the worst displacement crises of this century; and a crisis of the detained and missing that is entirely unresolved.
5. OCHA will update you on the humanitarian crisis. But to remind you: millions of children will not be in school this year in Syria; and the World Food Program reports that the Syrian minimum wage covers only 11% of a minimum expenditure basket, and only 17% of the food component. 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 in all parts of Syria. And let me once again stress the need to mitigate and avoid any adverse effects of sanctions. The constructive engagement by sanctioning states to counter over-compliance is imperative.

Mr. President,

6. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, ill-treatment and torture in detention remain reported across all areas of Syria – including cases of individuals dying in custody. The economic crisis further creates perverse incentives for misuse of power – including arrests to extract bribes for releases. I met with the families of the detained and missing persons last month on the International Day of the Disappeared. They are following and engaging closely with the newly established Independent Institution for Missing persons. Here let me note the importance of cooperating with this institution as a direct way to contribute to alleviating the suffering of the families.

Mr. President,

7. 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. Refugees who return voluntarily need every support to do so. But voluntary returns remain in small numbers, and people are continuing to leave Syria at the same time.
8. According to UNHCR perception surveys of the refugees – and notwithstanding certain Syrian government announcements on some issues that we continue to follow closely – concerns about safety and security inside Syria remains the key obstacle to return, while lack of livelihoods is an increasingly important factor influencing refugees' decision-making about return. To break this dynamic would require efforts of a kind we have not seen to date to address these obstacles – *protection concerns* regarding safety, security and mandatory military conscription, as well as housing, land and property rights, on which we urge the Government to act; and *livelihood concerns* – including access to essential basic services, including healthcare, water, electricity, and inadequate housing – on which we urge donors to be forward-leaning.

Mr. President,

9. What is needed in Syria is genuine progress towards a safe, calm, neutral environment, which is also the kind of environment needed for safe, dignified, voluntary refugee return. And to achieve that, there are absolutely no short-cuts. Without a credible process for a political solution, the downward spiral of trends on Syria will likely continue.
10. Let us remember, Mr. President, that Syria remains in a profound state of high conflict and territorial division. There are millions of Syrians living under Government control, but many millions still living outside Government control or abroad. There are four or more areas divided by active front-lines; an array of Syrian armed actors; Security-Council listed terrorist groups; six foreign armies involved in active conflict, some at the invitation of the Government; and a regional crisis that is in perpetual danger of crashing over Syria.

11. Let us be honest: these divisions are not just militarily and territorial but societal too. Social trust is in very short supply. We, as the United Nations, are among the very few who can directly engage with Syrians from all sides of this conflict – not just the political actors but civil society too, including women, who we bring to Geneva from all corners of the country and from the diaspora. This includes the work of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women’s Advisory Board – with whom I met in Geneva earlier this week. There are many things that unite them, most obviously their desire to see this conflict end and preserve one Syria. But equally, we should be frank – the drivers of conflict continue, grievances are real and enduring, and there remain very different visions of post-conflict Syria.
12. In light of these realities – the grievances and territorial divisions - it is unrealistic to think that stability can be achieved without a political process, among the warring Syrian sides themselves, facilitated by the United Nations. And, of course, such a process requires the constructive and coherent support of all international players too. Otherwise, the fundamental drivers at the heart of this conflict will continue, and the country will remain divided territorially -- plagued by violence and radiating instability across the region.

Mr. President,

13. Faced with these sobering realities, but determined to find ways we can work constructively, I look forward to meeting with the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and the President of the Syrian Negotiations Commission next week here in New York. I will also see Arab Ministers, the Ministers working in the Astana Format, and senior officials from other states, including donor countries. My message to all will be the same: we need to move the UN-facilitated political process forward on three specific fronts:
14. First, the Constitutional Committee. The Committee was the product of painstaking negotiations between the Syrians themselves, enjoys the backing of all key international players on Syria, and could have been – and yet still could be – a door opener to a genuine political process. Regrettably, we have lost over two years on what should be a secondary issue – the venue. As you know, Geneva remains the venue that was formally agreed when the Committee was launched and remains ready to host. But at the same time, we continue to seek agreement by both Syrian parties and a host on an alternative consensus venue – and it needs to be a consensus venue. I have also suggested over a prolonged period that the delegations in the meantime prepare for future discussions by developing drafts of constitutional texts and discussing those with the United Nations – this also has so far not found favour. We need to break this deadlock.
15. Second, the other door opener could still be genuine confidence-building measures, to build trust and open up movement on issues in Security Council resolution 2254, step-for-step. There is no shortage of ideas in this regard. I believe it should be in the common interest of all concerned to engage and seize this opportunity to make some progress.
16. And Third, Mr. President, door openers are not enough - we need to work together on a new and comprehensive approach. I believe it is highly necessary, extremely difficult, and yet definitely possible to develop a clear path that can deliver the Syrian people the restoration of their country and the realization of their aspirations to live in peace and dignity in line with Security Council resolution 2254. I believe this path can be developed

in a manner that is credible, balanced and realistic, that respects the core interests and concerns of all concerned, and that involves genuine compromise from all parties. I am also convinced it is possible for all key players to be able to see how their respective steps and efforts could link up to a comprehensive approach.

17. I recognize that the players needed to resolve the conflict are not at this time able to be convened in a single format. But that is precisely why I am inviting all key players to work with the United Nations on this.

18. Because the reality is, Mr. President, – and I hear no one contesting this – that no actor or existing group of actors can determine the outcome of this tragic conflict – not the Government, nor the Opposition or any other Syrian actors; not any state in the region or beyond; and not the Astana, Arab or Western groupings either. Moreover, existing piecemeal diplomacy is plainly struggling to make progress even on small measures, in part because critical actors are excluded in many cases.

Mr. President,

19. Let me say this, there is no military solution to the conflict, and there is no piecemeal diplomatic solution either. Therefore, I appeal to all to all stakeholders to engage with the United Nations.

Thank you, Mr. President.