

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

23 October 2024

Thank you, Madame President (Amb. Pascale Baeriswyl),

1. The fires of conflicts are raging the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including Gaza, and in Lebanon. And the heat is being felt in Syria too. Spiralling escalation is already having a major impact on Syria and Syrian civilians. I want to issue a clear warning: regional spillover into Syria is alarming and could get much worse, with serious implications for Syria and international peace and security. Syria demands our collective attention.

Madame President,

2. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians and Lebanese have fled Lebanon into Syria – into a country that is itself experiencing escalating conflict.
3. The past month has seen the fastest-paced and broadest-ranging campaign of Israeli airstrikes in the last thirteen years. Dozens of locations across Syria have been hit, including residential areas, even in the heart of Damascus. In total, the Syrian Government says that Israel has hit Syrian territory more than 116 times since 7 October 2023, which they say have resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred people.
4. In the Golan, some construction activity has been carried out by the Israel Defense Forces in the vicinity of the area of separation. During this activity, UNDOF observed an Israeli battle tank and excavators cross the ceasefire line, into the area of separation. There were also reports of the IDF carrying out at least one drone strike in the area of separation. Pursuant to the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement, no military forces, equipment or activity by either Israel or Syria are permitted in the area of separation.
5. Meanwhile, late September saw a report of a rocket attack from Syrian territory into the Occupied Syrian Golan, while the IDF also claimed to have shot down drones launched from Syria towards Israel.
6. Israel says that its actions address targets linked to Iran or Hezbollah, accusing them of smuggling arms into Lebanon from Syria. However, the Syrian Government and many monitors too have highlighted the heavy impact on civilians, with alarming reports of civilian deaths and casualties from Israeli strikes, as well as damage to some civilian and economic infrastructure. Israel's strikes on the road between Beirut and Damascus have hindered the passage of civilians seeking to flee and also strangled a critical commercial artery between the two countries. We are now seeing decreasing commercial traffic and gasoline prices doubling in Syria.
7. Regional escalation appears to be also catalyzing conflict in northwest Syria in a dangerous manner. There was a significant cross-line raid into Government areas by Security-Council listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, alongside reports of drones out of Idlib and ongoing artillery and rocket fire.

Russia has since resumed airstrikes for the first time in months and pro-Government forces have significantly accelerated drone strikes and shelling. There have been alarming reports of civilian casualties and significant civilian displacements, and damage to civilian infrastructure, including an electricity power plant feeding a water station.

8. The northeast is also touched by regional escalation, with reports of attacks resuming on US military bases there, prompting reported US artillery fire. This is aggravating tensions in an area that was already seeing elevated hostilities, between the SDF, Government forces and armed opposition groups, as well as some reports of Turkish drone strikes.
9. This worsening situation across several fronts also makes it harder to combat Security Council listed terrorist groups like ISIL, which still pose a serious threat.

In short, Madame President,

10. We are seeing all the ingredients for a military, humanitarian and economic storm breaking on an already devastated Syria, with dangerous and unpredictable consequences for civilians and international peace and security. I have five urgent appeals in this regard.
11. First, Syria must be sheltered from regional conflict. I repeat my call for the respect of the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria. Syria cannot become a free-for-all venue, where different actors settle their scores or fuel other theatres, nor a staging ground for attacks or retaliation.
12. Second, regional tensions must be de-escalated now. I echo the Secretary General's call for immediate ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon. I also express grave concern at the prospect of further escalations between Israel and Iran, and what this could trigger as regards to Syria.
13. Third, there is a risk that regional escalation could unravel ceasefire agreements that have, however imperfectly, provided for a vital freeze in front lines inside Syria for almost four years. Further work is needed to de-escalate towards a nationwide ceasefire in line with resolution 2254. We also need to see alongside this a cooperative approach to combating Security-Council listed terrorist groups, in line with international law.
14. Fourth, all actors, Syrian and international – including Israel – must comply with international humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. I deplore the civilian deaths, which are rising again, and the damage to civilian infrastructure.
15. Fifth and finally, let me also remind on the importance of UNDOF's presence and stress the need for both parties to abide by the terms of the Disengagement Agreement. Violation of the Agreement could increase tensions between the parties and lead to a further escalation of the situation in the region.
16. I recently conveyed these messages in clear terms to members of the Ceasefire Task Force in Geneva – including Russia, Türkiye the United States and Iran – building on all my engagements in New York last month.

Madame President,

17. Amidst this dangerous kinetic environment, UNHCR says some 425,000 people have crossed into Syria in recent weeks, fleeing Israeli airstrikes and violence. Around 72% of these are Syrians, the remainder mostly Lebanese.
18. It goes without saying, Syrians must be protected wherever they are, including those moving and those who have remained where they are. The world is closely watching to see whether the concerns that Syrian refugees have long themselves expressed will be meaningfully addressed in this new situation. I hope that all stakeholders understand that this is indeed a critical moment for all to act responsibly and constructively. We have always stressed that there are two areas of concerns Syrian refugees cite – one set related to *protection* arising from fears of arbitrary arrest, mandatory military conscription and housing, land and property rights – and one set related to *livelihoods* arising from lack of basic services, healthcare, water, electricity, and inadequate housing.
19. In this regard, let me first echo High Commissioner Grandi's appreciation for the Government keeping the borders open for everybody and for simplifying some procedures, working with UNHCR. Of course, more will be needed, on the full range of protection issues. Indeed, let me also stress, as the High Commissioner has, the need to continue over time to ensure the safety and security of all those arriving from Lebanon – not only upon crossing but thereafter. Let me also stress that this appeal applies to *all* authorities and *de facto* authorities. And let me in the same vein also underline the need for unimpeded access through all modalities.
20. Second, let me also echo the UN appeal for donors to give generously. Both those who are moving and the communities into which they are entering are often facing conditions of utter misery. Emergency humanitarian aid and early recovery activities need substantial resources – for recent arrivals and for the millions of Syrians who are suffering. The generosity of donors to date is appreciated, but more will be needed. This appeal too applies to all areas of Syria. Let me also underline the need for the active engagement of sanctioning states to mitigate and avoid the adverse effects of sanctions, particularly in the form of overcompliance.

Madame President,

21. These latest developments serve as a stark reminder of Syria's deep fragility. Partial, piecemeal or conflict-management approaches alone cannot tackle the scale of the ever-mounting challenges Syria faces. Syria remains in a state of profound conflict, with Syrians divided politically and across different areas, and under enormous stresses of so many kinds. There is obviously no quick-fix for these challenges. Unless the long-stalled Syrian-owned and led political process facilitated by the United Nations resumes and begins to move forward, I fear we will continue to see Syria beset by crisis upon crisis with no end. Instead, now would be exactly the time to de-escalate and to send a new signal to the Syrian people and the international community that the search for a political settlement is meaningfully resuming.
22. What could this look like? It would mean the Syrians coming together again within the Constitutional Committee – and I raised specific ideas on this during consultations with the Syrian parties here in New York last month, which I continue to pursue. It means

taking seriously the promise of genuine confidence-building, step-for-step, among Syrian and international stakeholders.

23. Beyond this, it also means developing a new and comprehensive path out of this conflict - one that tackles the Syrian-owned and led political issues at the heart of conflict, with UN facilitation and without foreign interference, as well as the sovereignty, security, civilian protection and economic issues in which outside stakeholders are also deeply involved. We need constructive international diplomacy in support of the core of the matter – a UN-facilitated intra-Syrian process to advance Security Council resolution 2254.
24. During and since High-Level week, I have discussed urgent de-escalation and ways of advancing the political process with the Syrian Foreign Minister and the Syrian Negotiations Commission. I also did so with Russian, Turkish and Iranian Foreign Ministers meeting in the Astana format, with Arab Foreign Ministers, and with senior officials from the United States and Europe and others.

Madame President,

25. One process that continues is the active work of men and women from Syrian civil society tirelessly serving their country and communities. I thank Switzerland for its support of our efforts to facilitate processes of inclusion, dialogue and cooperation among Syrian civil society, particularly through the Civil Society Support Room. I look forward to listening to Abir who will be briefing today. Many of the priorities of our office are informed by the insights they share, and it is our honour to support and work with them.
26. The same is true of the Women’s Advisory Board, whose insights and energy we continue to rely upon, and who work together across different lines. Last week, they spoke to me from all corners of Syria and outside too, conveying the impacts of the latest crisis on their communities. Syrians are stepping up to support arrivals from Lebanon in an already economically strained environment, amid fears of further military and regional escalation.
27. Syrian women continue to identify opportunities for the political process to move forward, build trust and give voice to the voiceless. And everywhere, Syrian women are on the frontlines, bearing the burden of this conflict for their communities and families, while advocating for an end to violence. In this month when we mark the passage of 24 years since Security Council resolution 1325, we recommit ourselves to the meaningful political participation of women in the Syrian political process. I remind the Syrian parties and all of you that sustainable peace only comes when the outcomes of a political process reflect the evolution and sacrifice of all members of a society.

Madame President,

28. By concluding, let me remind you, Syrians need today the urgent protection provided by de-escalation and the support needed to face crises upon crisis. And they need an inclusive and comprehensive political path out of the conflict and the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254, that restores Syria’s sovereignty, restores the dignity of the long-suffering Syrian people, enables them independently to shape their country’s

future, and contributes to stability in the region. As we seek to facilitate this path in the face of enormous challenges, we need the cooperation and engagement of the Syrian parties and all key players.

Thank you, Madame President.