

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN  
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
25 April 2024

Thank you, Madame President,

1. This last month, the grim specter of regional conflict loomed over Syria once again. You will have heard the Secretary-General's condemnation, and my own, of the 1 April strikes on Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus - an attack widely attributed to Israel. You will also have heard the Secretary General's condemnation of Iran's 13 April strikes on Israel. Since then, there were reports of further attacks on 19 April – also widely attributed to Israel – in Iran, Iraq and Syria, where the Syrian Government said an air defense site was hit by an Israeli missile. There were also reports of attacks on US bases in northeast Syria, attributed to Iraqi armed groups some claimed are linked to Iran.
2. I remain, Madame President, extremely alarmed at this dangerous and escalatory spiral. I have long warned that Syria is treated by many as a sort of free-for-all space for settling scores.
3. I am not only worried about these regional spillover effects and the grave dangers of miscalculation and escalation. I am also deeply worried about the conflict in Syria itself, which continues to blight the lives of the long-suffering Syrian people. Indeed, any temptation to ignore or merely contain the Syrian conflict itself would be a mistake. This is not a frozen conflict. Nor are its effects felt only in Syria. There are in fact no signs of calm in any of Syria's theatres - only unresolved conflicts, bubbling violence, and sharp flares of hostilities, any of which could be the kindling for a new conflagration. During this month:
  - In the northwest, pro-Government missile and drone strikes were reported again, and Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham launched multiple cross-line attacks.
  - In the northeast, there were reports of Turkish drone-strikes, exchanges of fire between armed opposition groups and Syrian Democratic Forces, alongside a growing insurgency by some tribal elements against the SDF.
  - In the southwest, security incidents remain at elevated levels with reports of open clashes between former armed opposition groups and Syrian Government forces, as well as incidents related to criminal activities on the border.
  - And ISIL terrorist attacks continued with sustained intensity, across the Syrian desert and the northeast in particular.
4. We need, Madame President, regional de-escalation, starting with an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. All players must exercise maximum restraint and respect international law. We must work towards a nationwide ceasefire in Syria too, in line with Security Council resolution 2254. All actors must comply with international humanitarian law and protect civilians – including when addressing Security-Council listed terrorist groups.

Madame President,

5. The humanitarian situation is as bleak as ever. And of course Ramesh will elaborate. But let me stress the need for access by all modalities, including cross-border and cross-line. Let me appeal for donors, both traditional and non-traditional, to give generously to the humanitarian response, including for early recovery. And let me stress that the effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians must be mitigated and avoided, in particular given concerns that overcompliance continues to impact humanitarian operations.
6. The economic situation remains perilous. The WFP says that the cost of a food basket doubled within a year, while the cost of living increased by 104%. The Syrian pound has reached around 15,000 per US dollar on the parallel market – in early 2020 it was 1,000, and on the eve of the conflict in 2011 it was 50. My colleagues on the ground continue to witness, including recently in Homs, an economic situation that is now even worse than at the height of the conflict. Many have lost the most vital ingredient of life – hope. The same is true for millions displaced outside Syria.
7. The unending suffering borne by Syrians carries knock-on effects for the most vulnerable. Many interlocutors tell my office about increasing gender-based violence, as well as negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage or women forced into prostitution.
8. Meanwhile, the smuggling and use of narcotics in Syria is, according to many reports, dramatically increasing – a trend that we have seen only fuel conflict elsewhere.
9. The detainee crisis remains as acute as ever. Children, women, men – of all ages and across all parts of Syria – remain subjected to unlawful arbitrary detention, forced conscription, and forced separation from their families. Reports continue of detainees being deprived of food and medical treatment, and subjected to torture and sexual violence – across *all* areas of Syria. Such practices must stop. Children, and people who are old or ill, should be released immediately. And the authorities in government areas, and those in de facto control of other areas too, must grant specialized independent humanitarian organisations access to all detention facilities and prisons, and ensure communication with families.

Madame President,

10. All of this shows us why we must move forward on the safe, calm and neutral environment that is necessary for a political process to unfold -- and also for safe, dignified and voluntary returns. My best efforts and those of others too to see these realities addressed through concrete measures on both sides have not yet produced the changes needed. Instead, more and more people want to leave Syria – and also leave neighboring states too – risking their lives on perilous routes. This is why stakeholders must focus on what refugees tell us they need: movement on both protection and livelihood concerns. In uniting our efforts in this regard, we must remember the disproportionate burden that neighbouring states continue to carry, and the risks that Syrian refugees can sometimes face amidst conditions of political, economic and social stress. We must promote protection and dignity for Syrian refugees wherever they are, while working to put in place conditions for safe, dignified, and voluntary return.

Madame President,

11. A mix of de-escalation, containment and humanitarian assistance – brokered through partial arrangements and piecemeal formats – is what we are seeing in practice. Without this the situation would be even worse. But such approaches cannot bring stability in Syria – just as they do not elsewhere in the region. All trendlines are steadily moving in an alarming direction.
12. Syrians need to see a political path out of this conflict, in line with resolution 2254. Renewing the Constitutional Committee could be a piece of that path. But despite intense efforts, we still are not seeing its meetings resume, due to issues unrelated to Syria. Let me stress: I remain open to any alternative venue to Geneva that attracts consensus of both the Syrian parties and the host, and my engagement is continuing 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.
13. Step-for-step confidence building measures could also show Syrians the kind of compromise needed to move forward. I remind all parties that there are concrete ideas on the table. The invitation to a deepened and concrete dialogue remains. And I remain willing to listen to and facilitate any alternative ideas for confidence-building measures.

Madame President,

14. De-escalating violence, resuming the Constitutional Committee, and confidence building measures are all entry points – but they cannot themselves resolve the conflict. And I am all too well aware that these efforts, and frankly other initiatives on Syria too, are neither delivering on the ground nor sufficient for the gravity of the situation. Instead, each month we see trends moving further in the wrong direction. A fatal combination of a lack of political will and centrifugal forces seems to be pulling Syria apart - its territory, its society and its structures. Syrians on all sides almost uniformly express their grave alarm at what this means for their country, and rightly so. And I will continue my dialogue with them, including next week with the Women Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room in Brussels.

Madame President,

15. A new, comprehensive approach needs to be explored that addresses the full range of issues – the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and the need for Syria's sovereignty to be restored, especially in a context of six foreign armies and regional score-settling within Syrian territory. I and my team are keen for engagement in this regard, and we appreciate that a number of parties wish to engage with us in the search for a way forward. This month, I welcomed the opportunity for in-depth discussions with Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan and other senior officials in Ankara.

Madame President,

16. A new and comprehensive approach would need to fully engage all critical stakeholders – this includes the Syrian parties and the international actors in the Astana format, the Arab Contact Group, the Western Quad, and this Council. Leaving out any key players will lead to blockage.

17. There are of course major regional and global obstacles to convening all of these stakeholders now. And, Madame President, this would not be the immediate goal of any new and comprehensive approach. Rather, we can and must begin with preparatory discussions with each stakeholder, on all their concerns and demands – in terms of both arresting negative trends and the shape of and path to a long-term settlement. We must prepare for work across a range of inter-linked and phased tracks and prepare for a time when it would be possible to put those ideas into diplomatic action.
18. The time will – indeed it must – come when diplomacy could reassert itself – and we can help bring that day closer and be ready for it. Syrians and the international community at large must be able to see a vision of what a realistic, sustainable and inclusive peace could look like, and a path to achieve it, to realize the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2254. Madame President, this is indeed a daunting task, but it is one that we must attempt. The depth of the crisis in Syria calls for nothing less.

Thank you, Madame President.