

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA
29 June 2022

Mr President,

1. Last week the Secretary-General and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths briefed you on the very grave humanitarian situation in Syria. As they underlined, the three prongs of the framework of resolution 2585 – cross-line, cross-border, and early recovery – have been absolutely essential to bringing life-saving, and life-sustaining, humanitarian assistance to all parts of Syria during the past extremely difficult year for the Syrian people. With humanitarian needs growing and civilians in desperate need, it is essential for the Council to renew this framework for an additional 12 months.
2. As the Secretary General has stated, this is a moral imperative. And, at a time of global turmoil, the Council's unity on humanitarian issues in Syria would also signal that the main stakeholders in this conflict can firewall key aspects of the Syria issue from their differences elsewhere in the world, and cooperate. It would be a kernel of the constructive diplomacy on Syria that I have long called for, and that will be absolutely essential if we are to move along the path of implementing my mandate -- Security Council resolution 2254. Indeed, a political settlement of the conflict is the only sustainable way to end the suffering of the Syrian people.

Mr. President,

3. To focus on a political way forward, it is vital that tensions and dangers of military escalation are contained. We are seeing ongoing and even increasing violence, in a number of flashpoints. Afrin and the northeast are seeing significant escalations in hostilities, with clashes and drone strikes, exchanges of fire and recent statements by Türkiye about a new military operation. As the Secretary-General's spokesperson stressed, Syria does not need more military operations but rather a political solution and more humanitarian assistance. The northwest has seen exchanges of rocket fire and reports of pro-Government airstrikes pick up again, along with a US strike on al-Qaeda affiliate Hurras al-Din, and infighting among armed opposition groups in Afrin and northern Aleppo. ISIL and other listed terrorist groups continue to launch attacks and claimed responsibility for killing Syrian Army soldiers this month. Killings and violence attributed to ISIL continue in al-Hol camp where conditions remain dire, underlining the need for progress on repatriations. The southwest has seen multiple security incidents. This month also saw reports of Russian airstrikes near Al-Tanf on an armed opposition group partnered with the United States. Meanwhile, strikes attributed to Israel appear to be increasing in scale and scope. Let me echo the Secretary General's concern, as expressed by his spokesperson, about the reported strikes on Damascus International Airport on 10 June.
4. Let me remind you of the firm position of the United Nations that directing attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure is strictly prohibited under international humanitarian law. And let me also remind you of the firm position of the United Nations on respect for Syria's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and independence.

5. And let me note that there is a risk that a miscalculated move in any of these flashpoints could lead to a broader conflict in a volatile situation. As we have seen time and again, conflict can escalate fast in Syria. If it does, mass civilian displacement and suffering are sure to follow, with the potential for wider regional instability. This is why we are concerned by violence across all of Syria's fault lines, and any intention to carry out new operations. This is why we reiterate our call for a nationwide ceasefire, a cooperative approach to countering listed terrorist groups, and a focus on supporting the political process.

Mr President,

6. Let's also not forget the acute economic crisis in Syria, resulting from more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption, mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, sanctions and now the war in Ukraine. Earlier this month, the World Bank reported that Syrian economic activity halved in size between 2010 and 2019. And we know for sure that the situation has not improved since then. The Bank warned that this economic crisis may lead to increased social unrest in Syria.
7. Let us also not forget that creating conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified refugee returns is a core element of Security Council Resolution 2254. A recent UNHCR survey of Syrian refugees' perceptions and intentions found that 92.8% of refugees living in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq do not intend to return to Syria within the next 12 months. Given the causes cited by refugees themselves, a wide range of actions would be required to create such conditions, addressing the many obstacles to returns – in terms of the security situation, livelihoods, basic services, housing, military service and protection.

Mr President,

8. In light of realities such as these, I have long been proposing that we work, step-for-step, on a series of confidence-building measures, to deal with many of the most immediate concerns of Syrians, and advance towards a safe, calm and neutral environment and the implementation of resolution 2254. I have continued bilateral engagements with the Syrian parties and international stakeholders on various entry points in this regard, sharing and receiving some ideas.
9. As I informed you in closed consultations last month, when I was in Damascus in May I identified to Syrian Foreign Minister Mekdad a number of topics on which I thought we could have deeper discussion on actions the Syrian authorities could take – topics which he undertook to consider.
10. As you know, I have long called on the parties to take *unilateral action* at a meaningful scale on the tragic issues of the detained, the abducted, and the missing, including in the framework of confidence-building and moving step for step. This issue, immense in scale, is a continuing and central feature of the trauma of the Syrian people. We need to do more than the 1:1 simultaneous release operations that have resulted from the Astana working group, and which saw another 10 detainees – 5 on each side – released just before the Astana meeting on 15 and 16 June.

11. Bearing this in mind, I briefed you in closed consultations last month on my engagement with Foreign Minister Mekdad on the presidential decree of 30 April and its implementation. My office in Damascus has since followed up on this engagement. I have also engaged with human rights organizations, victims and family associations and civil society contacts who have also shared their assessments, including estimates of many hundreds so far released, but no recent reports of further releases.
12. We continue to stress the *potential* of the decree, and the importance of its comprehensive implementation if that potential is to be realized. This opportunity should not be missed. We hope there will be further action by and communications with the Syrian Government on this issue and on the other topics for confidence-building measures.
13. In parallel, there are a number of topics in which others, including the outside players, could take positive steps too regarding Syria and advancing resolution 2254. I am continuing to engage key players on what such steps could look like and I have appreciated their readiness to engage.

Mr President,

14. We continue to convene the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee, which, if approached the right way, could contribute to a political settlement to implement resolution 2254. I last briefed you during the Eighth Session of its small drafting body, which concluded on 3 June. The Co-Chairs agreed that the Ninth Session will convene in Geneva on 25 July. Formal invitations have been sent accordingly and we are taking logistical steps to move ahead with the session.
15. I told the Committee members at the conclusion of the Eighth Session that I appreciated the tone and substantive nature of the dialogue in the room. But I was also honest with them that I saw real challenges. These relate to the pace of work, and the inability of the members to identify and conclude areas of initial provisional agreement – even on points where there was potential consensus in the room.
16. I met the Co-Chairs together at the end of the session to discuss what could be done to address these challenges. They have welcomed that I share ideas on ways to expedite the work and produce results and continued progress, and I have done so. I am looking forward to them reverting to me with their reactions or any other ideas.

Mr President,

17. As my regular briefings to you suggest, a daunting set of challenges faces the Syrian people. I was reminded of this when I was briefed on the results of my team's recent regional outreach with Syrian civil society. Syrians briefed my team extensively on political developments, the socio-economic situation, humanitarian and protection issues, women rights, inclusion of youth in the political process, local governance and social cohesion initiatives. What united all of these voices was the need to see urgent action to implement a comprehensive political solution, in line with resolution 2254.
18. Today I have warned of the risks of further escalation, and I have urged you all to find the unity and sense of purpose to contain those risks, support humanitarian objectives, and

promote concrete steps on the path to a settlement. My message is simple: Don't forget Syria. Find unity on Syria. Help the Syrians begin to emerge from this tragic conflict.

Thank you, Mr. President.