

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA
25 October 2022**

Thank you so much Mr. President [Gabon - Amb. Michel Xavier Biang],

1. I brief you after a busy period of diplomatic engagement, including a visit to Damascus.
2. But before I update you on that, let me first thank all those Syrians, from inside and outside Syria, who continue to engage with us – especially Syrian women. In a few days, we mark the 22nd anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325. Over nearly 12 years of conflict, there is almost no indignity Syria's women and girls have not suffered: poverty and malnutrition; detention, disappearance and abduction; sexual assault and rape; forced and early marriages; violence of multiple kinds when bearing children; denial of education and livelihoods. Women civil society activists are too often targeted by violence when attempting to engage in public life. Women political and civic leaders struggle to secure their rightful seat at negotiating tables.
3. That said Mr. President, Syrian women are successfully heading households, assuming responsibilities in their communities, and demanding full representation in political processes. They help guide the interventions of the international community in the humanitarian sphere. They advocate for the rights of the detained, abducted and missing. Many find ways to come together across divides and articulate an unrelenting demand for dignity for all Syrians. They embody a hope that a political settlement can bring real peace and enable Syrian women to assume their rightful and hard-earned place in society.
4. Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi and I will continue to engage and develop platforms such as the Syrian Women's Advisory Board and Civil Society Support Room to ensure women's equal access to the political process. We continue to advocate for quotas in Syrian political bodies of at least thirty percent. And we seek to create opportunities where issues of importance to women can be raised, including in the Constitutional Committee. I look forward to engaging the Women's Advisory Board again here in Geneva next month.
5. We also continue our regular dialogue with a wide range of Syrian civil society representatives – men and women - through the Civil Society Support Room. Syrian civil society are keen to put forward their knowledge, expertise, time, and ideas to help Syria move towards a comprehensive political solution. Recently, we launched a thematic group on issues related to local governance and decentralization. Another group of Syrian experts will start discussing issues related to protection needs. This engagement helps build trust among Syrians, and also provides us with advice on possible openings for the political process.

Mr. President,

6. Tragically, however, the political process has not so far delivered for the Syrian people, and they continue to suffer, not least from acute violence. Even as strategic stalemate persists, the conflict remains very active across Syria, let me mention a few examples:

- After infighting between armed opposition groups in recent weeks, Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – HTS – deployed fighters into Afrin and reached the outskirts of Azaz. There are now reports that they are withdrawing from Afrin following a ceasefire.
- Elsewhere, listed terrorist group ISIL remains a serious threat: one of the largest weapons caches since the so-called Caliphate fell was recently discovered in northeast Syria, underlining the group’s continued capacity to stage attacks.
- Pro-government airstrikes were reported in northwest Syria – both in Idlib and also on the outskirts of Azaz, in areas where strikes had not been reported for a very long time.
- Violence in the northeast continues, with frequent reports of drone strikes, mutual shelling and confrontations between the Syrian Democratic Forces on the one hand, and Türkiye and armed opposition groups on the other.
- Strikes were reported in the vicinity of US forces in Deir-ez-Zor.
- The southwest continues to see a string of security incidents each month, including ambushes, assassinations and IED attacks.
- There was an unclaimed attack on a bus carrying Syrian Government soldiers in Damascus.
- Strikes attributed to Israel have hit targets in Syria, including, once again, Damascus and Aleppo international airports.

Mr. President,

7. I reiterate my call on all parties to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, to preserve deconfliction channels and de-escalation agreements and build on them, towards a full nationwide ceasefire. I also call on them to continue to seek to find cooperative ways to counter Security -listed terrorist groups in a manner that fully respects international humanitarian law and preserves stability, and Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. It is unacceptable that hostilities continue to result in civilian casualties, including many children. We have conveyed our concerns again to key stakeholders in recent weeks and will continue to raise them with members of the Ceasefire Task Force here in Geneva.

Mr. President,

8. Let me also stress the scale of the economic challenges in Syria, and my concerns about Syrian humanitarian suffering and livelihoods. The Syrian pound lost a tremendous amount of its value in recent weeks, which in turn saw food and fuel prices jump to even higher record prices. Syrians are enduring the worst economic crisis since the war began; and it will only get worse this winter for the vast majority of Syrians. It is vital to ensure increased and unfettered humanitarian access to all people in need throughout Syria, via the most direct routes, including cross-border and cross-line access. And the deeper causes of economic suffering in Syria need to be addressed, by the government and by outsiders.

Mr. President,

9. As my OCHA colleague will brief you, the recent cholera outbreak is spreading rapidly. Cases have already spread to Lebanon and other regional countries have expressed concern about this prospect too. This was preventable and serves again as a reminder that we need to find a solution to the severe health and water conditions throughout Syria.

Mr. President,

10. My team and I continue to pay very close attention to the file of the detained, disappeared and missing persons. We have deepened engagement with victims and family associations and civil society organizations, who continue to lead the way and are voicing their priorities and pursuing solutions. Regrettably, we continue to receive reports of arbitrary arrests throughout the country. Meanwhile, six months after the presidential amnesty decree, there is nothing new to report. Despite our continued engagement, official information is not forthcoming, nor has independent monitoring been facilitated. On this and more generally, families stress the concern that arise from a lack of transparent communication, and the vulnerabilities and lack of confidence that this gives rise to.

Mr. President,

11. In the past weeks I have engaged widely with diplomatic counterparts during the General Assembly in New York, and in Washington, Berlin, Geneva, Damascus and Amman. I have met the Syrian Foreign Minister and the President of the SNC. I have also met the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, the Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Jordan and other senior officials from the Arab world, and senior officials from the United States, Germany and other European countries. I will continue this engagement in the period ahead.

12. I am pushing all stakeholders to engage on step-for-step confidence building measures to help advance resolution 2254. The key Syrian and international stakeholders need to rebuild their confidence that cooperation on Syria is indeed possible, that the other side *is* willing and able to deliver, and that Syria *can* be firewalled from other conflicts. That confidence can only be built by concrete actions. To serve that purpose, initial steps must be precise, reciprocal, verifiable, and implemented in parallel - and address daily concerns of the Syrian people.

13. The dialogue on this has deepened as a result of my most recent engagements, with some key stakeholders identifying concrete areas for potential steps, and all engaged with heightened interest. These discussions need to develop further. I particularly look forward to further engagement with the Syrian Government on this.

14. I continue to work to unblock obstacles to reconvening the Constitutional Committee here in Geneva. You will recall that the Syrian government nominees' decided not to come to Geneva pending a resolution of issues related to the venue cited by the Russian Federation. I have discussed this issue with senior Russian counterparts, with our Swiss hosts, and with the Syrian Foreign Minister and Syrian-government nominated Co-Chair of the Constitutional Committee in Damascus and of course with the SNC.

15. Even assuming sessions resume in Geneva, this would not be sufficient to restore the credibility of the Committee in the eyes of most Syrians and international stakeholders. That is why I am seeking to work with the parties and the Co-Chairs so that, when meetings reconvene, there is political will to engage in a spirit of compromise, with a faster pace, better working methods and more substance.

Mr President,

16. Let me recall that a Syrian-led and owned political process is designed to reach a negotiated political solution to implement Security Council resolution 2254. Such a solution must rest on Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity, And it must enable the Syrian people to determine their own future, via a process that culminates in free and fair elections administered under UN supervision, with participation by all eligible Syrians including members of the diaspora. This political solution is the only path to sustainable peace. Sadly, Mr. President, we are a long way from this goal at present, and there are challenging diplomatic and ground realities that make advancing towards a comprehensive solution difficult. But status quo should not be acceptable and there are ways forward. I appeal to all of you for support for my efforts to create some movement among the Syrian parties and key stakeholders, as we seek to advance the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254.

Thank you, Mr. President