

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA  
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BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
29 November 2022**

Madame President

1. In repeated briefings, I have warned of the dangers of military escalation in Syria. I am here in person today to tell you that escalatory dynamics are indeed taking place, and this is worrying and dangerous.
2. For many months we have seen a slow increase in mutual strikes between the Syrian Democratic Forces on one side, and Türkiye and armed opposition groups on the other, across northern Syria and with violence spilling over into Turkish territory. On 20 November, a week after the terrible bombing in Istanbul which Türkiye attributed to, I quote, the “YPG/PKK” – a claim which the SDF denied - Türkiye launched what it called the “Claw-Sword Air Operation”. Turkish airstrikes immediately hit a large number of what they say were, quote “YPG/PKK” targets across northern Syria and Iraq. The SDF and its affiliates say that some of these strikes hit civilian infrastructure and resulted in civilian casualties. There were also reports of SDF strikes on Turkish forces and armed opposition-controlled areas and inside of Turkish territory, with some reportedly hitting civilian infrastructure and resulting in civilian casualties.
3. The Secretary-General has called for all parties to exercise maximum restraint and avoid escalation, whether in the air or on the ground. Let me stress that Türkiye, the armed opposition and the SDF should de-escalate now.
4. And this call for restraint and de-escalation is relevant for all other areas in Syria too:
  - Idlib has seen very concerning incidents, including rounds of pro-Government air and ground-based air strikes. Some of these hit camps for internally displaced persons, killing and injuring civilians, destroying tents and displacing hundreds of families, while others damaged healthcare infrastructure. There were reported attacks by Security Council-listed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham on Government forces and Government-controlled areas, with civilian casualties.
  - Strikes attributed to Israel hit Damascus, Homs, Hama and Latakia, prompting Syrian Government anti-aircraft fire in response.
  - There were reports of airstrikes on the border between Syria and Iraq.
  - The US said that rockets hit US-led coalition forces in al-Shaddadi.
  - Deraa in the south has seen a continuation of security incidents and tensions and also fresh military clashes between local factions and Syrian Government forces, amid a reported anti-ISIL operation by former opposition fighters and also security incidents on the border, which Amman related to drug-smuggling.
  - The horrific rape and murder of two Egyptian girls reminds us that the situation in al-Hol camp remains of grave concern.

5. The trend lines are deeply worrying, and carry real dangers of further escalation. Let me warn the Security Council of the scenario where large-scale military operations by one actor then have knock-on effects across all other theatres, unravelling the strategic stalemate that has brought a measure of *relative* calm for almost three years. Such an escalation would not only compound the devastating harm already meted out to Syrian civilians. It would also further endanger regional stability. And listed terrorist groups, that are subdued but not defeated, would immediately take advantage of any fresh instability.
6. Let me therefore call loudly and clearly on all actors to restrain themselves and engage in serious efforts to reinstate the calm, move towards a nationwide ceasefire and a cooperative approach to counter-terrorism in line with international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure are absolutely essential. Syria needs less military activity and more focus on the political process and implementation of Security Council resolution 2254.
7. This was the message we have been relaying to members of the Ceasefire Task Force in Geneva, and which I brought to Astana last week, where I met with senior representatives of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye, as well as Government and Opposition representatives, and representatives of Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.

Madame President,

8. Let me also stress that Syrian civilians continue to experience terrible suffering in myriad ways beyond the effects of violent conflict.
9. You know that 6.8 million have been forced to flee and remain internally displaced. Another 6.8 million more are refugees. And 14.6 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance, and I'm sure Martin will say more about this. These needs that have grown in recent years in lockstep with catastrophic economic conditions, resulting from more than a decade of war and conflict, corruption, mismanagement, the Lebanese financial crisis, COVID, sanctions and the war in Ukraine. Only this week, we saw the Syrian pound reach record lows. It is clear that steps from both the government and outsiders are needed to stem this economic crisis. And let me remind you that any humanitarian effects of sanctions that could exacerbate the plight of ordinary Syrians need to be avoided and mitigated, particularly in terms of over-compliance.
10. Let me also remind you that untold numbers of Syrians continue to see their human rights violated. I once again, raised the issue of arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and missing persons with all the key interlocutors I met in Astana last week, including senior representatives of the Syrian government. Transparency, clear data and monitoring mechanisms remain core to the credibility of any release initiatives. My team also participated in the Astana working group on the release of detainees/abductees and handover of the bodies as well as the identification of missing persons. We reiterated our call for more substantive and frequent engagement in this area, to achieve some measure of concrete progress.
11. We continue to hold Humanitarian Task Force meetings in Geneva and call for increased and unfettered humanitarian access to all people in need throughout Syria

via all modalities. Resolution 2642 is enabling cross-border access and highlighting the need for enhanced crossline access and early recovery, and, I understand, progress has indeed been made. It is important that this Council continues supporting this framework – not least as we see a cholera crisis unfolding.

12. We continue to engage the widest spectrum of Syrian stakeholders, among other things via the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board and Civil Society Support Room, seeking advice on implementing resolution 2254. As always, I appreciated meeting members of the Syrian Women’s Advisory Board when they recently met in Geneva, and when they conveyed their concern that the political process seemed to be at an impasse.

Madame President,

13. In light of the realities on the ground and in the political context, I will continue to work closely with all stakeholders on step-for-step confidence building measures to help build trust and confidence among all players and advance resolution 2254. I can see many areas where the stakeholders could take mutual, reciprocal and verifiable steps that would begin to address legitimate concerns and, most importantly, the needs of Syrian civilians, by alleviating suffering and contributing to a safe, calm and neutral environment, which is an essential element of a political process.
14. I appreciate the increased interest in this approach from many players, including members of the Security Council, several of whom have deepened their dialogue with me in sketching out steps they could take. I look forward to further engagement with the Syrian Government on this when I visit Damascus next week, and on the full range of issues in resolution 2254, just as I will shortly engage with the Syrian Negotiations Commission.

Madame President,

15. In this regard, I am concerned that the Constitutional Committee has not met for six months. This is actually the only process in which Syrians nominated by the government and the opposition and from civil society meet and discuss aspects of their common future. The longer it lies dormant, the harder it will be to resume. And the absence of a credible political process can only promote further conflict and instability.
16. The Russian Federation raised issues over the venue of the Constitutional Committee meetings. These issues were comprehensively addressed and I thank the Swiss authorities for their receptivity. A further issue has now been raised, which is not in Swiss hands. In any case, if the will exists to prioritize the importance of the Syrian resuming their work, I believe there is a clear way forward to enable the process to resume in Geneva. In Astana, I appealed to the guarantors to support my call for the Constitutional Committee to meet in Geneva in January.
17. If and when the Committee reconvenes, it is important that there is some forward movement on the substance. I have in particular appealed to the Government Co-Chair to respond constructively to ideas shared in June and discussed in various contacts with him, in order to expedite the work of the Committee. As the Terms of

Reference stated, we must work work expeditiously and continuously to produce results and continued progress. This is essential if the Syrian people are to see the Constitutional Committee as a credible process.

Madame President,

18. I feel we are at something of a fork in the road. I am troubled by the thought of a major military operation resuming after three years of relative calm. I fear what this would mean for Syrian civilians, and also for wider regional security. And I equally fear a scenario where the situation escalates in part because there is today no serious effort to resolve the conflict politically.
19. There is however a clear way forward. The steps we must take in the weeks ahead are eminently possible. Let me highlight a few of them:
  - Step back from escalation and restore relative calm on the ground;
  - Renew the framework in this Council on the humanitarian front;
  - Resume and make more substantive the Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva;
  - Prioritize work on the detained, the disappeared, and the missing;
  - Deepen our work towards identifying and implementing initial step-for-step confidence building measures.
- 20.
- 21.
20. Through this approach, incremental progress would be achievable. And this would help create a dynamic and set us on a path to a more ambitious goal - a comprehensive political solution in line with resolution 2254, that meets the legitimate aspirations of all Syrians and restores Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity. The alternative is deeper suffering and more violence and instability. I appeal to all parties to reject this path and find ways to cooperate behind a more constructive way forward.