

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN BRIEFING  
TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
25 January 2023**

Thank you so much Mr. President (Japan, Amb Mr. Ishikane Kimihiro),

1. As we move into 2023, the Syrian people remain trapped in a profound humanitarian, political, military, security, economic and human rights crisis of great complexity and almost unimaginable scale.
2. Syrians remain deeply divided over their future. Despite our best efforts, no substantive progress is being made to build a common political vision for that future via a genuine political process. Equally, many of the issues in the conflict have for several years now not been solely in Syrian hands. The country remains de facto divided into several parts, with five foreign armies, multiple Syrian armed groups and Security Council listed terrorists all active on the ground. Serious abuses and violations of international humanitarian law and human rights continue across Syria.

Mr. President,

3. More than a decade of destruction, war and conflict, corruption and mismanagement, sanctions, the Lebanese financial collapse, COVID and its aftermath, and now the war in Ukraine have contributed to a twin humanitarian and economic crisis of epic proportions. Roughly half the pre-war population remains displaced – the largest displacement crisis in the world and one of the largest since World War II. This situation is not only a source of tragedy for Syrians but a driver of instability across the region, including against a backdrop of growing reports of illicit drug trade. The conflict needs a comprehensive political solution – nothing else can work. That solution is sadly not imminent. But we continue to focus on concrete actions that could build some trust and bring into being a real process to implement Security Council resolution 2254.
4. To this end, I continue to engage the Syrian parties to the conflict. I will return to Damascus in February for meetings with Syrian Foreign Minister Mekdad and the Government-nominated Co-Chair of the Constitutional Committee Kuzbari. I saw the President of the Syrian Negotiations Commission Jamous and the SNC-nominated Co-Chair of the Constitutional Committee al-Bahra in Geneva earlier this week.
5. I am in parallel engaging widely with key international players. Last week I met with Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu and Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan. Yesterday, I met together the Syria Special Envoys of France, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom. I have engaged with representatives of the Russian Federation and the European External Action Service, and Deputy Envoy Rochdi met representatives of EU member states and EU officials last week. We look forward to engaging widely with the full range of regional and international actors as part of continuing consultations.

6. The Syrian and Turkish authorities have in recent months held security and military contacts. The Syrian and Turkish Defence Ministers met together with the Russian Defence Minister in Moscow on 28 December. I continue to follow closely developments in this regard.
7. In all our engagements, our goal is to facilitate progress on several priorities in line with Security Council resolution 2254, and we are urging all actors to work together in support of a UN-facilitated political process. Last month I flagged six priority areas to you in my briefing. Let me update you on them today.
8. The first priority I identified was the need to step back from escalation and restore calm. A nationwide ceasefire remains essential to resolving the conflict. Last year, we saw periods of relative calm and periods of escalation. Over the last month, the picture has been equally mixed. We have seen fewer airstrikes in the north-west in recent months. And the intense military escalation in the north-east that we witnessed late last year has reduced. But in other ways the picture remains as dire as ever. Shelling, rocket fire and intermittent clashes have continued along all contact lines, involving a wide spectrum of actors – including, the Government, the armed opposition, the SDF and Security Council listed-terrorist group HTS, who have launched several cross-line attacks this month. Turkish drone strikes were reported in the north-east and Israeli strikes were reported in rural Damascus and on Damascus Airport. ISIL remains active, with sleeper cells killing military personnel and civilians.

Mr. President,

9. We continue to relay to Ceasefire Task Force members the importance of preserving and deepening calm, protecting civilians and consolidating the patchwork of existing agreements and arrangements into a nationwide ceasefire. And of course, this would require a parallel effort to find a cooperative approach towards countering listed terrorist groups, in line with international law and which ensures the protection of civilians.
10. The second priority I stressed was to renew the framework in this Council on the humanitarian front. Thank you for the unanimous adoption of Security Council resolution 2672 earlier this month. This allowed for the continuation of life-saving cross-border humanitarian assistance for millions in Syria, albeit for six months, as well as expressing support for cross-line operations and early recovery projects.
11. The scale of needs inside Syria is at the worst level since the conflict began – with record poverty, record food insecurity, basic services breaking down, and a burgeoning economic crisis. Needs in displacement camps remain the most urgent. Meanwhile, infrastructure remains on the brink, with frequent power outages against a backdrop of dwindling fuel supplies, with knock-on effects across the society, and we will obviously hear more from the OCHA briefer on this.

Mr. President,

12. The third priority was – and is - to see the Constitutional Committee resume and make more substantive progress in Geneva. The Constitutional Committee could be a door-opener and help advance a key component of resolution 2254 and contribute to a wider political process. I am keen to reconvene the Small Body of the Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva without delay. However, so far, there is nothing new to report, including on Russia's position regarding the venue. The issues that had been raised were comprehensively addressed, and I thank the Swiss authorities for their receptivity. Further issues have meanwhile been raised, some of which are not in Swiss hands, but on which, nevertheless, good offices are being extended.
13. The Government-nominated Co-Chair is yet to respond to my letter of last June on improving the Committee's working methods. I will continue my efforts to resume meetings and work with the Co-Chairs on finding ways to improve the substance and working methods of the Committee, while keeping the Middle Third apprised of any developments.
14. Fourth, Mr. President, we must keep pushing the file of detainees, disappeared and missing persons. I look forward to progress in establishing a missing persons' institution, as recommended by the Secretary General, created as a pathway able to offer tangible progress on this aspect of the file.
15. Meanwhile, we continue to remind our interlocutors at every opportunity that arbitrary detainees must be released, and substantive steps taken to ensure the protection and rights of detainees. There has been no improvement on the ground this month. Arbitrary arrests have reportedly continued, whereby many individuals arrested are neither informed of the reasons for their detention, nor are their families informed of their whereabouts.
16. Let us also not forget that these protection issues are among the core factors that refugees have cited to UNHCR when explaining their decision not to return to Syria within the next 12 months - alongside the security situation, livelihoods, basic services, housing, and military service. A wide range of actions on all of these fronts will be essential to creating a safe, calm and neutral environment, including for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees and IDPs.
17. The fifth priority is to bring about initial step-for-step confidence building measures. It is important to identify some precise, concrete, reciprocal, verifiable steps that could positively impact the lives of Syrians, with some trust and confidence between the parties, and move us towards a safe, calm, neutral environment and along the path of implementing Security Council resolution 2254. I appreciate that the dialogue has deepened with all parties on these issues, and stress that it is important that engagement further deepens during February.

Mr. President,

18. My sixth priority is to engage with Syrians across the board. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board continues to advise me and Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi. Members of the WAB, in turn, have continued their own conversations with their fellow Syrians, to ensure that their perspectives are heard, including those belonging to women. We also continue to engage

Syrian civil society activists on a broad range of issues relating related to the political process, as well as ongoing protection concerns. Participants in the Thematic Working Groups of the Civil Society Support Room pursued their regular discussions through digital means on the issues of local governance and decentralization and protection priorities for Syrians, and how they can be addressed through a political process in line with resolution 2254. The Syrian women and men we engage remain hopeful that this conflict will come to an end in a manner that enables individuals to live in dignity.

Mr. President,

19. Ultimately, a diplomatic effort requires the inclusion of all relevant Syrian and international actors whose stake and influence are necessary to resolve this tragic conflict. It requires a common effort to unite behind Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process facilitated by the United Nations as mandated in resolution 2254. Only this could address the core drivers of this conflict and meet the needs and legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, restore Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, and safeguard regional stability and security concerns. It is in that spirit that I continue to engage all players and appeal for their continued support for the UN effort to facilitate the political process.

Thank you, Mr. President.