

Geir O. Pedersen
United Nations Special Envoy for Syria
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
29 August 2019

Thank you, Madame President.

1. The scale of violence and instability in Syria is extremely alarming. We have an ever-rising civilian death toll; millions displaced; untold tens of thousands detained or missing; large parts of the Syrian territory fragmented between different actors; confrontations between states on multiple axes; a resurgent ISIL stepping up its guerrilla attacks; and not yet the launch of a real political process.
2. These dynamics can and must change. Let me highlight the dangers before us, but also the prospects for launching the political track. And let me underline the importance of the support of this Council if we are to begin to shift the dynamics now.

Madame President,

3. Let me highlight five major immediate concerns regarding the situation on the ground.
4. *Let me start with the situation in the North-West.* Despite an attempted Russian-Turkish reinstatement of the ceasefire announced in early August, hostilities in and around Idlib quickly resumed. A major Government offensive retook the southern tip of the de-escalation area. Pro-government airstrikes, shelling, rockets and mortars continue. More civilians have been killed, as Mark just highlighted. Many more have fled their homes. More health facilities and other civilian infrastructure have been hit – even markets, schools, IDP camps, and water stations. Towns have been almost entirely depopulated as civilians, including women and children, flee shelling and are stranded without shelter, food or water.
5. Turkey reports that one of its military convoys into Idlib faced aerial attacks. Meanwhile, its observation post in Morek has been encircled by pro-government forces– a reminder that the situation risks sparking international conflict.
6. Presidents Putin and Erdogan met on Tuesday, 27 August, and indicated that they had reached common understandings on how to stabilize the situation based on the September 2018 memorandum of understanding. We can only welcome this high-level diplomacy and these statements and hope that it will bring calm to Idlib. But let me express the gravest concern that the violence is, so far, not abating.

Madame President,

7. No one pretends that there is any easy solution to the challenge of countering Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – as well as groups such as Hurras al-Din and foreign terrorist fighters. Their attacks must cease. But counter-terrorism cannot put 3 million civilians at risk who have the right to protection, under international human rights and humanitarian law. The actions that are killing and displacing them must stop now. The situation in Idlib needs a predominantly political solution.
8. *Let me turn to the situation in the North-East.* Tensions flared in July with troop concentrations on the Turkish side of the border. Advances in US-Turkish talks in August helped avert conflict, and we are closely following developments as first steps appear to be taken to implement these interim understandings. But a concrete political settlement is needed, as the Secretary-General has said, that respects Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity; that takes into account legitimate Turkish security concerns; and provides for the well-being of the diverse Syrian population in that area and that their voices are heard.
9. *Third, Israeli-Iranian tensions.* Israel confirmed that it conducted airstrikes on the outskirts of Damascus on 24 August. Israel said its aim was to pre-empt drone attacks staged from Syrian soil which it stated were being planned by Iranian Quds Force operatives and Shiite militias in Syria. Syrian state media said that Syrian air defense systems had intercepted hostile rockets before they reached their targets. Hizbullah has said that two of its fighters were killed in the strikes and has threatened to retaliate from Lebanon. These escalatory actions are extremely worrying. I urge all parties to respect the sovereignty of Syria and indeed of all states in the area, by refraining from attacks and provocations and showing maximum restraint, both in action and in rhetoric.
10. *Fourth, in south-west Syria* reports of detentions, demonstrations, disappearances and assassinations are a source of serious concern. Mark just highlighted the challenges in Rukban and Al Hol, and I have nothing to add to that.
11. *Fifth, let us remember that Syrian families face many-pronged dangers* – of violent conflict, terrorism, displacement, conscription, arbitrary detention, torture, separation, gender-based violence and a myriad of other protection issues. Syrians also face unprecedented levels of poverty, economic shortcomings, and a sense of hopelessness. And millions of Syrian refugees continue to see obstacles to safe, dignified and voluntary return.

Madame President,

12. It should be clearer than ever that there is no military solution for Syria. A nationwide ceasefire, stipulated in resolution 2254, has never been more relevant and necessary – including as a matter of international peace and security. And it is clear that only a political process and ultimately a political solution can restore Syria's sovereignty, protect the rights and future of all Syrians, and begin to address the deep divisions within Syrian society.

Madame President,

13. That is why, even amid the fighting, I have spared no effort in discharging my mandate to facilitate intra-Syrian negotiations that sets a process to develop a new constitution, pursuant to which free and fair elections under UN supervision shall take place, in line with resolution 2254. I have been carefully consulting the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission, in order to establish a solid agreement on a credible, balanced and inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee convened under UN auspices in Geneva that can serve as a door-opener to a broader political process. I thank both the government and the opposition for the substantive and open dialogue each is having with the UN. Throughout, it has been clear that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. That said, there is a strong understanding on two equal co-chairs - one nominated by the government and the other by the opposition; on UN facilitation through my good offices, on a 75% voting threshold while striving for consensus; and on a large body of 150 members and small body of 45 members; and on a clear commitment to guaranteeing the safety and security of the committee members and their relatives.
14. In early July, I held productive talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and with the leadership of the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission on all remaining details of a package to resolve outstanding names and agree terms of reference and core rules of procedure.

Madame President,

15. The package is nearly finalized, and the outstanding differences are, in my assessment, comparatively minor. I am convinced we can conclude negotiations and am in contact with both the opposition and the government. I have also conveyed my readiness to return to Damascus in the very near future as part of completing the work. I am quietly hopeful that the UN will be in a position to announce an agreement before the start of the General Assembly.
16. The governments of Russia and Turkey have been of particular assistance and are fully supporting the UN leadership of the negotiation process on the constitutional committee. I will be visiting Iran shortly, and look forward to its continued support. I have no doubt that a Summit of the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran planned for mid-September can contribute to the effort underway.
17. I appreciate the strong support provided by the United States and several European and Arab countries for the overall UN effort, and the active support of the European Union. I look forward to visiting and having consultations in Washington later this week. I continue to strongly urge the United States and the Russian Federation to deepen their own direct dialogue building on the efforts they have made during this year.

Madame President,

18. In recent months, I have heard some Syrians react with scorn at the notion of progress on the constitutional committee in Geneva while violence surges and no progress is made on other files. I have found the insights from a broad range of Syrian civil society and Syrian women,

including via our Civil Society Support Room and Women's Advisory Board, to be extremely important in this regard. They reveal an underlying reality. A viable process cannot just be about meetings in Geneva. It needs to address real-life problems for Syrians, from the outset. To be a meaningful door opener, to be the moment that turns the page towards a new Syria, a constitutional committee's launch should be accompanied by measures that have real impact on the ground.

19. Real action on detainees, abductees and missing persons could be such a measure – if done in a meaningful way and at meaningful scale. During the reporting period, a fourth simultaneous release operation took place under the umbrella of the Iran-Russia-Turkey-UN Working Group. I am pleased that, due to the UN's strong insistence, there was clear progress in terms of respect for basic provisions of international humanitarian law. For the first time the International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed to act as a neutral intermediary – and members of my team observed the operation too.
20. But this and all other release operations to-date have been vastly insufficient in scale. In line with resolution 2254, all sides should engage in unilateral releases and move beyond “one for one” exchanges – and I believe women, children, the sick and the elderly must be released at scale. The Government and the opposition must collect, protect and manage information they have of individuals they hold or have information on – and also who they seek. Here again, an internationally recognized neutral intermediary, such as the ICRC, could play a key role in supporting all sides, including families, with the compilation of information on detained and missing persons, in keeping this information safe, and handling it confidentially. With ICRC's support, my team has developed procedures for conducting searches for missing persons in Syria in line with international humanitarian law and in the true spirit of resolution 2474 unanimously adopted by this Council in June. These procedures will be put on the agenda of the next Working Group meeting. My invitation for that meeting to take place in Geneva as part of the Working Group's rotating consultations stands.

Madame President,

21. International players have the responsibility to deepen their dialogue too, and to support the UN-facilitated process as we work directly with the Syrian parties. I have no doubt that the Astana format and the Small Group format will continue, and the UN takes a practical approach to working with such important groupings. But the time has come to bring together the will embodied in both of those formats, and in the permanent membership of this Council, in a very practical way – a group of key players, in a common forum in Geneva, supporting a Syrian-led and -owned process facilitated by the United Nations in the discharge of its mandate from this Council. If the Syrians are to overcome their mistrust and division and move step-by-step along a path to heal Syrian society and restore Syria's place in the international community, a common international support format for Geneva will be absolutely key. I ask for this Council's support in making this happen.

Madame President,

22. I am deeply conscious of the profound grief and suffering of the Syrian people everywhere and of the need to end this conflict for the sake of Syria, the Syrian people, the region and the world. We are entering a crucial month for the parties to engage with the UN in finalizing the constitutional committee and key international players to stabilize Idlib, the North-East, and regional tensions, and come together behind the UN effort. That could enable the UN to convene a constitutional committee, accompanied by first steps to overcome deep mistrust, build confidence, and offer some hope after a long period of darkness. This will not be easy, but this is the one path towards a better future for Syria and a step-by-step implementation of Security Council resolution 2254.

Thank you.