

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

Mr. President,

It is an honour to brief the Security Council for the first time as the Special Envoy for Syria, some eight weeks into my mandate.

I have taken up this task with all humility, and conscious of the profound grief and suffering of the Syrian people everywhere. I am conscious of the need to end this conflict for the sake of Syria, the region and the world. I know you all understand the scale and difficulty of my task. It is not for the lack of talent that my predecessors did not achieve more. And it will of course not be possible to satisfy every party on every issue.

But I can promise you that I will work impartially and diligently to discharge the mandate given to me in Security Council resolution 2254, to facilitate the political process. To do that will require the cooperation of all Syrian and international parties. It will require the readiness of all to deal seriously with the realities of the conflict and to work together to move things step by step in a positive direction.

Mr President,

In my initial engagements, I have reminded all parties that resolution 2254 contains all the elements required for a political solution. The resolution begins by respecting the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and provides a roadmap for a truly Syrian-led and owned political process. And this is a key, because I am convinced that a real peace process in Syria needs to be owned by the Syrians – including over half the population, Syrian women - for it to be sustainable.

Resolution 2254 demands compliance with international law, stresses protection of civilians and unfettered humanitarian access, cessation of hostilities, addressing terrorism, implementing confidence-building measures, and releasing detainees and abductees. All of these are vital if we are to see Syrians moving out of conflict. It further addresses the issues of governance, the constitutional process and UN supervised elections. These are the means by which the Syrians, and no one else, should determine their future. It speaks of safe and voluntary refugee returns and of reconstruction— issues that present themselves on a major scale and require serious discussion. In short: resolution 2254 takes a comprehensive view on the issues that need to be addressed to end the conflict and bring stability and genuine peace.

Mr. President,

My first and most important priority has been to engage the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission and seek their views and cooperation.

In Damascus, I was received very well by Foreign Minister Moallem. He responded positively to my core message. He expressed interest in the success of my mission and he welcomed my intention to return. Last week, Deputy Special Envoy Ramzy returned to Damascus and held good discussions with Deputy Foreign Minister Miqdad, reaffirming an agreement to sustained dialogue on peace in Syria, on the basis of resolution 2254, with the aim of building confidence and towards a Syrian-led and -owned and UN-facilitated political process.

I visited the Syrian Negotiations Commission at their office in Riyadh and met with all components led by Coordinator Nasser Hariri. I appreciated very much their positive response to my message and their commitment to engage and seek dialogue and negotiation to implement resolution 2254. My senior advisers had follow-up discussions a few days ago with them. They affirmed their readiness for a sustained dialogue on the basis of resolution 2254 towards a Syrian-led and -owned and UN facilitated political process.

I have also appreciated the frank, practical and constructive engagements with all international stakeholders, including visits to Moscow, Cairo, Ankara, Tehran, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, and meetings with senior officials of key countries in Geneva, at Davos, and recently in Munich. I will be in Washington on Tuesday and other capitals in due course - including London, Beirut, Amman and Beijing.

Mr. President,

I have recalled to all my interlocutors, and I remind you, that we are not starting from scratch – we have 12 living principles developed by the Syrians in Geneva and affirmed in Sochi; we have baskets that have formed an agreed agenda for intra-Syrian talks under UN facilitation. But beyond that, let me share five core thoughts with you on the way ahead.

First: it is essential for me as the UN mediator and facilitator to have direct and effective engagement with the Government of Syria, and of course with the opposition. This is needed to build confidence and trust and to develop sustained dialogue with the parties. It is needed to bring the Syrians to real negotiations under UN auspices to end the devastating conflict in the country and make a new beginning so that Syrians can together “win the peace” – a peace for all Syrians. I welcome the readiness of the parties to engage with me in this regard. And I look forward to returning to Damascus in a few weeks and to seeing the Syrian Negotiations Commission again after that.

It is not for me here to prejudge what can be built in a deeper dialogue. But I believe there is a shared sense that battlefield developments might be winding down. Nevertheless, the conflict is far from over. And the challenges of winning the peace are staggering in scale and complexity.

Large tracts of territory remain outside of government hands. ISIL is nearly defeated territorially but experience suggests it can reemerge. Syrians yearn to see the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons meaningfully addressed.

Around half of Syria’s pre-war population have been displaced, you know the figures: 5.6 million refugees, 6.6 million IDPs and 80% of Syrians are living below the poverty line and half are unemployed. 11.7 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance.

I was pleased that, with the engagement of the US and Russian co-chairs of the ISSG and the facilitation of the Syrian government, we recently saw the largest single humanitarian convoy of the conflict reach 40,000 IDPs in to Rukban.

Let me emphasise, Mr President, that the UN stands ready to support a durable solution for the people of Rukban, one that abides by core protection standards, that must be coordinated with all relevant parties.

Socio-economic challenges are acute, with major challenges in service delivery, including gas shortages.

Mr. President,

After 8 years of war, Syrian society has undergone a profound transformation that has also dramatically impacted Syrian women. Many have assumed new responsibilities as the primary breadwinners of their families. Others have faced increased forms of violence specifically targeting women. Syrians – men, women and children - are suffering enormously.

Part of my mandate is to try and find ways to address this issue. Syria remains volatile for those who remain inside Syria and for those who wish to return.

My second point: Let me observe here that I was encouraged by the recent release of 42 detainees/abductees. This was the second release operation conducted by the Russian Federation and Turkey within the framework of the working group on detainees, abductees and missing persons. At the same time, we need to scale up and prioritize action on this issue which is of immense humanitarian importance and is also an essential part of building confidence. We are intensively engaging on this issue with the parties, and in key capitals. We are eager to see more meaningful progress to be unlocked in the period ahead, and we are in concrete discussions on how to attempt to do this.

My third point: Beyond the formal parties, the full spectrum of the Syrian people need to be engaged and involved in the effort to build confidence and trust, and search for peace. Engaging Syrians from different walks of life reminds me of what is at stake for civilians in this conflict. It reminds me of Syrians' resilience in responding to the overwhelming needs generated by this conflict, and of their stake in the political process.

Over the past two months, my team has conducted consultations with more than 200 Syrian civil society actors from inside Syria and the diaspora. I have been carefully studying the insights and reflections of these Syrians, to inform my thinking and I remain committed to ensuring that a broad spectrum of Syrian civic actors are heard and included in our efforts to promote sustainable peace.

Mr. President,

Next week, the Women's Advisory Board will be in Geneva. They have already been in touch to convey that there will be no sustainable peace in Syria unless all Syrians are included in shaping the future of the country. I look forward to hearing their views on how to advance the women's rights agenda and strengthen the meaningful participation of women in the political process.

This brings me to my fourth point: As I deepen the dialogue with the parties, I sense a wide acceptance of the notion that convening a credible, balanced, inclusive and viable Syrian-led and -owned Constitutional Committee, under UN auspices in Geneva, can be important to revitalize the political process. It can be a door opener to a deeper dialogue and genuine negotiations.

I also believe it is now well understood that a package of understandings is needed to ensure that the Syrian Government and opposition are on board on essential principles of procedure to guide the work of a constitutional committee. It is my hope that we can finalize the rules of procedure and the composition of the committee in the near future. I will do everything possible to facilitate a credible composition including a minimum 30% female representation.

Mr. President,

As we focus on developing a real Syrian-led process, we of course all acknowledge that external intervention has been a significant factor in the conflict. Five international armies operate across Syria's land and airspace, in tension or even conflict, generating daily risks for international escalation. The involvement of course extends beyond the military sphere to a range of other spheres as well. So this brings me to my fifth point: that I will focus on improving international dialogue and cooperation.

Some challenges must be addressed urgently or else Syria will be engulfed in renewed escalations – escalations that would have immense human costs, derail any progress on the political front, and risk regional spill over. Intensive diplomacy is underway. But even more is needed regarding the future situation in the north-east.

There, I believe a way forward is needed that, to paraphrase the Secretary-General, ensures the unity and territorial integrity of Syria and takes into account the security concerns of neighbouring States, while recognizing and giving voice to different components of Syria's population. Likewise, HTS advances in Idlib and escalations in the area underscore the need to uphold the fragile ceasefire arrangement for Idlib, to protect the civilians, and also counter the Security-Council listed terrorist groups and foreign fighters that have been such a scourge on Syria, while also addressing the root causes and conditions in which they thrive. I welcome the recent Sochi summit's fresh impetus to fully implement the Idlib memorandum. And I urge this to be a continued focus in the lead-up to the next Astana meeting. Meanwhile, the international community must ensure that the international norms against the use of chemical weapons are indeed respected and enforced. On another note, I would add that the growing risk of further confrontations between Israel and Iran in Syria and that this should not be overlooked.

Mr. President,

Beyond crisis management, I note well that key international players express emphatic support for a political settlement for Syria under UN auspices and affirm resolution 2254. They agree on the need to counter Security-Council-listed groups and the need for peace and stability. They support a political settlement that meets the legitimate aspiration of the Syrian people and preserve Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. They share an appreciation of the realities of 2019 and that real diplomacy is needed to address them. At present different formats of discussion make contributions. And the United Nations has engaged judiciously with

all who seek to help. But I believe there are real possibilities for strengthening international support and I believe we need to be creative in this regard. I will be working hard in this direction. If we are to see how issues can be unblocked and how to help the parties move in a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process, a common forum where key states engage seriously on these issues may be needed.

Mr President,

Let me conclude: my engagements with all parties, without exception, have been positive and forward-looking. But, of course, as we go deeper into the issues, the parties' willingness to move from good words to real talks will be put to the test. I will engage all in good faith with five goals in the period ahead:

First: To begin and deepen a sustained dialogue with the Syrian government and the opposition on building trust and confidence towards a safe, calm and neutral environment;

Second: To see a more concrete action on detainees, abductees and missing persons through engagement with the Astana players and the Syrian parties and all concerned;

Third: To engage a wide range of Syrians as I proceed and to involve them in the process;

Fourth: To convene a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee as soon as possible;

Fifth: To help the international parties deepen their own dialogue towards the common purpose of a credible and sustainable political settlement of the Syrian conflict that can enjoy international legitimacy.

Mr. President,

If you allow me - one final thought: Syrians have every capacity to live together in peace and a political settlement is plainly needed if we are to see real and genuine reconciliation. There is no military solution and the true victors will be those who can move beyond slogans and paint a hopeful picture of what Syria could look like in ten years – a picture that all Syrians can support, even if the road towards it will be long and hard.

Mr President,

I've spent much of my career working with problems that seem totally intractable, dynamics that seemed eternally fixed. But I know, first hand, that history can bend in directions that nobody anticipated.

Thank you.