


Syria: Briefing and Consultations on Political and Humanitarian Developments

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What's In Blue

Posted Tue 26 Oct 2021

Tomorrow (27 October), the Security Council will hold a briefing, followed by consultations, on the political and humanitarian situations in [Syria](#). Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen is expected to brief via videoconference (VTC), while Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths will brief the Council in person. A Syrian civil society representative may also brief.

Political Briefing

Pedersen is likely to describe his efforts to reinvigorate the political process, while focusing his briefing on the work of the Constitutional Committee. The committee convened in person for its sixth round of meetings from 18 to 22 October in Geneva, following a nearly nine-month hiatus. The meetings were of the committee's Small Drafting Body, which comprises 45 representatives from Syria's government, opposition groups and civil society and is tasked with drafting constitutional proposals. Over the course of the week the participants discussed four agenda items: governance and political transition, constitution, elections and counterterrorism. It seems that participants discussed these issues in a more substantive manner than they had in previous meetings of the committee.

At the conclusion of the committee's sixth round of talks on 22 October, however, Pedersen told reporters that while there had been both positive and negative developments throughout the week, the final day was a "big disappointment". Despite assurances prior to the sixth round of meetings that the parties would begin both the drafting phase of the process and establish a timeframe for the next rounds of discussion, the government apparently did not wish to engage with the texts proposed by the opposition and dates were not set for future meetings.

Pedersen may provide an assessment of the meetings—including why he felt that the sixth round fell short of expectations—and explain the main sources of contention between the parties. He told reporters on 22 October that during the talks, trust had been built between the government and opposition on some areas, while adding that he would "not [be] the one to conclude [the process] on the [parties'] behalf". Council members might be interested in hearing what steps Pedersen anticipates taking to move the process forward, including whether he intends to undertake further outreach with the parties and international actors in the coming weeks.

Some Council members have argued that the Council should not put undue pressure on the Constitutional Committee, maintaining that the committee's work should proceed according to its own pace without outside influence. However, other Council members are likely to raise concerns that the committee has met only twice in 2021 and express apprehension about the halting progress on the political track and on the implementation of [resolution 2254](#). (Resolution 2254, which was unanimously adopted in 2015, calls for a “Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition” and includes calls for a new constitution and free and fair elections to be administered under UN supervision.)

Analysts have suggested that recent growing ties between the government in Damascus and Arab countries may cause the former to demonstrate less commitment to the political track. In recent months, Bahrain, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, have moved towards improving diplomatic and economic relations with the government in Damascus. In addition, there are indications that Egypt has made overtures regarding the easing of relations that have been significantly strained since the beginning of the conflict in Syria.

The security situation in Syria is another likely focus of tomorrow's meeting. Pedersen may note that security conditions appear to be worsening and express concern regarding the uptick in violence in several parts of Syria. Pedersen and several Council members are likely to condemn the violent incidents that took place on 20 October, including the bombing in Damascus of a bus that was reportedly carrying Syrian military personnel, which resulted in at least 14 deaths. Later that day, Syrian government forces shelled a residential district in the north-western town of Ariha—which is located south of Idlib—reportedly killing 11 civilians, including four children. Pedersen may also reference the recent spate of violence involving Turkish forces and Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria, mainly near the town of Tal Rifaat, north of Aleppo. He is likely to repeat his call for a nationwide ceasefire, which he has argued would both ameliorate the conditions for civilians who are affected by fighting and could also help create space for confidence-building on the political track.

Humanitarian Briefing

Griffiths is likely to echo Pedersen's concern about the recent uptick in violence, particularly in the country's north-west, and emphasise its harmful effects on the civilian population. He is also expected to update the Council on the impact of Syria's economic crisis on the humanitarian situation. According to a joint statement issued by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP) and OCHA on World Food Day (16 October), the decade-long conflict and the more recent economic crisis have caused 12 million Syrians to face food insecurity, with another 1.8 million people at risk of “sliding into hunger”. Griffiths may tell the Council that humanitarian needs remain high and are likely to increase as winter approaches.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the humanitarian situation are another expected topic of discussion at tomorrow's meeting. Griffiths may warn that the rapid spread of COVID-19 is hampering health care facilities' ability to provide adequate services. He is likely to echo the Secretary-General's latest 60-day [report](#) on the

humanitarian situation in Syria, dated 21 October, which notes that COVID-19 transmission rates “remained high and likely far beyond official records”, with inadequate testing capacity and protective and medical equipment. While the entire country is affected by the negative consequences of the pandemic, the north-west—which already suffers from poor healthcare access and where only 1.6 percent of the population is vaccinated—appears to be particularly hard hit.

The water situation in some parts of Syria is also a cause for concern. Griffiths is likely to describe the ongoing drought and unusually high temperatures, which have caused unprecedentedly diminished water levels in the Euphrates River. The Euphrates provides drinking water to more than five million people in north-east Syria, while dams on the river provide electricity to some three million people. Low water levels have contributed to power outages, reduced access to clean drinking water, loss of crops, and an increase in water-borne diseases.

Finally, Council members are likely to be interested in hearing updates on the current status of humanitarian access in Syria. According to the Secretary-General’s 21 October report, from mid-August to mid-October, 470 trucks carrying humanitarian aid entered Syria through the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkish-Syrian border. In addition, Griffiths is expected to update the Council on progress in facilitating cross-line delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria. During his last Council briefing on 15 September, Griffiths informed members of WFP’s 30 August cross-line shipment from government-controlled territory in Aleppo into opposition-held territory in north-west Syria. The 30 August delivery was the first cross-line delivery in Syria since 2017. Griffiths may also note that between January and September, 1,575 trucks— an average of 175 a month – made cross-line deliveries of humanitarian assistance into Syria’s north-east.

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