

Syria Political Briefing

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What's In Blue

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On Monday (30 September), Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen will brief the Security Council on the political situation in Syria. While members are expected to make statements in the open chamber following Pedersen's briefing, closed consultations are scheduled to follow the briefing.

On 23 September, Secretary-General António Guterres announced that the Syrian government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission had agreed to form "a credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee that will be facilitated by the UN in Geneva". The briefing and interventions from Council members are expected to focus considerable attention on the launch of the Committee, with Pedersen and several members likely to welcome the formation of the Committee. Pedersen may reiterate some of the points he made in his 29 August Council briefing ([S/PV.8609](#)) regarding the structure and guidelines of the Committee: among other things, the Committee will consist of 150 members with two equal co-chairs (one nominated by the government, the other by the opposition); it will have a 75 percent voting threshold, although consensus is desired; and the safety and security of its members and their relatives must be guaranteed.

Pedersen will probably brief further on the Committee's rules of procedure and terms of reference. These issues were addressed in a letter forwarded to Council members this morning by the Secretariat ([S/2019/775](#)). Members might want to know how lessons learned, and best practices from successful constitution-drafting processes have informed the development of the terms of reference. They will probably also want to know when the Committee will begin its work, Pedersen's plans for facilitating this work, and whether there will be a timeline for its activities. There may also be interest in knowing the percentage of women in the Committee; when he briefed the Council for the first time as Special Envoy on 28 February, Pedersen said that he would "do everything possible to facilitate its [the Committee's] credible composition, including a minimum 30 per cent female representation" ([S/PV.8475](#)).

The Special Envoy may emphasise that the formation of the Constitutional Committee is only the start of a broader political process leading to free and fair elections. He may further note that while [resolution 2254](#) describes a constitutional process and UN-supervised elections, it also focuses on other issues that need to be addressed for Syria to have peaceful future, including, among other things, unfettered humanitarian access, a cessation of hostilities, the voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the threat of terrorism.

While recognising the Committee's establishment as a positive step, a number of members may underscore that this body needs to work effectively and efficiently, free of undue pressure. These members may express the view that the end result of the political process should be a Syria that allows for genuine political participation and respects human rights. In this respect, on 26 September the foreign ministers of the Small Group on Syria—which consists of Council members France, Germany, the UK and the US, and non-Council members Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia—issued a joint statement in which they supported Pedersen's "efforts to implement all of Resolution 2254, including the meaningful involvement of all Syrians, especially women, in the political process." Among other things, the statement also calls for "free, fair and credible elections, under UN supervision, in which internally displaced persons, refugees and the diaspora must be able to participate" in a safe environment; and accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law as part of a sustainable, peaceful solution to the conflict.

While there will most likely be widespread affirmations that only a political solution to the conflict can succeed, Russia may underscore the threat of terrorism in Syria and say that it is supporting the Syrian government in combatting this threat. It may emphasise that the presence of foreign armed groups in Syria remains an impediment to the political process. Russia may express the determination of the Astana guarantors (Iran, Russia and Turkey) to support the work of the Constitutional Committee and to help convene its first meeting in Geneva, as outlined in a joint statement by the foreign ministers of the three guarantor countries on 24 September in New York.

Pedersen may underline that trust must be developed among the parties in Syria for a successful political process to gain traction. He and some members may further emphasise the importance of providing humanitarian assistance to those in need and of creating necessary conditions for the safe and voluntary return of internally displaced persons and refugees.

There is also likely to be some discussion of the release of detainees, abductees and missing persons by the parties as a confidence-building measure. Pedersen has said that meaningful action on detainees, abductees and missing persons—such as "unilateral releases [that] move beyond one-for-one exchanges", as he noted in his 29 August Council briefing—would help open up space for the political process. In this regard, members may be interested in any recent developments in the working group on this issue—which is composed of Iran, Russia, Turkey and the UN, with the International Committee of the Red Cross as an observer—as well as any signs that the Syrian parties are amenable to larger scale releases. On 7 August, at the request of the US, supported by eight other Council members, the Council held a meeting solely focused on the situation of detainees, abductees and missing persons in Syria for the first time since the beginning of the conflict (S/PV.8593). At the meeting, the Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, acknowledged that, although the UN was not able to verify the numbers, reports suggest that more than 100,000 people had so far been detained, abducted, disappeared or gone missing, largely but not only through the actions of the Syrian government.

Monday's meeting will represent the first Council meeting on Syria since 19 September, when the Council voted on competing draft resolutions aimed at a ceasefire in Idlib: one draft produced by the humanitarian penholders on Syria (Belgium, Germany and Kuwait) that Council members had been negotiating since late August, and a second draft, produced by China and Russia, focusing largely on counter-terrorism issues, that was put in blue earlier in the day without prior negotiations among the full Council. China and Russia vetoed the Belgium/Germany/Kuwait draft, while 12 members voted in favour and Equatorial Guinea abstained. China and Russia were the only members to vote for their own draft; nine members voted against it, and four (Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Indonesia, and South Africa) abstained.

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