

Syria Political Briefing

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What's In Blue

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Tomorrow (19 December) Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen is expected to brief the Security Council on political developments related to Syria. Consultations are scheduled to follow.

The work of the Constitutional Committee is expected to be addressed in the meeting. The Committee reconvened in Geneva between 25-29 November 2019 for the second round of discussions; there was no progress, as the co-chairs from the government side and the opposition side were unable to agree on an agenda for the meeting. The government side wanted to discuss “national constants” such as terrorism and sanctions relief prior to discussing constitutional matters. The opposition maintained that these issues could be addressed but not outside the context of the constitution. The third round of negotiations has yet to be scheduled.

Members are expected to welcome the work of the Special Envoy, including his efforts as facilitator of the Constitutional Committee. Some members might emphasise the need for the parties to engage earnestly in the Committee’s work, given the inability to agree on an agenda for the second round. There are already signs that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is distancing himself from the Constitutional Committee, a point made by Ambassador Christoph Heusgen (Germany) during the 22 November Council meeting on Syria (S/PV.8674). In this respect, in a 31 October television interview, al-Assad said that while the pro-government group of the Constitutional Committee “represents the viewpoint of the Syrian government...the Syrian government is not part of these negotiations nor of these discussions”. Similarly, the Syrian Arab News Agency, which is associated with the government’s Ministry of Information, has described the government side in the Constitutional Committee as the “Syrian Government-backed delegation”, suggesting that the delegation in Geneva has the government’s support but does not represent it.

Council members in general recognise the Constitutional Committee as the start of a broader political process that needs to be accompanied by other measures, if Syria is to have a positive future: among other things, these include a cessation of hostilities; unfettered humanitarian access; the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees; and an environment free of fear and intimidation. Some Council members are concerned that there is no timeframe for the Committee’s work; in contrast, at the 22 November Council meeting, Russia said that “the imposition of artificial time frames” for its work was unacceptable.

Pedersen may also provide his views on the 14th round of talks as a part of the Astana process. On 10-11 December 2019, representatives of the Astana guarantors—Iran, Russia and Turkey—convened in Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), Kazakhstan, for talks on

developments in Idlib and the constitutional committee, among other issues.

Representatives of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and the UN observed the meeting. The Astana guarantors issued a joint communiqué at the end of the meeting in which, among other things, they reaffirmed their “strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity” of Syria; “expressed their opposition to the illegal seizure and transfer of oil revenues that should belong” to Syria; welcomed the “signing of the Memorandum of 22 October 2019 [between Turkey and Russia] on stabilization in north-east Syria”; expressed “readiness to support the work of the [constitutional] committee”; and highlighted “the need to facilitate safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their original places of residence in Syria, ensuring their right of return and right to be supported”.

Pedersen and Council members may emphasise the importance of confidence-building measures as a means of energising the political process. In the past, the Special Envoy and several members have highlighted that large-scale releases of detainees and abductees could serve as an important step in this regard, and these views may be reiterated in tomorrow’s meeting. Members could also emphasise the sharing of information about missing persons as a way to build trust and confidence between the parties. In addition, they could highlight other potential confidence-building measures, including some of those outlined by the International Crisis Group’s 25 November 2019 report, “Ways Out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum”: the “establishment of a technical committee to launch a property restitution process;...amnesty for army deserters; [and] regular access to formal and informal detention centres to qualified international organisations”.

The Council had been scheduled to vote this afternoon on competing draft resolutions authorising cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access in Syria: the first produced by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait (the humanitarian co-penholders) and the second, an alternative Russian draft. (See our What’s in Blue story from yesterday). As it did not appear that either draft would have the necessary support to be adopted, efforts were made today to agree a compromise text that would be acceptable to Council members. This is expected to be voted on tomorrow following the briefing on political issues in Syria.

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