



Security Council

Seventy-third year

8434th meeting

Thursday, 20 December 2018, 10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mr. Adom (Côte d'Ivoire)

Members:

Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Zambrana Torrelio
China	Mr. Wu Haitao
Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbengono
Ethiopia	Mr. Amde
France	Mr. Delattre
Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
Poland	Mr. Lewicki
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
Sweden	Mr. Skoog
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Ms. Pierce
United States of America	Mr. Hunter

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I now give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura (*spoke in French*): I congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of your important role this month. Please allow me to say a few words. My statement will be a bit long because, as you know, this will be the last statement I shall make under my current mandate.

(spoke in English)

I thank you for this opportunity to deliver my monthly briefing for the final time under this mandate. I am circulating the full written statement to the Council. I pray the Council will forgive me for the length of this statement. It is longer than usual, but there is a reason for that.

I have served as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria for four years and four months—almost exactly the length of the First World War. The Syrian people have been enduring a conflict for seven and a half years—longer than the Second World War. This conflict has been and remains a tragedy for the Syrian people. It has been a dirty, brutal and horrific war. It has seen all the faultiness within Syria, the region and the world prevail over the will of the Syrian people, Syrian unity, regional stability and international cooperation. No effort— not mine nor that of the Council or of anyone else— has been able to completely stop the logic of war from prevailing. However, we hope that we are getting close to that point.

In spite of several ceasefires and some moments of real hope, the battlefield has all too often prevailed over peace talks. There have been constant shifts. Now is the time to look even more closely at the ultimate question: Will peace be won? We believe that it should and it can. Will it be sustainable? We believe that it can and it should be. That is why a real political process is required. The Security Council outlined the elements for the political process in resolution 2254 (2015). The Council exclusively mandated the United Nations to convene the parties, facilitate the political process and finalize participation, with full respect for Syria's sovereignty and the ability of the Syrian people to choose their own representatives, with the purpose of enabling the Syrian people to determine independently and democratically their own future— all while stressing the vital, parallel importance of a nationwide ceasefire.

With this mandate, I believe that we have made some difference. To be frank, it is not enough, but we have made some difference— together. We have saved lives with some ceasefires and de-escalations; albeit limited in scope and in time, they did save lives. We stimulated humanitarian access to places that were not getting it, although nowhere near what civilians desperately needed and asked for.

We have convened the Government and the opposition and assisted in the process of uniting the opposition, although we must admit that we have not yet had the parties really recognize each other as interlocutors with whom they must do business and actually negotiate, let alone reach agreements. We have elaborated with the parties key principles for a common future and settlement, but we have not yet turned these into real mechanisms for implementation. We have identified a clear agenda accepted by the parties that would facilitate negotiation, but we have not yet been able to tap into its potential.

We have with determination promoted the involvement of Syrian women in the search for a peaceful settlement to the crisis. They know what their country is facing; they constitute more than half of the population, even though their participation is constantly challenged. We have with equal determination promoted the meaningful inclusion and substantive participation of civil society; but this, too, is constantly challenged.

We have nearly completed the work of putting in place a constitutional committee to draft a constitutional

reform, as a contribution to the political process, but there is an extra mile to go. We know what is needed for a safe, calm, neutral environment in Syria and for United Nations-supervised elections of the highest international standards pursuant to a new, reformed constitution, but we have not been able to begin the full work required to make that a reality.

I deeply regret what has not been achieved, and I am sorry that it has not been possible to do more. I think we in the Security Council should share in that regret. I know we do. However, we have identified and put in place some of the crucial foundation on which the future process can build. My successor has all the skills and ability to work out what combination of continuity and change is required. He was my successor in Lebanon. He did better than I did. He is a friend and someone we all respect. He has been tested and is someone that many Council members know. For that reason, I am very confident about what I am saying.

However, let us make no mistake, and here please allow me to pay deep respect to Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. As with my own predecessors and me, the success of my successor will depend on the Council's unity and determination to empower and support the United Nations and to pressure all parties to begin real dialogue, negotiate and compromise with a view to addressing the grievances of the Syrian people and implementing resolution 2254 (2015).

Following the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015), we did see serious attempts to put in place a ceasefire and to cooperate in countering terrorism, which is and will continue to be the priority of all of us because it has been threatening everyone in this Chamber and beyond. We also saw serious attempts to support the Geneva talks on a political transition via the International Syria Support Group. However, that promise has not yet been fulfilled. The unity here is not yet strong enough, and the forces that have been trying to complicate peacemaking have at times proven to be stronger.

By the start of 2017, in Astana Iran, Russia and Turkey committed to cooperating on de-escalation and confidence-building. Jordan, the United States and the Russian Federation began to work on de-escalation in the south-west later in the year. Although the results were mixed, but lives were saved. Sadly however, three of the four de-escalation arrangements that did stand came to an end. There were also lives lost. One of those areas — Idlib, where there are more than 3 million

civilians — did hold and is still holding and we all support that arrangement.

In the meantime, despite the establishment of a working group in December — which, we must recognize, is always better than nothing — results on detainees, abductees and missing persons fell short of hopes. It did, however, produce initial concrete, albeit modest movement recently. From the point of view of the Syrian people, however, it is unacceptable that tens of thousands languish in detention, remain unaccounted for amid fear, torture or death, or being unaccounted for.

We have never had a so-called nationwide ceasefire for any length of time or the real confidence-building that resolution 2254 (2015) envisaged, alongside the Geneva political talks. However, we did often get close. Despite that, the United Nations-facilitated Geneva talks identified a clear agenda of four baskets of issues based on resolution 2254 (2015). Members are very familiar with them, but we should recall them because we do not want to lose what has been achieved. Those baskets produced 12 Living Intra-Syrian Essential Principles, developed with the extensive input of the Government and the opposition and through consultation with a broad cross-section of civil society and Syrian women.

The 12 Principles are a foundation on which my successor can work. They provide a vision for the future of Syria that can be shared by all, as well as carefully crafted formulas on key issues that can be the basis for future work. Those issues include sovereignty and unity; governance and democracy; the separation of powers and human rights; religion and the State; decentralization; measures against terrorism; respect for all components of Syrian society; the full participation of women; the right of refugees to return to their homes and land and so on.

Logically, a Syrian-owned and Syria-led political process, facilitated by the United Nations, must ensure the genuine realization in practice, not only in words, of the Principles through agreements, mechanisms and concrete steps, guided by resolution 2254 (2015). As was recognized at the presidential level between the United States and the Russian Federation in Da Nang in November 2017, constitutional reform and United Nations-supervised elections in a safe and neutral environment open the way for the concrete implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

As I indicated a year and a day ago when I briefed the Security Council on 19 December 2017 (see S/PV.8142), the United Nations has identified, through baskets 2 and 3 of the Geneva process, 11 parameters — these are set out in the written briefing that I will circulate to members — for a constitution-making process and 6 insights on United Nations-supervised elections. In my assessment, those are broad commonalities that could guide the parties and that would, in any case, guide the United Nations and my successor as a facilitator.

By the end of 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran were preparing to convene a gathering of Syrians in Sochi. I attended the Sochi meeting on the guidance of the Secretary-General in the light of the understanding reached by the Secretary-General and myself in Vienna with diplomats of the Russian Federation that the Sochi meeting would make a contribution by enabling the United Nations to establish under its auspices in Geneva a key element in the architecture of the broader process that the realization of resolution 2254 (2015) requires.

The Sochi final statement, which the Russian Federation circulated to the Council in the Chamber as an official document, affirmed the 12 Principles as the basis for the political settlement. It called for the formation of a constitutional committee with the purpose of drafting constitutional reform as a contribution to the political settlement under the United Nations auspices, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). I underline the word “contribution”. The constitutional committee can thus be a key building block in a real political process — an important entry point so to say — but certainly not the only one. Syrians know that, and Council members and I know that.

In Sochi it was agreed that such a committee would at the very least comprise Government and opposition representatives in the intra-Syrian talks, Syrian experts, civil society, independents, tribal leaders and women; that care would be taken to ensure adequate representation of Syria’s ethnic and religious components; and that “final agreement” is to be reached in the United Nations-led Geneva process on the mandate and terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure and selection criteria for the composition of the constitutional committee. To that end, the Sochi final statement appealed “to the United Nations Secretary-General to assign the Special Envoy for Syria for the assistance of the constitutional committee work in Geneva”.

Russia and the United Nations clearly understood that the Special Envoy was to facilitate that process and enjoyed the prerogative of finalization in the formation of the constitutional committee. The Special Envoy would be able to identify members of that committee from a Sochi pool of candidates, as well as to draw on other people from outside that pool, if required, to ensure a credible and balanced committee. The United Nations facilitation of that process was the clear basis for moving forward.

Since the Sochi meeting, over the course of almost a year, I have been undertaking a marathon of consultations with Syrian and international stakeholders, in particular the conveners of the Sochi meeting, to enable the establishment of a Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, United Nations-facilitated, balanced, inclusive and credible constitutional committee in Geneva. I will not recount all the steps of that diplomacy. However, let me reiterate the key points so that we know where we stand before I pass the issue on to my successor.

The Government and the opposition have conveyed 50 names each and agreed not to question the 50 names of the other side. It was accepted that there should be 50 names on a middle third list, meeting the criteria of the Sochi final statement. It was accepted that that would therefore form a constitutional committee of 150 members. It was accepted that a drafting body of a maximum of 45 people would be identified, with 15 from each of the three groups. It was accepted that conducive chairing and decision-making arrangements needed to be clearly identified. It was affirmed that the constitutional committee would be convened under United Nations auspices in Geneva.

Five months ago, the United Nations put forward a consolidated proposed middle third list, based on credibility, balance and inclusivity, including aiming at an overall minimum of 30 per cent women on the constitutional committee. The opposition did not entirely like that list but agreed not to question it in the spirit of moving forward. The Government had strong objections to the list and indicated that it would work with the conveners of the Sochi meeting on a different list and that the United Nations should wait for that input.

On 27 October in Istanbul, the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey agreed that the end of December should be a target, considering the circumstances, for the establishment of the

constitutional committee. The Secretary-General tasked me, before moving on, to verify whether it was possible to establish a credible, balanced, inclusive, Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, United Nations-facilitated constitutional committee to draft a constitutional reform for popular approval and to fundamentally advance that objective.

To overcome the Government's concerns, while not losing the engagement of the opposition and maintaining the quality and legitimacy of the overall package, I indicated that the United Nations would be receptive to modest, credible and balanced proposals, while bearing in mind its mandate and responsibilities in the context of the need to finalize the package. We understand that it is a great responsibility for the United Nations because it is to exercise its mandate and it is expected not to accept any kind of diktat with regard to convening the constitutional committee or finalizing the package.

In recent weeks, diplomacy beyond the United Nations Secretariat has intensified, leading to a meeting that I hosted in Geneva on Tuesday with the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey. The Secretary-General was closely involved throughout. The three Foreign Ministers provided the United Nations with significant joint input regarding the constitutional committee. That significant joint input comprised 50 names, drawing partly on my own suggestions, as their proposal for the middle third list for the constitutional committee.

Having examined the names, the Secretariat assessed that it would not yet feel fully comfortable in giving the United Nations stamp of legitimacy to all 50 names as meeting the necessary criteria of credibility and balance; hence, at our suggestion, the need to go the extra mile. We have seen the loss of some experienced experts of excellent credentials, who would also have been natural bridge-builders. We know that no list will ever be perfect, but in our assessment the list needed a further review and some extra miles to be put in.

There is also a need to identify with greater precision the remainder of the package with the parties on board so that the constitutional committee — when it meets — can effectively function, delivering outcomes in line with its own mandate as a genuine instrument within a larger political process towards sustainable peace. In that respect, my consultations leave me

confident that it should be possible to agree on a 75-per cent voting threshold and balanced co-chairmanship arrangements. I should like to add, if I may, that regardless of who the co-chairs are, if one is from the Government then the other should be a member of the opposition, and one of them should be a woman, given that women represent some 51 to 55 per cent of the population.

My consultations also leave me confident that it is understood that the constitutional committee will draft a constitutional reform and that the United Nations will have the crucial role of accompanying and facilitating this Syrian-owned process. It is also crucial to identify how the smaller drafting body would be selected and begin to work. The parties therefore need to buy into those key details. Let us be frank. I know that we always tend to look at the glass as either half full or half empty, but there has been real progress made. We nearly have a list. The rules of procedure have become a little clearer, but we need to go that extra mile.

If a constitutional committee is established, it will of course be done with the blessing of the Security Council. That would have to happen in any case. It will be vital for the Council to support regular reviews of the progress of the committee's work and any adjustments required along the road in order to help a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led constitutional committee, in accordance with the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

The United Nations alone has the legitimacy and mandate to bless — at least at the initial stage — the constitutional committee, given the circumstances in Syria. That is the role that the Security Council can play. That must be accompanied by parallel efforts to ensure a full ceasefire, see detainees and abductees released at scale, build confidence, create a safe, calm and neutral environment with reforms of governance, and lay the ground for United Nations-supervised elections, as per resolution 2254 (2015).

In that regard, and contrary to the spirit of building mutual confidence, we have been very concerned at times by the recent and credible reports of some type of intimidation and coercion of persons reportedly on the list for the constitutional committee and their family members inside Syria. Those reports have become more frequent in recent days and, frankly, we consider that very worrisome. This is therefore a fundamental reminder of the need for concrete steps towards what we call a safe, calm and neutral environment. That

is also one of the things that refugees and internally displaced persons have been telling us in no uncertain terms. They want a safe and neutral environment.

People will consider returning when they feel safe; if their fundamental rights are protected; if they can reunite with their families in the areas they came from; if their property and other legal rights are preserved and institutions of the State protect such rights; and if basic social services are delivered without political prejudice or bias. The list of legitimate questions does not end here. All of those and other questions are key to the establishment of a calm, safe and neutral environment.

If we are able to start a constitutional committee, it will be a new test of political will. Will the Government engage seriously and show a willingness to address real grievances — grievances that have been present since the very origin of this horrible conflict? Will the opposition engage seriously and realistically, realizing that the process of change in Syria will not be an easy one, but that it also needs it to be pragmatic? I urge them both to do so. There is no other way out of the Syrian conflict.

Let me commend the voices of the Syrians beyond the Government and the opposition who are working for peace against all odds. Many of them participate in the Civil Society Support Room, which we created in partnership with Syrians who committed to the value of peace. Indeed, many are meeting with my team this week in regional capitals. I must therefore urge members of the Council, the international community and Syrian parties more broadly to listen to those voices, even when I am no longer there. They are important. They should be protected and involved meaningfully on the long and challenging road ahead. I salute those Syrian civilians and thank them for their efforts and willingness to engage with us and with the Council.

Let me also once again stress the crucial role of women in the Syrian political process. This is not lip service. I have seen them; they have had enormous influence. They were given a chance and can be given more chances to do so. I have done everything I could to promote this, both with the delegations and within civil society. I have also been assisted by the Women's Advisory Board, the membership of which has recently rotated and been renewed. The Women's Advisory Board is a model for what is possible when Syrians from different backgrounds come together to accompany the

mediation process. I can see that that has now also been replicated in the Yemen file.

Women in Syria have continued to remind me of what is possible and to plea for a process that is fully inclusive of all of Syrian society, with the full participation of women and everyone else. I have fought and will continue to fight to ensure at least 30 per cent representation of women in the constitutional committee. I hope to see that realized, which is why I have also put emphasis on the co-chairmanship.

This is the Security Council, so let me stress one point above all. The United Nations as a facilitator and mediator can create every sort of mediation process and every sort of dialogue — whether secret talks, backchannels, proximity talks, technical talks, working groups, direct talks, multi-party talks, constitutional committees, national dialogue and so on. I have sought to bridge international divides with ideas, messages, channels and meetings and by framing a way forward that all could sign on to in order to consistently support our mandate. I have also sought to speak publicly and clearly about the shocking violence and abuses against civilians, the need for humanitarian access and the need to counter terrorism, as well as the fundamental importance of respecting international humanitarian law. But that is no substitute for the genuine efforts of influential countries to talk to each other and work constructively within the Council and beyond in support of a United Nations process that is Syrian-led and Syrian-owned.

It is the Council — and the Council alone — that is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has mandated the United Nations to facilitate the intra-Syrian political process for the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). That is the only way to enable Syrians to determine their own future. And we need a renewed sense of common purpose and concerted action in the Council if 2019 is to be the real turning point for Syria.

In closing, I would like to thank our Secretary-General, António Guterres, for his trust, advice and encouragement, as well as my own team, which, over the past four and a half years, has worked tirelessly to keep the talks process alive and moving forward, albeit sometimes incrementally, but never giving up. I owe them an enormous gratitude. I am convinced that the tenacity and ingenuity of United Nations staff can

make a fundamental difference for Syria, and I wish my successor every success in his vital work.

It has been a real privilege and an honour to work with each and every member of the Council. In spite of the Council's own divisions, it has always had one line, which I have constantly felt. It has consistently supported our complex mission and me, and I want to thank it very warmly for that. And since that this is my last briefing to the Council in this capacity, let me to go beyond protocol, since members and I have actually developed individual friendships, and I have felt that.

So beyond just a formal greeting — since we were together and they have accompanied me during this journey, which has not been an easy one — I should like to warmly shake the hand of each one of my friends.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I should like to tell him how pleased and proud we are of the work that he has been able to achieve in Syria. The warm round of applause he has just received underlines the great interest we take in his work and our deep satisfaction with it. That round of applause is worth all of the speeches of thanks in the world. I ask him to accept that gratitude and that applause as a symbol of and testament to our sincere and warm gratitude.

I now give the floor to those members of the Security Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Hunter (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy De Mistura for his briefing. On behalf of the United States, I express our sincere gratitude to him for his four and a half years of service as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. We greatly appreciate the tireless effort that he has put into that work and his efforts to bring peace and stability to Syria. We wish him all the best. The United States also looks forward to maintaining a close and constructive relationship with his successor, Mr. Geir Pedersen, as he assumes his role as Special Envoy.

The United States remains committed to the permanent destruction of Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and other terrorist groups in Syria and around the world. As we have said, we will use all instruments of our national power to press for a withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces and, most importantly for today's meeting, the United States will continue to advance a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis in a

way that honours the will of the Syrian people and is consistent with resolution 2254 (2015). We will continue to work together with our allies to fight terrorism. The United States will also work with like-minded States, the United Nations and the Syrian opposition to seek a diplomatic end to this conflict. There is only one internationally agreed road map for achieving those goals. It is a political solution to the Syrian conflict, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). And the first step towards the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) is the creation of a new Syrian constitution.

In January, the Russian Federation, in close consultation with the United Nations, published the Sochi declaration. The declaration called for the creation of a constitutional committee in Geneva, led by the Special Envoy, as a contribution to reinvigorating United Nations efforts to implement resolution 2254 (2015), which had stalled from a lack of genuine participation by the Al-Assad regime. The Sochi declaration made it clear that the constitutional committee's 150-person membership would have equal representation among the regime, the Syrian opposition and independents, and that its scope of work, schedule and voting procedures would be determined by the Special Envoy. In no way was the Syrian regime to be given a veto over the membership or procedures of the committee. Russia agreed that the United Nations would have the authority to manage the committee in order to receive the imprimatur of legitimacy from and attention of the Council as a credible Russian contribution to peace in Syria.

For 11 months, Russia's so-called Sochi initiative has produced nothing but a stalemate. We are now just 11 days away from the end of the year and are rapidly approaching the Syrian regime's and Russia's last chance to follow through on that commitment. In recent months, the United States, members of the Council and the small group on Syria have worked tirelessly to support Special Envoy De Mistura's efforts to launch a credible and balanced constitutional committee. The Astana group has failed thus far to convince the Al-Assad regime to accept the United Nations balanced list of members for the constitutional committee, which would have allowed the committee to move forward. A committee that is not balanced or representative of the Syrian people, including the opposition, cannot be considered legitimate.

Progress towards a political solution to the conflict, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), is urgent, given

the situation in Idlib. Idlib's 3 million civilians have been able to live in relative peace, thanks to Russian and Turkish efforts to de-escalate the violence and keep pressure on the regime to not launch an offensive. However, there are increasing indications of a potential military escalation in Idlib, despite the fragile ceasefire held together by the Turkish-Russian creation of a demilitarized zone. Any military escalation in Idlib would be reckless and catastrophic for millions of people and for the stability of Syria's neighbours.

We are at a crossroads that will define the end of the Syrian conflict. If Russia and the regime do not help form a legitimate, credible and balanced constitutional committee before the end of the year, we should all place that failure squarely at their feet. The United States is ready, with our allies and partners in the small group, to focus on supporting United Nations-led efforts to reinvigorate a political process. We also would work to further isolate the regime diplomatically and economically. Let me be clear — there will be no reconstruction money. There will be no legitimacy for the regime. There will be no facilitation for returns of refugees. That will not be discussed or even considered until we get the political process moving. The United States remains firmly committed to the blueprint for a political solution to the Syrian conflict, agreed by resolution 2254 (2015), in order to achieve peace and stability in Syria. We look forward to working with the United Nations and with the incoming Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to create a permanent and peaceful end to the conflict.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I warmly thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Staffan De Mistura, for his particularly important briefing. More broadly, on behalf of France I would like to offer him our deep gratitude for his exemplary engagement and intensive and tireless efforts over the past four years to resolve one of the gravest crises of our times. His efforts will leave an indelible mark on the United Nations work on the Syrian conflict.

I would like to start by addressing the situation in north-eastern Syria, which requires our full attention today. The fight against terrorism is indeed a priority for France, in order to thoroughly eliminate Da'esh and counter any resurgence of terrorism in the region. Our assessment is that Da'esh continues to be a threat in the Levant and that that terrorist organization can continue to rely on smaller areas, particularly in Syria.

In that context, growing tensions on the ground could provide opportunities for terrorist groups. There is a very real risk of a new descent into violence and a resumption of large-scale atrocities. The north-east should not have to become yet another Syrian region on the long list of those that have had to deal with a humanitarian disaster. In the north-east — as in Idlib, where the situation is deteriorating — renewed hostilities would have dramatic consequences. With regard to Idlib, it is essential to sustainably maintain the cessation of hostilities, in line with the conclusions of the Istanbul summit. We therefore call upon Russia and Turkey to redouble their efforts and do everything possible to preserve the calm on the ground, as they committed themselves to doing.

We, alongside the partner States of the international coalition, are also in close contact with Washington regarding the timetable and conditions for the implementation of the decision to withdraw United States forces engaged against Da'esh in Syria, as was announced by the President of the United States. In the coming weeks, France will take care to ensure the security of all United States partners, including the Syrian Democratic Forces. It is important that the United States take into account the protection of the populations of north-east Syria and the stability of that area in order to avoid any new humanitarian tragedy or resurgence of terrorism. It is thanks to the action of the international coalition since 2014, and of the local forces — Iraqi on the one hand, Kurdish and Syrian Arabs on the other — that Da'esh has been weakened and has essentially lost its territorial gains. However, the fight is not over.

I would also like to return to the intense efforts deployed in recent weeks within the political sphere of the Syrian conflict. The past few weeks have seen exceptional diplomatic mobilization for the formation of a balanced and inclusive constitutional committee under the auspices of the United Nations. All of us around this table have called for the first meeting of the constitutional committee. The members of the small group also requested the same on the sidelines of the General Assembly, and Russia made a commitment to achieve that. On 27 October in Istanbul, the Heads of State and Government of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey set a clear and realistic goal: to hold a meeting of the committee before the end of year.

While we have achieved a united vision — which is a rare occurrence with regard to the Syrian file — to

move forward on the constitutional aspect of the political process, the latest discussions in Geneva have, unfortunately, not enabled us to reach a favourable outcome. Staffan de Mistura has worked tirelessly throughout this process, devoting every effort to establishing a balanced and inclusive constitutional committee, which is the first essential contribution to a legitimate and viable political process to settle the Syrian crisis.

The situation in which we find ourselves today is, without a doubt, due to the Syrian regime, which has never sought to show the slightest sign of commitment. We regret that Russia and Iran could not — or would not — convince the regime that it was in its interest, as well as that of the Syrian people. The Astana guarantors have, in recent days, proposed a poorly coordinated and unbalanced list of people whom they know to be unacceptable and jeopardize the credibility of the future committee. Throughout this process, these countries have been under the impression that it was up to them to determine the composition of the committee and that the United Nations would accept it without further discussion. What was presented in Geneva is clearly unacceptable and clearly considered as such.

If there is any hope of creating a credible constitutional committee, it is up to the regime and its supporters to prove this by the end of the year. We do not intend to close any doors on this matter. A credible committee requires cohesion among a number of parameters: a balanced and mutually agreed membership must be accepted by both parties in equal measure, not simply by the regime; it must not undermine the political process from the outset; there must be equally balanced rules of procedure, proposed by the United Nations; and the membership must be fully committed to the Geneva process, led by the United Nations.

While the United Nations has spent months redoubling its efforts in attempts to arrive at such an agreement, the refusal we have been met with will lead us — if this is confirmed — to explore all modalities of implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) upon the arrival of Geir Pedersen in January. That remains our only road map for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis. The constitutional dimension is but one aspect; any lasting political solution in Syria would require the introduction of several others, although it is clear that there has been little progress with regard to those other components.

To achieve this, we must reaffirm the centrality of United Nations mediation. Resolution 2254 (2015), unanimously adopted by the Council, must remain the framework for all our efforts. More than ever, that is the only common goal that should guide us. The only possible way out of the conflict is through a credible constitutional process and free and impartial elections, under the supervision of the United Nations, and ensuring the participation of all Syrians, whether inside or outside Syria's borders.

Resolution 2254 (2015) provides for the adoption of confidence-building measures, prioritizing the fate of detainees; protection against political persecution and arbitrary arrests; and guaranteeing the property rights of displaced persons. Those confidence-building measures will serve as the concrete actions needed to establish a safe and neutral environment where each and every Syrian citizen has a place. They are also necessary to establish the political conditions for the voluntary and safe return of refugees and displaced persons. Syria must rebuild itself politically to regain stability. It will also have to rebuild itself as a society; hence why the fight against impunity is unavoidable. The full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) will also mean achieving a lasting ceasefire and ensuring the protection of the people through free and unimpeded access to humanitarian aid throughout Syria.

The Syrian tragedy, due to its terrible human dimension — but also because it reveals and revels in our collective impotence — will remain one of the markers of our generation. It is in that spirit that, in this Chamber and with the French anthropologist Laetitia Atlani-Duault, I call upon us all to ensure that this tragedy does not become the downfall of the United Nations. Today Syria stands at a crossroads, while the risks in Idlib and elsewhere remain immense. Our conviction is that today, perhaps for the first time in the past seven years, we have a narrow window of opportunity to foster real political momentum to settle the Syrian conflict. However, this window of opportunity is likely to disappear, given developments in the situation in recent days.

It is therefore more crucial and more urgent than ever for all of us to shoulder our responsibilities. The Astana guarantors in particular must demonstrate that they can live up to the commitments they have undertaken and ensure their full implementation. For its part, France intends to remain fully committed to contribute to a solution to the Syrian conflict. We hope

that this will be the same for everyone, because in the absence of such a solution, now is not the time to allow engagement with Syria to dwindle.

Like Mr. De Mistura, whose exemplary commitment will continue to inspire us, we must remain fully mobilized to achieve a political outcome to the Syrian conflict. The Syrian crisis still poses a serious threat to regional stability and our collective security, and therefore, only a political outcome can enable the country to regain lasting stability. France will not give up and will not disregard, over the course of the coming weeks, any of the possible paths to peace.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): We thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his briefing. On behalf of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, we thank him for his leadership, dedication, tenacity and commitment during his tenure as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. He has our fullest admiration. Under the most difficult circumstances, he has retained his empathy, compassion and humanity. We are specifically grateful to him for not compromising on amplifying the voices of civil society, and Syrian women in particular, to which we attach great value.

I will focus on three points today: first, the constitutional committee; secondly, the fate of detainees and missing persons; and thirdly, accountability.

With regard to my first point concerning the constitutional committee, we fully support the efforts of the United Nations to convene the constitutional committee. We acknowledge the efforts of the Astana guarantors to find a way forward on the United Nations middle third list of representatives on the committee. Let me underline that a credible political process demands a constitutional committee that is credible, balanced and inclusive of all Syrians. The constitutional committee needs to be acceptable to all parties, including the Syrian opposition. A committee that does not meet those conditions would lack the necessary international legitimacy. We call on the United Nations to continue to monitor and ensure equal representation in the constitutional committee. We repeat the importance of a minimum of 30 per cent female representation in the constitutional committee and its subcommittees.

We also call on the United Nations to take a leading role in the establishment of the working methods and the procedures of the committee, including provisions on a balanced chairing agreement. We welcome the fact that the United Nations has not closed the door

on the constitutional committee and will go the extra mile. We are looking forward to the incoming Special Envoy's views on the viability of the necessary package for a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. If it can be achieved, we would surely welcome a first meeting in Geneva. If the stamp of legitimacy cannot be given, we will support the incoming Special Envoy in his efforts to find an alternative way forward under resolution 2254 (2015). The Kingdom of the Netherlands reiterates that the establishment of the constitutional committee is not an end in itself, but part of a broader political process based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Secondly, with regard to detainees, missing persons and torture, we express grave concern about the lack of progress on the detainees file. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have been arrested, imprisoned and/or disappeared without due process at the hands of the Al-Assad regime. We are gravely concerned by the appalling situation in prisons, as was described in the most recent report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, which referred to torture and sexual violence.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the International Committee of the Red Cross should have access to the prisons. We are horrified by the death notices of prisoners that the regime sends out to family members, and we are staunch advocates for support and access to information about prisoners for family members. We call on the parties involved to invest in confidence-building measures on the detainee issue. The Syrian regime should start a process of releasing all political prisoners. We are looking forward to the prioritization, by the incoming Special Envoy, of the detainee and missing persons issue as an integral part of the political process.

That brings me to my third point on accountability. Once more, we underline that lasting stability in Syria cannot be achieved without accountability for those responsible for war crimes. We repeat our support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism in Syria, and we emphasize that we will continue to actively promote accountability.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands reiterates its calls for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court. We regret that the Council has been blocked from doing so by the use of the veto. Let me

also underline that structural changes are needed in the political situation and in the governance of Syria. The conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees need to be met. That is currently not the case. The protection of housing, land and property rights need to be guaranteed. That would make reconciliation and return easier. We need a credible and inclusive political transition firmly under way before the European Union can even begin to consider reconstruction aid for Syria. I would like to emphasize the words of my Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stef Blok, who said: “It is unthinkable for the Kingdom of the Netherlands to finance a regime that is responsible for war crimes.”

In conclusion, the Syrian conflict forms one of the darkest and most violent episodes of our times. Unfortunately, it is far from over. There are those who believe in a military solution, but there is none. Military victories will not lead to stability and will not lead to safety. In that respect, I reiterate our call on all parties to intensify their efforts to uphold the ceasefire in Idlib and find a negotiated and sustainable political solution. In the end, only an inclusive political process can solve the Syrian conflict. The Kingdom of the Netherlands will continue to contribute towards that goal.

Let me also take this opportunity to salute all of the countries that have contributed to the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. The Coalition has achieved great progress, but much remains to be done. Let me associate myself with the points made in that regard by our French colleague just now. Also, in this specific context, we stress that extremism will not be defeated without a political solution for Syria.

Let me finish by welcoming my good friend, Geir Pedersen, as the new incoming Special Envoy and by expressing support for his upcoming work on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015). We call on the new Envoy and both current and incoming Security Council members to commit themselves to the fight against impunity. The Syrian people deserve justice.

To use the words of Staffan de Mistura from this weekend at the Doha Forum: justice is

“like a candle and the light should never disappear... we need that light... because one day, sooner rather than later, that candle will be giving a feeling of hope to those who lost so many people due to this horror”.

I thank our dear friend Staffan for keeping that candlelight of hope and justice alive.

Mr. Amde (Ethiopia): We thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his comprehensive briefing. This is his last briefing. It is also our last statement on the Syrian issue as a Council member. I would like to express our deep appreciation to the Special Envoy for his dedicated and highly professional diplomatic efforts to facilitate a political solution to the Syrian conflict. For more than four years, he has devoted his full energy and his decades of experience and knowledge to facilitating a peaceful end to the crisis. We are deeply grateful for his determined efforts and for his continued sense of optimism while dealing with what has been one of the most difficult of diplomatic assignments. His work will, we believe, make an excellent starting point for his successor. Indeed, the honest assessment and reflection so eloquently presented today will be extremely useful for advancing the intra-Syrian political talks under the auspices of the United Nations.

When Mr. De Mistura told the Council of his decision to move on (see S/PV.8373), he also promised to do all he could up until the last day of his mandate to convene a constitutional committee — a stepping stone towards the revitalization of the political process. That is precisely what he has been doing, engaging with the Syrian parties, the Astana guarantors, the members of the small group and other stakeholders. He has been advancing the possibility of creating a credible and inclusive constitutional committee. However, as he recently pointed out, there is an extra mile to go in that marathon effort. We stress the importance of convening a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned constitutional committee, essential for reviving a comprehensive political process, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

There are changes on the ground, and the relative calm in Syria is encouraging. Nevertheless, it is clear that there are also areas with very serious challenges relating to ongoing hostilities. Millions remain in desperate need of humanitarian aid; millions more are refugees and internally displaced. The full implementation of the demilitarization agreement on Idlib is critical if we are to avoid any possible humanitarian catastrophe.

We have repeatedly stressed during our time on the Council that the Syrian crisis can be effectively and sustainably addressed only through a comprehensive political dialogue facilitated by the United Nations.

That remains the case. There is no military solution. The Syrian parties must engage constructively and in good faith with the newly appointed Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen. We wish him every success in discharging his responsibilities.

Equally important, other Member States with influence over local actors must also support the search for durable peace in Syria. Regrettably, forging agreement on Syrian issues has been very difficult. I do not have to remind members that the Security Council is the body responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security. Its unity, particularly agreement among the permanent members, is central and critical to making progress in Syria. For the sake of the Syrian people, who have endured so much over the last eight years, we hope that all actors will finally work together to find a common path to end that continuing tragedy. Such action is very long overdue.

Mr Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura for his comprehensive and detailed briefing and for his relentless efforts over the past four years to achieve peace in Syria.

Three years ago in this Chamber, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015), which set a road map for reaching a just political settlement in Syria and restoring stability to that dear Arab country, which has a great history. However, three years have passed and we have, unfortunately, not been able to implement that resolution on the ground.

In January, an agreement was reached in Sochi to establish a constitutional committee. We have long awaited the start of its functioning. Efforts made thus far to allow the committee to begin its work before the end of the year have been unsuccessful. We renew our call for a balanced, credible, comprehensive and inclusive committee in which all Syrian components are represented. We believe that that would play a vital role in moving the Syrian political process forward. The constitutional committee is the first step in a political transition that includes several steps, such as drafting the constitution and holding free and fair elections, pursuant to the constitution, under the supervision of the United Nations and in line with highest international standards of transparency and accountability. The elections should also give voice to all Syrians, including those living abroad, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

We have listened to the Special Envoy and closely followed the discussions of the Astana guarantors with him in Geneva on 18 December to move forward with the establishment of the constitutional committee. In that regard, we stress that the United Nations has a central role to play in facilitating a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process.

The political process in Syria is at a critical juncture and requires decisive decisions. I am not exaggerating when I say that the credibility of the Security Council and the United Nations is at stake at this sensitive period in the Syrian crisis. We reaffirm that there can be no military solution to the crisis in Syrian. There is a need to support all efforts to build trust among the relevant parties, most notably through the release of all prisoners and detainees, support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to investigate all war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the holding of all perpetrators accountable.

As long as Idlib province is relatively stable, thanks to the Turkish-Russian agreement, there is a glimmer of hope for achieving a breakthrough and make an important step towards the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

The international community and the Security Council have repeatedly failed the Syrian people. We must not fail them again. We ought to implement the relevant Council resolutions so as to enable the Syrian people to achieve their legitimate aspirations through a political settlement agreed by all Syrian protagonists. That would enable the Syrian people to achieve their legitimate aspirations, while preserving the unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria.

In conclusion, we reiterate our thanks and deep appreciation to Special Envoy Mr. De Mistura for his relentless efforts over the past four years. We look forward to working with the new Special Envoy, Ambassador Geir Pedersen. The State of Kuwait will fully support him and encourage his efforts to ensure the success of his mandate.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We thank Special Envoy de Mistura for his comprehensive briefing. As he ends his highly meritorious service, I would like to express to him and his team our most sincere gratitude on behalf of Kazakhstan for their efforts and commitment to achieving enduring peace in Syria. We greatly appreciate the Special Envoy's

outstanding engagement, as demonstrated in the intensive consultations to convene a credible and balanced United Nations-facilitated, Syrian-owned and -led constitutional committee. Mr. de Mistura's work has been monumental. He has left his mark and legacy, and we all greatly appreciate his efforts. He has built a strong foundation for his successor to build upon. We wish the new Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen, every success on his important assignment.

At present, the contours of a peaceful life in Syria are becoming increasingly clear. We therefore consider it to be very important to continue to work on the establishment of a constitutional committee. It is not an easy task, but we must patiently and consistently keep at it, because there is no alternative. The committee would enable the drafting of a new basic law for Syria.

In that regard, we welcome the efforts made by Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy for Syria, who this week hosted high-level representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey in Geneva to discuss the possibility of establishing a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. It is essential that all parties involved provide maximum support for the earliest formation of a Syrian constitutional committee. Those consultations have made a significant contribution to the political settlement in Syria as a follow up to the Sochi final statement of 30 January, which is in line with the Geneva process to implement Council resolution 2254 (2015). Astana believes that we can ensure the necessary package of arrangements for a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee. That would also include a balanced arrangement for chairing, drafting and ensuring electoral viability.

We are pleased that the Secretary-General appreciates the value of the Astana process and its invaluable work, especially among the guarantors themselves and with the representatives of the Syrian opposition. The Secretary-General has also acknowledged the importance of other high-level meetings, including the Da Nang statement of 11 November 2017 and the Istanbul Declaration of 27 October 2018.

We believe that the only way to create peace in Syria is to establish a comprehensive political process under the leadership of the Syrians themselves, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). We also believe that the Astana process has yielded positive

results aimed at strengthening the ceasefire and the monitoring mechanism and has laid the foundation for further political settlement in the framework of the Geneva talks.

Kazakhstan commends the successful fight against international terrorism and the destruction of the combat potential of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and other organizations in Syria. The chances for a peaceful resolution of the crisis that has engulfed Syria increase with the victory over terrorism. We all agree that despite the stabilization and reduction of escalation, the current situation in Syria requires the increased attention and consolidated efforts of the entire international community.

To conclude, even as we step down as a member of the Council, Kazakhstan remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis and is hopeful that the negotiation process in Geneva will succeed in restoring peace and stability in Syria. We will continue to do our best through the Astana process. We are confident that the settlement of the Syrian conflict has no military solution. We echo the United Nations concerns that a full-scale escalation of hostilities in the area must be averted at all costs. We are ready to work with new Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to that end.

Mr. Skoog (Sweden): I would like to start by expressing Sweden's immense appreciation to Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura for his tireless efforts for the people of Syria. I want to thank Mr. De Mistura for his perseverance, creativity and energy, and may I add, civility and dignity in circumstances where those values have been in short supply.

We, of course, welcome incoming Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, and we assure him that he will have Sweden's full support. It is important to maintain focus, momentum and, I believe, the unity of the Council in backing him in his difficult task.

After almost eight years of conflict, we fully understand those who claim that the international community has failed the Syrian people. The international community has a responsibility now to remain actively engaged on Syria. That is the only way to ensure that the grievances of the Syrian people that led to that tragedy can be addressed and that all of the people of Syria can come to feel trust in the future.

Since the beginning of our tenure on the Security Council, we have tried to leave no stone unturned in

seeking progress towards bringing the conflict in Syria to an end and ensuring that the humanitarian needs are covered. Today, I will focus on the importance of immediate military de-escalation, the urgent need for progress towards a sustainable political solution, and the necessary conditions for lasting peace.

First, on the importance of de-escalation, we call on all parties to the conflict to de-escalate and show restraint, as well as to fully respect their obligations under international law. We welcome the Astana guarantors' renewed commitment to uphold the ceasefire in Idlib, and we reiterate our expectations of the guarantors in that regard. We are encouraged that the agreement to cease hostilities continues to hold, although there have been worrying signs of violence recently.

We are therefore deeply concerned by continued military operations by Syrian Government forces and allies, particularly in Idlib, where there are reports of civilian casualties. We are also concerned by Turkish statements regarding a possible military operation in north-eastern Syria. Turkey is a critically important actor in that crisis and a key partner of the European Union. As stated by European Union High Representative Mogherini, we expect Turkey to refrain from any unilateral action that would risk further instability in Syria. A safe, calm and neutral environment on the ground is necessary for progress towards a political solution.

Secondly, a sustainable political solution to the Syrian conflict that is acceptable to the international community can happen only through a United Nations-led political process, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Women's full and effective participation in that process is critical, and I want to thank Mr. Staffan de Mistura for dedicating all his efforts to that agenda.

We appreciate the update on the constitutional committee. It is deeply disappointing that, one year after Sochi, that committee has still not been established. As just stated by Mr. Staffan de Mistura, there is still an extra mile to walk to ensure a credible, balanced and inclusive committee. We fully trust the United Nations judgement in ensuring that the committee's composition and its rules of procedure meet the requirements needed for international legitimacy. There is not much time left. Every effort must now be made to establish the committee in a way that satisfies the United Nations

criteria. The committee must then be swiftly convened in Geneva under United Nations auspices.

The failure to establish that committee would, however, rest fully with the Government of Syria, owing to its lack of constructive engagement and willingness to compromise to date. We urge the Government of Syria and those with good relations with Damascus to ensure full collaboration. Constitutional reform represents a stepping stone towards elections, which must be free and fair, with all Syrians eligible to participate. In that connection, the 12 principles referred to and repeated by Staffan De Mistura today are fundamental to efforts to move the entire process forward.

Thirdly, on the conditions for sustainable peace, the conflict has led to a disaster far beyond Syria's borders. Six million people have been displaced within the country, and five million have fled to neighbouring countries. The conditions for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees are not yet in place, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Let us be clear. The primary reason why refugees and internally displaced persons are not returning is not primarily the lack of schools, hospitals and roads. It is first and foremost because they fear for their safety. They fear retribution, persecution and detention. They would now also face discriminatory legislation undermining their housing, land and property rights.

They all know family and friends who have been arrested, imprisoned and tortured. There are no excuses for the Syrian authorities to hold those unlawfully held in prison. The authorities should release those detainees and uncover the fate of all of those Syrians who have disappeared. In order to create the conditions for the return of refugees, a political solution and respect by the Syrian authorities for international law, including international refugee law and international human rights law, is therefore fundamental.

As part of building sustainable peace, we recognize that the reconstruction of Syria will eventually be needed. Sweden, like the rest of the European Union, will be ready to assist only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition, in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), is firmly under way — as that is deemed necessary in order to reach sustainable peace.

Finally, accountability is also necessary for sustainable peace. The conflict in Syria has been characterized by a flagrant disregard for international law and by disrespect for human life. The Special Envoy recently stated that he has never, in his long United Nations career, seen a conflict with the use of such indiscriminate brutality as in Syria.

Upholding the international rules-based order is fundamental to efforts to end conflicts and prevent new conflicts from unfolding. Sustainable peace can happen only if the perpetrators of the horrible crimes witnessed in Syria are brought to justice. The international community must not allow impunity. We encourage increased funding and support for the mechanisms established to ensure that evidence is preserved for future criminal proceedings, and we believe that the Council should refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

It is only through a United Nations-led process, trusted by all Syrians and supported by the international community, that we can achieve a political solution in Syria — one that addresses the fundamental grievances of the Syrian people, guarantees their rights and aspirations, and creates the conditions for peace and stability for them. The Security Council must therefore wholeheartedly support the United Nations-led political process and remain actively engaged.

Mr. Lewicki (Poland): Let me join all other delegations in commending Staffan de Mistura for his outstanding work, his great personal commitment and all his tireless efforts aimed at bringing peace to Syria and in particular to the Syrian people, because, as he has rightly stressed, this is a great tragedy not only for the people of Syria but also for humankind as a whole.

Regrettably, at a time when the Syrian conflict has entered its eighth year, continual and widespread violence is still rampant, including serious and systematic violations and abuses of human rights and international human rights law.

Now, at the end of 2018, we are at a critical juncture. We strongly believe that the Idlib ceasefire agreement introduced some positive dynamics. However, questions persist as to, first, the sustainability of the arrangement in future, secondly, the degree of compliance by the parties to the conflict in Syria, as well as, thirdly, the ongoing difficult situation of internally displaced persons and other civilians present in Idlib and its surroundings. As we heard recently from Under-

Secretary-General Lowcock, the situation is especially worrying in the north-western part of the country. Taking into consideration the recent events in Idlib province, we emphasize once again the need to prevent military hostilities and their attendant disastrous humanitarian consequences.

We are also concerned by the situation in north-eastern Syria, which continues to be tense, including between Turkey and the People's Protection Units, part of the United States-allied Syrian Democratic Forces. We therefore expect all parties to refrain from any unilateral actions likely to undermine the efforts of the Global Coalition against Daesh or risk further instability in Syria.

Owing to the current situation in Syria, cross-border deliveries of humanitarian aid continue to provide an indispensable lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people across Syria. That is why Poland welcomed the recently renewed authorization for cross-border humanitarian access.

It must be emphasized that the political process has continued to fail to gain traction. This includes the establishment of a constitutional committee, the first step towards a genuine political process under United Nations supervision. Let me underline something that has already been mentioned by many around this table: the fact there is no military solution to the conflict that could bring sustainable peace to the Syrians. We should aim at reaching an intra-Syrian framework political agreement, and here we could not agree more with Staffan's statement that sustainable peace requires a real political process. This applies also to addressing the root causes of the conflict, because we are talking about sustainable peace for the Syrian people.

A cessation of hostilities may give a chance for the peace talks to succeed under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva to gain momentum, so that a political solution might finally be reached. We also call on the Astana guarantors to follow through on their commitment and protect civilians as a matter of priority.

Let me also underline the fact that any political solution must be brokered in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). The United Nations, and particularly its Special Envoy for Syria, has a special role in this process. That is why we express our full support for all efforts made by the Envoy to establish a constitutional committee as

soon as possible and wish to congratulate him on the progress already achieved. We ask all actors involved, in particular the Astana guarantors, to provide support for this process.

The constitutional committee should be established now, as a priority, and further steps should swiftly follow to enable a negotiated political transition process. This requires the full and constructive engagement of all the parties to the conflict. A special role has to be played by the Syrian authorities, which should participate in the negotiations in good faith and without any preconditions.

In conclusion, let me once again thank Staffan for his service, not only to the United Nations but also to the Syrian people and to humankind as a whole, and let me assure his successor, Mr. Pedersen, of our full and continued support for his work.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is a pleasure to have with us once again the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, Staffan de Mistura. The briefing he has just delivered makes clear that he has spared no effort to achieve the formation of the constitutional committee after four years of strong commitment to the peace negotiations in Syria. I convey to him the gratitude of the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea for his four years of important and intensive work in the quest for a peaceful solution to a very complicated conflict. My delegation would underline the importance of ensuring that at the conclusion of his mandate, there will be no interruption in this important task as it is handed over to his successor, Mr. Pedersen.

As the end of the year draws near, expectations about the convening of the first meeting of the constitutional committee are higher than ever. Although at the eleventh international meeting on Syria it was not possible to make significant progress towards a broad consensus on the formation of the committee, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea took note of the fact that at the meeting held on 18 December, the Astana guarantors agreed to make the efforts necessary for the first meeting of the committee to be held in Geneva in early 2019.

Although the Republic of Equatorial Guinea stresses the contribution of the Astana guarantors in the framework of this decisive and delicate process, with a view to creating the conditions necessary to prevent violence in Syria, resolve humanitarian problems and

contribute to the repatriation of Syrian refugees and the implementation of the political process on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), we nonetheless recognize that the current stalemate is not benefiting in any way the millions of Syrians who have been suffering from the conflict since 2011.

My delegation is aware that the main reason why the process has become so sensitive is because the problem of each segment of the future committee wishing to promote its own interests. It is not inappropriate to say so, as it is an open secret that each party wants its own Government and its own opposition, and yet they want the representatives of civil society to be acceptable to all. It is therefore very difficult to reach an agreement as to who is going to be a part of that section of the Syrian constitutional committee.

We hope that the third list of representatives of civil society, agreed upon by the Astana guarantors and presented to the Special Envoy at the 18 December meeting, will not detract from the shared objective of establishing a constitutional committee that is balanced, inclusive and trustworthy, in accordance with the decisions of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi and resolution 2254 (2015). In that vein, we call on the Special Envoy to continue consultations with the Syrian Government and the co-guarantors in order to come up with a list that enjoys the greatest possible consensus of all parties. The United Nations must continue to play the role of facilitator, with full respect for the sovereignty, unity and independence of the Syrian people. Furthermore, my country's Government believes that cooperation among the main allies of the national parties to the conflict is key to the successful development of Syria. It is clear that this conflict has no military solution, as the passage of time has demonstrated.

My Government also wishes to stress the importance of the contact mechanism of the United States with the Russian Federation on Syria. We are certain that both countries have an effective set of tools not only to exchange views about the situation in Syria, but also, and most important, to revitalize the political process with the same aim: to take decisive steps forward towards a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with the objectives of resolution 2254 (2015).

Finally, Equatorial Guinea hopes that there will be no further delays in the formation of the constitutional committee and that the stalemate in the

negotiations will not lead to the failure of the Astana process. We encourage the incoming Special Envoy to continue exploring all opportunities to overcome the roadblocks to the formation of the committee so that the first meeting can be held early next year, as we have repeatedly stated in the Security Council.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We welcome the convening of this meeting and thank Mr. De Mistura for his important briefing. We wish to highlight once again the sense of responsibility and professionalism that has characterized his complex work and made possible progress in laying the groundwork for ending the devastating Syrian conflict. We thank him for his tireless efforts and his genuine commitment to peace and justice.

We particularly look forward to the latest developments in connection with the formation of the constitutional committee, which we attribute largely to Mr. De Mistura's perseverance and diplomatic skill as well as to the commitment shown by the Astana platform countries. Those developments provide the new Special Envoy, Mr. Pedersen, with a path on which to advance, together with the main governmental actors involved, in order to guarantee the establishment, in the coming weeks, of a committee that the Syrian population and the international community can recognize as credible, balanced and legitimate.

We believe that in order to achieve that complex objective, it is of the utmost importance for the committee to be representative and include all sectors of Syrian society, in particular Syrian women, and to be equipped with transparent and democratic mechanisms for its functioning and decision-making. We hope that those conditions will be met and that the work of the committee will result in a new constitution leading to free elections, supervised by the United Nations, within the framework of the broader political settlement process as set out in resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), and with full respect for the unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.

We also consider it essential that those efforts be supported by confidence-building measures and national reconciliation. In particular, we encourage and expect further and more substantive progress in the identification of missing persons, the surrender of remains, and the release of detainees and missing persons. We must also recall the need to ensure access

to justice and accountability for atrocity crimes committed during the protracted conflict.

I wish to conclude by stressing the importance of the Security Council remaining attentive to developments on the ground, with a view to ensuring that the ceasefire in Idlib, established in September by the Russian Federation and Turkey, is maintained. The success of any effort to achieve sustainable peace in Syria, such as the constitutional committee, will depend to a large extent on preventing Idlib from becoming the scene of a new humanitarian tragedy.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): Like others, I pay tribute to our good friend and colleague Staffan. It was a sad day when we learned that he would step down. He has given the most enormous service to the United Nations. I personally have worked with him on Afghanistan and other issues, and his track record in that country, in Iraq and in Lebanon speaks for itself. He has tried harder than anyone to bring a resolution to this truly terrible conflict in Syria.

As he himself said, he has worked on it longer than the First World War lasted, exceeding the tenure of his predecessors, Mr. Brahimi and Kofi Annan. I think as the tribute to him showed, there is not a person in the United Nations who does not feel very deeply the amount of commitment, energy, resolve and passion that he has brought to this most difficult of all United Nations Envoy tasks.

We would like, through him, to also salute his wonderful team, who have supported him — both the members sitting behind him and some of those whom we have seen via videoconference, and whom I also personally know from previous incarnations. I would like to welcome Geir Pedersen, but I will save that for another time, when Geir has taken over. But I hope he knows that we are very indebted to him and that we recognize how much we owe him.

I think that, as other speakers have said, it is deeply regrettable that there has not been more progress on the constitutional committee. It is unfathomable that — for an idea that was set up to advance the political process at Sochi — there has not been more progress, because it ought to have been possible to have made progress in that area. There are just a handful of days left within which to meet President Putin's self-imposed deadline.

But even with just a few days to go, if progress can be made, then we absolutely urge the Syrian authorities

and their supporters to take that opportunity. But when all is said and done, the United Nations can only join a process that is balanced. That is the fundamental tenet on the basis of which the United Nations assists Governments and the international community. We will support the Secretary-General and the Under-Secretary-General to the hilt in upholding that very central tenet. I think it was the French representative who made the point that the Astana guarantors had submitted at the moment an unbalanced and unworkable list, and we would absolutely agree with him. Again, even in those last few days, if there can be a genuine consultation process, then there should be one in order to achieve a meaningful reconciliation.

But I would also like to say that we are meeting almost on the third anniversary of the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015), and it remains the best agreement we have made and the closest we have come to managing to work towards an end to this crisis. It is a huge failure of the international community — not of the United Nations, but of the international community — that collectively we have not been able to advance this more. But above all, and very obviously, it is a huge failure of the Syrian Government to protect its people that has led us to this point, and the Syrian Government's refusal to work towards the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) is at the absolute heart of all the horrors and all the awful things that have been inflicted on Syria and its people.

The central problem in the whole Syria conflict has always been the Syrian authorities' refusal to address the legitimate grievances of the Syrian people. That is how the conflict came about in the first place. It remains a central tenet, an essential element of what has to be done if anything is ever to move forward. The Special Envoy has often come to the Council unable to record any positive movement by the regime.

I just want to stress again that, without movement in that direction and whatever happens militarily, Syria will not see reconstruction or rehabilitation into the international community. Its people will not see representative government, and whatever interim arrangement comes into force in Syria, it will not help the Syrian authorities hold their territory or govern it, and it will certainly not do anything to address the legitimate aspirations of all of Syria's people, regardless of the religious or ethnic community from which they come. As such a central point, rehabilitation means being able to stop a reversion to the tensions and the situation that existed before the conflict. Without

addressing the aspirations of all of Syria's people and a genuinely representative Government, there will never be an end to the suffering of the Syrian people. I really think that the Council should look ahead, focus and keep that question of what will most help the Syrian people in the future right at the forefront of its plans and thinking.

Finally, if I may, I would like to say a word about Da'esh. The United Kingdom has been a leading member of the Global Coalition. We are proud of our role, alongside other partners, in the fight against Da'esh. Since military operations began, the coalition and its partners in Syria and Iraq have captured the vast majority of Da'esh territory and even in recent days important advances have been made in the last area of eastern Syria that Da'esh still occupies. The Royal Air Force of the United Kingdom was active in just the past 24 hours. Much remains to be done in the global campaign, but we must not lose sight of the threat that Da'esh continues to pose, even when it no longer holds territory.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his briefing on the state of the political situation in Syria.

On 18 December there was an important breakthrough in that area in Geneva. It is a pity that a number of members of the Security Council have preferred not to notice it. After intense, painstaking and difficult work based on the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress and with the active assistance of the Astana troika, the composition of the constitutional committee was decided on and a very important step taken on the path to a settlement of the Syrian crisis on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015). On the same day, the Foreign Ministers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey, as guarantors of the Astana format, held a trilateral meeting, as well as consultations with Mr. De Mistura, at which they handed over the list of civil-society candidates to be included on the constitutional committee. I want to emphasize that the list has been approved by both Damascus and the Syrian opposition. I should remind the Council that the Government and opposition lists for the committee were sent to Mr. De Mistura in May and July. These efforts were greeted with great appreciation by the Special Envoy, who noted the considerable contribution

that the Astana troika has made to getting the process to this point, and we heard about that again today.

The Ministers adopted a joint statement that was circulated yesterday as an official Security Council document. It notes that at the meeting in Geneva, the Foreign Ministers of the three countries affirmed their commitment to assisting in launching the work of the constitutional committee, including by working with the Syrian parties and the Special Envoy to define its general guiding principles. They particularly emphasized that a spirit of compromise and constructive participation on the part of its members is an essential condition for ensuring that the committee's decisions enjoy the greatest possible support from the Syrian people.

It was agreed that every effort would be made to hold the constitutional committee's first meeting in Geneva at the beginning of 2019, which would be an important step in the preparations for constitutional reform in Syria, which is the basis on which general elections are to be conducted, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). We firmly believe that those steps represent the beginning of a viable, long-term political process, led and implemented by the Syrians themselves, with assistance from the United Nations and in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi. We are grateful to Mr. De Mistura for his active efforts to advance the political process in Syria and the help he has given the Astana format, which made a considerable contribution to the shift from armed confrontation to the political arena. We are particularly grateful to our partners from Kazakhstan for their contribution to the launch and functioning of the Astana platform.

We are aware that there are some who may be unhappy with the achievements of the cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran. But they are always dissatisfied. There is always something that they do not like. First among them are those who deep down still cherish hopes for so-called regime change based on their plans for reshaping the Middle East according to a design that suits them. At first, they said that not having a constitutional committee was a bad thing. Now that the list has been agreed on, they say it is unbalanced and no good anyway. We do not see the logic in that. We call on everyone who is not bent on denying the genuine desires of the Syrian people by promoting scenarios based on geopolitical engineering to help the three guarantor countries of the Astana format to get to work on the comprehensive political

process that Syria, the Middle East and the entire international community needs, based on the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi and the Security Council's resolutions on Syria. At the same time, it will be important to make sure that the results on the political front are supported by genuine rather than hypothetical steps to resolve the Syrian Arab Republic's humanitarian problems and its post-conflict reconstruction. We have frequently heard, and continue to hear, particularly from our Western partners, that increased cooperation and the lifting of unilateral sanctions will be possible only when real progress has been made on the settlement process. That moment has come, and we hope that our colleagues will not go back on their word and come up with new politicized conditions.

We are not trying to create the impression that all is well in Syria. There are many problems that will have to be resolved in the future, first and foremost in Idlib, where our Turkish partners are making serious efforts based on their existing commitments to separate terrorist and moderate groups. We once again urge all who have influence with those groups to counsel them. But the fact is that the situation in Syria has indeed changed, and for the better. Many Governments have acknowledged those changes. We have seen positive steps on the part of States in the region that want to normalize their relations with Damascus. We hope that the desire for the full-fledged restoration of relations between the Arab countries and Syria and Syria's speedy return to the Arab family will provide material support to the settlement process in Syria, based on the fundamental principles of international law and the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations.

We, the three guarantor States, have succeeded in doing what we were urged, persuaded, pressured and even threatened to do. Tell me, could anyone else have done it? Does anyone suppose that it could have been done simply by compiling our own list and handing it to Mr. De Mistura? I want to emphasize that the legitimate list was not going to be one that the small group had given its consent to but rather the list that the representatives of the Syrian parties, both Damascus and the opposition, agreed on, and that is exactly what happened.

We firmly believe that we all have a chance to launch a genuine political process for a reliable, lasting settlement in Syria. Logically, it will be based on the results of the work already done by the Astana troika.

The Astana troika, in close coordination with the United Nations, stands ready to energetically work on this issue. At the same time, it is our view that the last word has to remain with the Syrians themselves.

Mr. Zambrana Torrelío (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the information provided by Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura, whom we thank and acknowledge for the work he has done over the years and for his tireless efforts on this sensitive issue, not only for the Security Council but also for the international community. We would also like to wish his successor the best of success in the work entrusted to him.

During the two years that we have occupied this seat, we have witnessed the urgent need of the Syrian people for a cessation of violence and for humanitarian aid. Accordingly, we attended numerous meetings through which we sought to promote consensus and unity in the Security Council for the benefit of the Syrian people. Many times we had to make a call for this space not to be politicized or for it not to be used as a sounding board for the conflict on the ground or for the achievement of geopolitical objectives.

That is why we highlight the progress made in stabilizing and reducing violence in the country, which in recent months has led to a tangible change in the state of the conflict on the ground. We believe that the improvement in the situation has been thanks to the efforts of the Astana guarantors, whose agreements made it possible to establish important areas of détente, and to those commitments made between Russia and Turkey or between Russia and the United States at the time, all of which made it possible to reduce violence on Syrian territory, which resulted in relative peace for the civilian population.

In recent days, the agreement signed in Istanbul on 27 October among Turkey, Russia, Germany and France had a major impact on the population by allowing humanitarian assistance and emergency medical care to reach those most in need. We are convinced that it is the result of openness to dialogue among the parties involved, which we believe must be a constant. On the other hand, we believe that any measure involving unilateral sanctions is not only contrary to international law but also works to the detriment of the humanitarian situation in Syria.

We emphasize the importance of the meetings held in recent weeks, and particularly the recent

meeting in Geneva between the Special Envoy and the Astana guarantors, which we believe served once again to confirm the will to move forward the political process in Syria. We hope that those instances of rapprochement will bear fruit through the establishment, in the near future, of a credible, balanced, inclusive and representative, Syrian-owned and Syrian-led constitutional committee, facilitated by the United Nations, which will allow, in the medium and long term, for a strengthening of the relative peace that now exists on the ground.

That is why, throughout our presence in the Security Council, we have stated that there is no military solution to this conflict, and we rejected any attempt at fragmentation or sectarianism in the country, as well as the presence of foreign military forces without the authorization of the Syrian Government. Within the framework of international law, we request that they be withdrawn as soon as possible, but mainly in the context of respect for the principles of sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the country. We believe that all parties involved should respect those principles.

We reiterate our call to resolve this conflict through an inclusive dialogue and concerted political process, led by and for the Syrian people, that satisfies its legitimate aspirations and allows for a peaceful solution to the situation, within the framework of the Geneva process and resolution 2254 (2015), under the auspices of the United Nations and as agreed in the outcome of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue, held in the city of Sochi in January.

I would like to conclude by stressing the challenge facing the Security Council to continue the efforts, commitments and dialogue among the parties that will enable the formation of a constitutional committee in the near future, and, to that end, by emphasizing that support for the efforts of the Special Envoy must be constant. We believe that the Security Council must meet the challenge of remaining united in order to advance a political process that leads to a sustainable solution for the Syrian people.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I wish to thank Special Envoy De Mistura for his briefing. China expresses its appreciation for his more than four years of tireless efforts aimed at facilitating the political-settlement process of the Syrian issue.

In recent days, with the concerted efforts of the parties concerned and the international community, the political settlement of the Syrian issue has seen positive new momentum. The Foreign Ministers of the three Astana guarantors met with Special Envoy De Mistura and issued a joint statement in which they agreed to make efforts to facilitate the work on the establishment of the constitutional committee, which will start early next year. China appreciates that and hopes that all parties will continue to work towards the same goal and meet one another in the middle to push forward the political process in Syria for an early result.

Years of conflict have taken a heavy toll on the entire country of Syria. The Syrian people yearn for peace, a return to a tranquil life and an early start to rebuilding their homeland. Currently, the memorandum on stabilizing the de-escalation zones in Idlib is being implemented. The security situation in Syria is generally stable, and a window of opportunity for a political settlement to the Syrian issue has opened. The international community should continue to stay committed to diplomatic efforts and support the role of the United Nations as the main channel of mediation. We should focus on the following tasks moving forward.

First, it is necessary to continue to advance the political-settlement process of the Syrian issue. Against the backdrop of the new positive momentum for the political settlement of the issue, the United Nations should continue to strengthen communication and coordination with the Syrian Government and work for progress in the formation of the constitutional committee, so as to launch a sustainable and effective Syrian political process. The United Nations should continue to enhance its mediation efforts. The members of the Security Council should maintain unity and speak with one voice in order to create conditions for a political settlement of the Syrian issue.

Secondly, it is necessary to facilitate the continued improvement of the security situation. The parties concerned should continue to promote the implementation of the ceasefire agreement reached and maintain the effective functioning of the Idlib demilitarized zone. The international community should strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, unify standards and combat all terrorist organizations listed by the Council as such, so as to prevent such terrorist organizations from making a comeback and undermining the hard-won improvement in the security situation.

Thirdly, the parties in Syria should be urged to work towards the same goal and meet one another halfway. The parties concerned on the Syrian issue should follow the spirit of resolution 2254 (2015), *inter alia*, and act on the basis of respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and in accordance with the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led principle to facilitate the efforts of the parties in Syria to find a solution acceptable to all through an inclusive political process.

China has always been committed to the political solution of the Syrian issue. The Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian issue, Mr. Xie Xiaoyan, recently visited United Nations Headquarters in New York and Geneva to strengthen communication and coordination with the United Nations and other parties with a view to providing support for the Syrian political process. China stands ready to work with international community to play a positive and constructive role in advancing a political settlement of the Syrian issue.

The President (*spoke in French*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Côte d'Ivoire.

I would like once again to congratulate Mr. Staffan de Mistura for his excellent briefing on the political process in the Syrian Arab Republic.

We welcome the holding of the eleventh meeting of the Astana process on the settlement of the Syrian crisis, which took place on 28 and 29 November in Astana. My country welcomes the joint statement issued at the end of that meeting, which stressed the need

“to intensify consultations at all levels to help the Syrian people to return to a normal life and preserve the territorial integrity of Syria”.

The declaration further reaffirmed,

“the commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as respect for the principles of the Charter of the United Nations”.

I also call on all parties to the conflict to implement the agreement providing for a demilitarized zone in Idlib governorate, which was signed 17 September in Sochi under the auspices of the Russian Federation and Turkey.

Moreover, Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the progress made within the framework of the pilot project prepared by the working group established by the Astana process and the United Nations, which aims at investigating the fate of missing persons and releasing those detained. That progress, which included the exchange of prisoners between the Syrian Government and armed groups in the northern part of Syria on 24 November, constitutes a decisive step towards building confidence among the parties to the conflict. The principles of justice and accountability should also be applied by all parties to the conflict as a necessary step in the search for achieving peaceful coexistence among all Syrian people of all creeds and communities.

My delegation is concerned about the announcement by the Turkish President on 12 December of the launching of a new offensive in Syria against the Kurdish People's Protection Units, which Ankara considers a separatist terrorist organization. Côte d'Ivoire therefore calls on the Turkish authorities to prioritize negotiations so as to avoid a new outbreak of violence that would lead to massive displacement of people and exacerbate the already alarming humanitarian situation. Furthermore, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), my country calls on the Syrian parties to create the conditions necessary to enable refugees and displaced persons to return voluntarily and in dignity and safety to their home areas and to enable conflict-affected areas to recover.

Côte d'Ivoire endorses the appeal made in Istanbul on 27 and 28 October during the quadrilateral summit for the effective establishment of a constitutional committee and for drafting a new constitution by late 2018. In that regard, Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the most recent Geneva meeting on the implementation on an inclusive and credible constitutional committee. Such a constitutional committee will enable relaunching the political process, which is at a deadlock, and will pave the way for the holding of free and impartial elections under United Nations supervision.

As Mr. De Mistura is about to leave his post, Côte d'Ivoire expresses its deep gratitude to him for his unfailing commitment to bringing about peace in the Syrian Arab Republic. Côte d'Ivoire would like to take this opportunity to pay heart-felt tribute to him for his tireless efforts during the mission that the Secretary-General conferred upon him. My country recognizes his excellent work over the past four years, his dedication and self-sacrifice in significantly contributing to the

restoration of peace and lasting stability in the Syrian Arab Republic. Furthermore, Côte d'Ivoire urges all stakeholders to support Mr. Geir Pedersen, the new Special Envoy, in successfully carrying out his mandate.

In conclusion, my country reiterates its call for a political resolution to the conflict in Syria and urges the Syrian parties to resume negotiations.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): The Special Envoy began his briefing today by pointing out that the Syrian people have suffered for a period longer than the duration of the Second World War. What he said is correct. As members of the Security Council know, however, every story has a beginning and an end. That is why it is impossible to summarize what the Council has termed "the Syrian crisis" and reduce it to a few formal remarks, even if they seem important. Council members who have a long memory should not forget the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the crisis and the hidden roles played by certain Governments, some of whom are members of the Council, to make up the crisis and create the conditions necessary for it to worsen for the sake of their agendas of internal interference in order to change the geopolitical landscape in our region.

I would remind Council members of the following minor, but important, detail. During an appearance by the former Prime Minister of Qatar on national television, he admitted that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had spent \$137 billion to destroy Syria by orders of their American masters. That statement was made by the former Prime Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Al Thani. Everyone will recall that he came to the Security Council in 2011 to pit Council members against the Syrian State. That man acknowledged on Qatari television that Qatar and Saudi Arabia spent \$137 billion to destroy Syria. I am speaking only about Qatar and Saudi Arabia having spent \$137 billion. Would it then not seem legitimate to make the link between the statement of that Qatari official and the emergence of Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and other takfiri terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria? Is that not a legitimate question? Would any reasonable, intelligent person believe that those terrorist organizations fell on Syria

and Iraq like meteorites from outer space? That is the question that I am asking the members of the Council.

I said this before and I will say it again in this Chamber. More than ever, it is high time to objectively and correctly read the situation in Syria in order to help the Syrian Government rid itself of the waning terrorist war with the help of our allies. Such a reading is also necessary to eliminate the remnants of Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front and their affiliated misled and thuggish groups. That is what should have been done instead of adopting radical positions to blackmail the Government and the people of Syria, prolong the terrorist war and extend its destructive effects on Syria, the region and the world. That should have been done instead of repeating failed recipes that have resulted in the destruction of more than one country. It is high time for some to stop disassociating themselves from reality. They must give up the last of their illusions and realize that they will not be able to get through politics that they were unable to get through terrorism and sponsoring terrorism.

The Government of Syria has demonstrated its openness to all initiatives and sincere efforts aimed at bringing us out of the current crisis. That is why — and the Council is aware of this — based on our sense of national responsibility and what is in the interests of our people, we have demonstrated our commitment to, and cooperation with, United Nations efforts, whether during the mission of Mr. Kofi Annan, Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi or Mr. Staffan de Mistura. In that regard, we welcome the appointment of Mr. Geir Pedersen as the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and we are prepared to work in close cooperation with him.

Today I reiterate the willingness of the Syrian Government to participate effectively in any serious efforts aimed at reaching a political solution, one in which Syrians exclusively decide on their future through inter-Syrian dialogue and under Syrian leadership. That solution should be based on the fact that the people of Syria are the sole and exclusive holders of the right to determine the future of their country without external interference, while guaranteeing the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria. Those are matters that have all been confirmed by international law, the Charter of the United Nations and the 30 Council resolutions concerning Syria.

The success of any political solution in Syria depends upon close cooperation and coordination with the Syrian Government on various relevant issues. Success also calls for international commitment and genuine political will to fully eliminate the remaining terrorist organizations and the removal of the illegitimate foreign forces present on Syrian territory. Success requires that the sincere efforts of the Syrian Government and its allies to reach the political solution to which we all aspire no longer be hindered.

Almost eight years after this dirty and unprecedented war was imposed on my country, it is important to note a strange paradox among certain States. That paradox is the clear contradiction between their deeds and their words, which reminds us of this Italian proverb: “There is a sea between saying and doing”. Those States say that the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria are to be respected, and that the solution must be an inter-Syrian solution led by Syria without external interference. How can those words be reconciled with the actions of those States, in particular their direct military aggression against Syria, their invasion of some parts of Syria, their support to armed terrorist groups, as well as their creation of political groups whose only objective is to undermine the inter-Syrian solution?

Those States continue to rely on the failed recipes of the past. They are desperately trying to create the image of a landscape characterized by confrontation and the new division of roles in order to destabilize the region, causing conflict among its various States for the sake of the plans of Israel and its allies to “assassinate” the Palestinian question. They also try to characterize the foreign terrorists whom they have brought in from the four corners of the world as the Syrian opposition.

On the subject of the moderate opposition, allow me to present some of the key figures of that “moderate armed Syrian opposition”. Those eminent persons were genetically modified in the intelligence labs of their parent countries in order to become the Syrian opposition. The list is long, but I shall name a few: Abu Omar the Chechen, Abu Mekdad the Turk, Abu Musab the Saudi, Abu Suhaib the Libyan, Abu John the Briton, Abu Muhammad the Tunisian, Abu Huraira the American, Abu Moaz the Turkistani, Abu Hafsa the Egyptian, Abu Abdul Rahman the Canadian, Abu Abdullah the Jordanian, Abu Talha the Kuwaiti, Abu Murrah the Frenchman, Abu Oud the Belgian, Abu Walid the Australian, Abdulhaq Jundallah the Uyghur, and the

mufti of the Al-Nusra Front, Abdullah Al-Muhaisini from Saudi Arabia. Those are the prominent figures of the “moderate armed Syrian opposition”.

The political hypocrisy continues under the roof of the Security Council, revealing the true political intentions of those States that for eight years have been putting their full military, media and political weight behind investing in terrorism, in a grave moral contradiction of all the resolutions of the Council. That has led to innumerable tragedies and the suffering of the innocent Syrian people.

The constitutional committee emerging from the inter-Syrian national dialogue conference in Sochi should be established as soon as possible. It must be recalled that the Syrian State was the first to provide the list of invited members, and the Special Envoy attests to that. The Government of Syria has worked very seriously with its allies to overcome the obstacles imposed by some parties to prevent the formation of the committee and to divert it from its set objectives. Nobody therefore has the right to doubt the Syrian Government’s support of that process or its commitment to the outcome of the Sochi conference.

We have always welcomed the role of the Special Envoy as facilitator of the constitutional committee, and we will continue to do so. Nevertheless, we stress once again that no one can proclaim to be a third-party participant in the process, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of neutrality, integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States. That is what the founding fathers of the Organization said. We ourselves took part in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945.

We reaffirm that the constitution and all relevant issues are purely sovereign issues to be decided by Syrians themselves, without external interference. It is unacceptable to set in advance conclusions or conditions on the work of the committee and its recommendations. The committee is autonomous. It is the committee that decides what recommendations to make, and not any other State or party. It is unacceptable to impose deadlines or artificial timelines on the work of the committee. That would be counterproductive because the constitution will define the future of Syria for generations to come.

In conclusion, my country, Syria, has always been serious about working towards a political solution through the inter-Syrian dialogue led by Syrians

and without external interference. The fight against terrorism is the priority at all stages of the political process. All honest Syrians are called upon to take part in that political process based on national interests in order to move forward with the reconstruction of what terrorism has destroyed. That reconstruction has already begun thanks to the efforts of Syrians who are loyal to their country. The same must be done to guarantee the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes.

We are confident that all Syrians will take into account the following. It must be a Syrian-owned political solution, reached through a credible political process in our homeland, not in Istanbul, Doha, Riyadh or Washington, D.C. The political solution must be achieved in Syria on the basis that the Constitution and all issues concerning it are sovereignty-related matters that should be decided solely by the Syrian people.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Al Habib (Islamic Republic of Iran): I would like to express my Government’s heartfelt thanks to Mr. De Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and his team for all their efforts during his tenure. There has always been close cooperation between my Government and Mr. De Mistura as Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and for Iraq and Special Envoy for Syria. He has visited our country many times. I hope that next time he can visit as a vacation to have enough time to see the various beautiful Iranian cities. I would also like to welcome the appointment of Mr. Pedersen as the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria and express our readiness to cooperate with him in discharging his mandate.

From the beginning of the Syrian crisis until now, the Islamic Republic of Iran has always had a principled position: there is no solution to the conflict other than a political settlement. Based on that principled approach, we cooperated with Russia and Turkey in initiating the Astana process. To date, we have made considerable progress and will resolutely continue the path towards a political settlement. After years of conflict, with all its security, socioeconomic and humanitarian ramifications, there is now an emerging consensus in support of the political process. Nevertheless, the

international community should facilitate in that regard rather than dictate the process.

In that context, we attach great importance to the establishment of the constitutional committee as a decisive element of that process. This year, the Astana guarantor States have made every effort to prepare the ground for the formation of the constitutional committee. In that regard, we would like to highlight the progress made to date, which should be considered a joint success of the international community and the Syrians, as it is towards a political solution to end the crisis.

The latest round of our endeavours was the ministerial meeting of the Astana guarantor States in Geneva on 18 December, where the guarantors also held consultations with Mr. De Mistura. During the meeting, the positive results of the consultations with the Syrian parties on the composition of the constitutional committee were presented. The ministers reaffirmed their determination to facilitate the constitutional committee beginning its work, *inter alia*, by drawing up its general guiding principles through interaction with the Syrian parties and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. The rules of procedure that will ensure the committee's efficient and sustainable work will be determined on the basis of those principles.

Moreover, they agreed that the work of the constitutional committee should be governed by a sense of compromise and constructive engagement, aimed at reaching general agreement among its members. That should enable the outcome to receive the widest possible support of the Syrian people. The Ministers also agreed to make efforts to convene the first meeting of the constitutional committee in Geneva in early 2019.

Finally, reaffirming their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria, they emphasized that those principles should be respected by all sides. That means that all foreign forces whose presence is not permitted by the Syrian Government should leave the country.

While significant progress has been made so far on the establishment of the constitutional committee, we need to continue our efforts with the utmost care, perseverance, prudence and patience.

With that in mind, our guiding principle must be to ensure that the committee is an effective, pragmatic and inclusive Syrian-led and Syrian-owned vehicle in order

to move forward. To achieve that, the committee needs strong international support. However, ultimately, the right to determine the future of Syria belongs exclusively to the Syrians themselves.

At this critical juncture of the Syrian crisis, we should all accept that there is no choice other than to cooperate in facilitating an inclusive Syrian political process. Therefore, all States that have influence on the armed opposition groups are expected to encourage those groups to end the fighting in order to join the political process. That is absolutely crucial for any progress to be gained in the political domain.

Likewise, parallel to the efforts in the political field, fighting the terrorists should continue unabated. That should of course be done in line with international law and with close attention to the protection of civilians.

In addition, given the ongoing positive direction with regard to ensuring security and in view of the increasing tendency towards the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, the international community should further support the reconstruction of the country, as well as the speedy return of refugees and internally displaced persons. To that end, all sanctions must also be lifted.

In conclusion, I wish to stress that the Islamic Republic of Iran will continue to play a constructive role in bringing about peace and prosperity in Syria.

The President (*spoke in French*): I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Denktaş (Turkey): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura for his briefing. As his tenure comes to an end, I wish to express our deep appreciation for his tireless and remarkable efforts, as well as those of his team, towards achieving a political solution to the crisis in Syria. We look forward to working with his successor, Ambassador Pedersen, in the period ahead.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has maintained that there can be no military solution and that the only way to end the conflict is through a United Nations-mediated political process in line with the resolution 2254 (2015). In all our consultations with the other Astana guarantors and the United Nations, we have advocated the revitalization of the Geneva process through the establishment of a credible, balanced, inclusive and legitimate constitutional committee. The Astana format is not an alternative to the Geneva

process but an effort to complement it. Through the Astana process, Turkey, Russia and Iran built solid cooperation on common denominators.

Looking back, I would say that our constructive engagement has been a game-changer, yielding concrete results both on the ground and on the political track. Since last September, the Astana format has demonstrated significant achievements. First, the memorandum on the stabilization of the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area (see S/2018/852, annex) ensured relative calm in the province. Secondly, the pilot project on the mutual release of detainees was implemented. Last but not least, we reached a critical stage towards the finalization of the formation of the constitutional committee.

As explained by Mr. De Mistura and the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation, on 18 December the Foreign Ministers of the Astana guarantor States met with Mr. De Mistura in Geneva to share the positive results of their consultations with the Syrian parties on the constitution of the committee. The representative of Iran explained some of the developments. After months of hard work and intense consultations, we believe that we have made considerable progress and reached the final stretch in our efforts to finalize the constitutional committee. The guarantor States are working closely with the United Nations to finalize the minor adjustments to the middle third list, which, for the most part, enjoys the support of all sides, including the United Nations, and is workable.

Together with the other guarantors, we will step up our efforts in the days ahead to ensure that the committee will convene its first meeting in January 2019. We appreciate the efforts and cooperation of Russia and Iran towards the formation of the committee. We call on all our partners to support us and the United Nations as we work on initiating a new chapter in the political process in Geneva. Our purpose is to bring the Syrian parties together as soon as possible and to prepare a suitable basis for negotiations.

In Geneva, the three Foreign Ministers and the United Nations also discussed the rules of procedure of the committee and related arrangements. We will continue to work closely with the United Nations to ensure the effective functioning of the committee in all its aspects. A functioning committee will be the key to achieving the ultimate goal of finding a negotiated political solution in Syria, in line with resolution 2254

(2015), paving the way for free and fair elections in Syria. That said, we are of course aware that the formation of the committee is only the beginning. We therefore call on the rest of the international community to support those efforts towards expediting the political process.

In Geneva, we also took stock of our joint efforts to maintain the ceasefire regime in Idlib. We continue to work on the implementation of the memorandum that I mentioned above. There is considerable progress in the withdrawal of radical groups and heavy weapons from the demilitarized zone. We are working hard to ensure the separation of radical groups from civilians and moderate opposition groups. Despite provocations, we are determined to ensure that calm prevails in Idlib.

Ultimately, ensuring a stable ceasefire not only prevents further bloodshed but also creates an environment conducive to advancing on the political track.

I listened carefully to the statements of all representatives in the Chamber, including your statement, Mr. President, in your national capacity. I see value in putting on record the following few points.

Our collective efforts to fight terrorism also contribute to the creation of viable conditions to that end. Turkey will continue to combat all terrorist groups, including the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which undermine the territorial integrity of Syria. The ethnic cleansing that they carry out was well documented by Amnesty International three years ago. They have been implementing a ban on teaching in the Arabic language, which is documented in a recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/1041).

We will not stand idle in the face of any terrorist threat that targets our national security and Syria's territorial integrity. The number of incidents of harassment fire and hostile actions by the PKK/PYD/YPG has recently increased. That exacerbates the security threat posed by those terrorists across our borders. The PKK/PYD/YPG units to the east of the Euphrates are opening harassment fire on our border posts. They are digging trenches and tunnels to fortify their positions. We will never allow the entrenchment of terrorists along our borders. Protecting our borders is our sovereign right. Turkey will take the necessary steps to ensure its border security against the PKK/PYD/YPG threat as and when it deems necessary.

Turkey will continue its efforts to achieve a viable political solution in Syria that is based on resolution 2254 (2015) and owned and led by the Syrian people under United Nations supervision. The constitutional

committee will be a crucial instrument in kick-starting that political process. We therefore call on the Security Council to put its weight behind the efforts to that end.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.