



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8475th meeting

Thursday, 28 February 2019, 10.30 a.m.

New York

Provisional

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| <i>President:</i> | Mr. Ndong Mba | (Equatorial Guinea) |
| <i>Members:</i> | Belgium | Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve |
| | China | Mr. Wu Haitao |
| | Côte d'Ivoire | Mr. Adom |
| | Dominican Republic | Mr. Singer Weisinger |
| | France | Mr. Delattre |
| | Germany | Mr. Heusgen |
| | Indonesia | Mr. Djani |
| | Kuwait | Mr. Almunayekh |
| | Peru | Mr. Meza-Cuadra |
| | Poland | Ms. Wronecka |
| | Russian Federation | Mr. Nebenzia |
| | South Africa | Mr. Matjila |
| | United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland | Ms. Pierce |
| | United States of America | Mr. Cohen |

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

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

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Geir Pedersen, 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 give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: It is a pleasure to see so many old friends around the table. I am also looking forward to developing new friendships. It is a real honour for me to be here.

It is also an honour for me to brief the Security Council for the first time in my capacity as the Special Envoy for Syria some eight weeks into my mandate. I have taken up this task with all humility, conscious of the profound grief and suffering of the Syrian people everywhere. I am also aware of the need to end this conflict for the sake of Syria, the region and the world.

I know Council members all understand the scale and difficulty of my task. It is not for lack of talent that my predecessors did not achieve more, and it will, of course, not be possible to satisfy every party on every issue. But I can promise the Security Council that I will work impartially and diligently to discharge the mandate given in resolution 2254 (2015) to facilitate the political process. To achieve that end, the cooperation of all Syrian and international parties will be required. It will require the readiness of everyone to deal seriously with the realities of the conflict and work together to move things step by step in a positive direction.

In my initial engagements, I have reminded all parties that resolution 2254 (2015) contains all the elements required for a political solution. The resolution begins by respecting the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and provides a road map for a truly Syrian-led and Syrian-

owned political process, which is key, because I am convinced that a real peace process in Syria needs to be owned by the Syrians, including over half the population — Syrian women — for it to be sustainable.

Resolution 2254 (2015) demands compliance with international law, stresses protection of civilians and unfettered humanitarian access, cessation of hostilities, addressing terrorism, implementing confidence-building measures, and releasing detainees and abductees. All of these are vital if we are to see Syrians moving out of conflict. It further addresses the issues of governance, a constitutional process and United Nations-supervised elections. These are the means by which the Syrians, and no one else, should determine their future. It speaks of safe and voluntary refugee returns and of reconstruction, which are issues that present themselves on a major scale and require serious discussion. In short, resolution 2254 (2015) takes a comprehensive view of the issues that need to be addressed to end the conflict and bring stability and genuine peace.

My first and most important priority has been to engage with the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiation Commission and seek their views and cooperation. In Damascus, I was received very well by Foreign Minister Al-Moualem. He responded positively to my core message, expressed interest in the success of my mission and welcomed my intention to return. Last week, Deputy Special Envoy Ramzy returned to Damascus and held good discussions with Deputy Foreign Minister Mekdad, reaffirming an agreement to keep up a sustained dialogue on peace in Syria, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), with the aim of building confidence and a view towards a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned and United Nations-facilitated political process.

I visited the Syrian Negotiation Commission, led by Coordinator Naser Al-Hariri, at its office in Riyadh and met with all components. I greatly appreciated their positive response to my message and their commitment to engaging and seeking dialogue and negotiations towards implementing resolution 2254 (2015). My senior advisers had follow-up discussions with them a few days ago. They affirmed their readiness for a sustained dialogue on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) towards a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process under United Nations facilitation.

I have also appreciated the frank, practical and constructive engagements with all international

stakeholders, including visits to Moscow, Cairo, Ankara, Tehran, Paris, Berlin and Brussels, and meetings with senior officials of key countries in Geneva, at Davos, and recently in Munich. I will be in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, and other capitals in due course, including London, Beirut, Amman and Beijing.

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

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

It is not for me here to prejudge what can be built in a deeper dialogue. But I believe that there is a shared sense that battlefield developments might be winding down. Nevertheless, the conflict is far from over. And the challenges of winning the peace are staggering in scale and complexity. Large tracts of territory remain outside of Government hands. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is nearly defeated territorially but experience suggests that it can re-emerge. Syrians yearn to see the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons meaningfully addressed. Around half of Syria's pre-war population has been displaced. Council members know the figures: 5.6 million refugees, 6.6 million internally displaced persons, 80 per cent of Syrians living below the poverty line, and half of the population unemployed. Some 11.7 million Syrians need humanitarian assistance. I was pleased that, with the engagement of the United States and Russian Chairs of the International Syria Support Group and the facilitation of the Syrian Government, we recently saw the largest, single humanitarian convoy of the conflict

reach 40,000 internally displaced persons in Rukban. Let me emphasize that the United Nations stands ready to support a durable solution for the people of Rukban — one that abides by core protection standards and that must be coordinated with all relevant partners. Socioeconomic challenges are acute, with major challenges in service delivery, including gas shortages.

After eight years of war, Syrian society has undergone a profound transformation that has also dramatically impacted Syrian women. Many have assumed new responsibilities as the primary breadwinners of their families. Others have faced increased forms of violence specifically targeting women. Syrians — men, women and children — are suffering enormously. Part of my mandate is to try to find ways to address that issue. Syria remains volatile for those who remain in the country and for those who wish to return.

Secondly, I was encouraged by the recent release of 42 detainees/abductees. This was the second release operation conducted by the Russian Federation and Turkey within the framework of the Working Group on the release of detainees/abductees and handover of the bodies as well as the identification of missing persons. At the same time, we need to scale up and prioritize action on that issue, which is of immense humanitarian importance and is also an essential part of building confidence. We are intensively engaging on that issue with the parties and in key capitals. We are eager to see more meaningful progress unlocked in the period ahead, and we are in concrete discussions on how to do so.

Thirdly, the full spectrum of the Syrian people — not just the formal parties — needs to be engaged and involved in the effort to build confidence and trust, and search for peace. Engaging Syrians from different walks of life reminds me of what is at stake for civilians in this conflict. It reminds me of Syrians' resilience in responding to the overwhelming needs generated by this conflict and of their stake in the political process. Over the past two months, my team has consulted with more than 200 Syrian civil society actors inside Syria and in the diaspora. I have been carefully studying the insights and reflections of those Syrians to inform my thinking, and I remain committed to ensuring that a broad spectrum of Syrian civic actors are heard and included in our efforts to promote sustainable peace.

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

That brings me to my fourth point. As I have deepened the dialogue with the parties, I have sensed broad acceptance of the notion that convening a credible, balanced, inclusive and viable Syrian-led and -owned constitutional committee, under United Nations auspices in Geneva, can be important for revitalizing the political process. It can open doors to deeper dialogue and genuine negotiations. I also believe that it is now well understood that a package of understandings is needed to ensure that the Syrian Government and opposition are on board on essential principles of procedure to guide the work of the constitutional committee. It is my hope we will be able to finalize the rules of procedure and the composition of the committee in the near future. I will do everything possible to facilitate its credible composition, including a minimum 30 per cent female representation.

As we focus on developing a real Syrian-led process, we must all acknowledge that external intervention has been a significant factor in the conflict. Five national armies operate across Syria's land and airspace, in tension or even conflict, generating daily risks of international escalation. That involvement, of course, clearly extends beyond the military sphere to a range of other spheres as well.

That brings me to my fifth point — the need to focus on improving international dialogue and cooperation. Some challenges must be addressed urgently. Otherwise, Syria will be engulfed in renewed escalations that would have immense human costs, derail any progress on the political front and risk regional spillover. Intensive diplomacy is under way, but even more is needed regarding the situation in the north-east. The way forward must — to paraphrase the Secretary-General — ensure the unity and territorial integrity of Syria and take into account the security concerns of neighbouring States, while recognizing and giving voice to different components of Syria's population.

Likewise, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's advances in Idlib and escalations in the area underscore the need

to uphold the fragile ceasefire arrangements for Idlib, protect its civilians and counter the Council-listed terrorist groups and foreign fighters that have been such a scourge on Syria, while also addressing the root causes and conditions in which they thrive. I welcome the fresh impetus of the recent Sochi Congress to fully implement the Russian-Turkish memorandum and I urge for it to be a continued focus in the lead-up to the next Astana meeting.

Meanwhile, the international community must ensure that international norms against the use of chemical weapons are respected and enforced. On another note, I would add that the growing risk of further confrontations between Israel and Iran in Syria should not be overlooked.

Beyond crisis management, I note well that key international players express emphatic support for a political settlement for Syria under United Nations auspices and affirm resolution 2254 (2015). They agree on the need to counter Security Council-listed terrorist groups and the need for peace and stability. They support a political settlement that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and preserves Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. They share an appreciation of the realities of 2019 and understand that real diplomacy is needed to address them. At present, different discussion formats are contributing, and the United Nations has engaged judiciously with all who seek to help, but I believe that there are real possibilities for strengthening international support and that we need to be creative in that regard. I will work diligently to that end. If we are to see how issues can be unblocked and how to help the parties move forward in a Syrian-led and-owned process, we may need a common forum where key States engage seriously on those issues.

In conclusion, my engagements with all parties, without exception, have been positive and forward-looking, but of course, as we get deeper into the issues, the parties' willingness to move from good words to real talks will be put to the test. I will engage all, in good faith, with five goals in the period ahead: first, to begin and deepen a sustained dialogue with the Syrian Government and the opposition on building trust and confidence towards a safe, calm and neutral environment; secondly, to see more concrete action on detainees, abductees and missing persons through engagement with the Astana players, the Syrian parties and all concerned; thirdly, to engage a wide range of

Syrians as I proceed and involve them in the process; fourthly, to convene a credible, balanced and inclusive constitutional committee as soon as possible; fifthly, to help the international parties deepen their own dialogue towards the common purpose of a credible and sustainable political settlement of the Syrian conflict that can enjoy international legitimacy.

I have one final thought — Syrians have every capacity to live together in peace, and a political settlement is plainly needed if we are to see real and genuine reconciliation. There is no military solution and the true victors will be those who can move beyond slogans and paint a hopeful picture of what Syria could look like in 10 years — a picture that all Syrians can support, even if the road towards it will be long and hard.

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

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

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

Mr. Cohen (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen for being here today. The United States congratulates him on his appointment and welcomes him to the Security Council for his first briefing as Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. We look forward to working with him to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict through the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). The United States is unwavering in its commitment to achieving a peaceful political settlement to the Syrian conflict in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

I am joined today by the Secretary of State's Special Representative for Syria Engagement, my good friend Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, to underscore the United States determination and sense of urgency towards implementing the blue print of resolution 2254 (2015) for a political transition in Syria, which still remains stalled by the Russian Federation and its supporters, although the Council unanimously adopted it three years ago.

The United States supports the Special Envoy's efforts to convene a legitimate, credible and balanced constitutional committee. We remain prepared to

support the formation of a constitutional committee once the United Nations is satisfied that the membership, composition and rules of procedure are balanced. We once again affirm that the committee must be balanced in its inclusion of civil society, opposition and regime representatives if it is to meet the credibility criteria. The United States welcomes Special Envoy Pedersen's plans to explore other potential initiatives within the four-baskets framework, including constitutional reform and the need for credible preparations for United Nations-administered free and fair elections.

In addition, it is clear that violence must stop in order for a political solution to take hold. One of the best ways that the Council can support Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts on the political track is to ensure the creation of a stable security environment not just in Idlib, but throughout Syria. That, of course, will require the Al-Assad regime and its allies to uphold the calls of resolution 2254 (2015) for a comprehensive nationwide ceasefire. Therefore, it is vital that Security Council members redouble our efforts towards our shared goal of de-escalating the military conflict in Syria in order to create a safe and calm environment, alongside a political process that honours the will of the Syrian people. To that end, the United States strongly urges the parties to maintain the Turkish/Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement in Idlib. We are deeply concerned about both the increase in air strikes and other military activity in Idlib.

Terrorism cannot be used as a pretext for targeting civilians. The United States urges the parties to the Idlib ceasefire to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Idlib governorate in accordance with international humanitarian law. As we have repeatedly stressed since its inception, the Turkish/Russian-brokered ceasefire is essential for protecting the nearly 3 million civilians residing in Idlib. Syrians have experienced significant reductions of air strikes and civilian deaths since the ceasefire went into effect in September 2018. Once again, to repeat what we have said in the Council for many months, any major military operation in Idlib would be a reckless escalation of the conflict and would result in a humanitarian catastrophe far beyond what we have witnessed during previous regime assaults on eastern Ghouta, Aleppo and Homs. The international community should find ways to de-escalate the conflict, including by maintaining the Idlib, ceasefire in order to save lives and provide space for the political process.

Resolution 2254 (2015) also calls on the parties to release arbitrarily detained individuals, particularly women and children. Efforts to release detainees, including abductees and missing persons, held by the Al-Assad regime and Syrian political opposition groups, have been insufficient under the auspices of the Astana guarantors. Progress on the release of detainees and missing persons is an important step towards building the trust and confidence necessary to achieve a political solution, and it is a vital component of a political solution under resolution 2254 (2015).

Next month will be the eighth anniversary of the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The United States believes that a political solution in Syria can be arrived at only through the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). We will continue to support the efforts of the United Nations and Special Envoy Pedersen to achieve that goal.

Mr. Almunayekh (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his valuable briefing. We take this opportunity to offer him and his team our full support in undertaking their difficult task. We hope that his efforts will be crowned by future success in order to move forward the Syrian political process.

We are meeting today for the first time this year to discuss the Syrian political issue. It is an issue that, regrettably, has seen no progress for a number of years. The State of Kuwait has always stressed that the failure of the Security Council to implement its resolutions would prolong and compound conflicts and weaken its credibility. We have seen that happen in Yemen, Palestine and a number of other countries, as we see today in Syria. I am referring in particular to resolution 2254 (2015), which was adopted by consensus in December 2015. The resolution established a road map to reach a just political settlement in Syria, facilitated by the United Nations while led and owned by Syria. That would contribute to restoring stability in this dear Arab country, but unfortunately is not translated yet on the ground.

The Special Envoy therefore has many challenges ahead, but we are confident that he is determined to ensure the implementation of the resolution. His latest visit and meetings with the parties concerned represent a good beginning, which reflects his resolve to revitalize the political process in Syria. The Security Council and the international community must renew

their commitment to the political process, as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015), which established the steps of a political transition process consisting of many stages, including the drafting of a constitution and the holding of free and fair elections, in accordance with the Constitution and under the supervision of the United Nations. Those elections would be held according to the highest international norms of transparency and accountability, inclusive of all Syrians, including those living abroad. Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) are the major terms of reference regarding the Syrian crisis, and the Security Council must ensure their implementation.

It has been more than a year since the Sochi agreement was concluded regarding the establishment of a constitutional committee. To date, the work of such a committee has yet to begin. In that context, we reiterate our call for the committee to be balanced, credible and inclusive of all sectors of Syrian society and to devise its working methods. On 15 February, the Special Envoy expressed in Geneva his hope that the Committee would meet as soon as possible, also in Geneva, to begin serious discussions, which would signal the long-awaited launch of the political process.

Furthermore, like any other political process, confidence-building measures among the parties are important; the most prominent of these is the release of detainees and prisoners. We take note of the recent release of a number of prisoners, but we need to see more progress on this issue. We urge the parties to the conflict to cooperate with the Special Envoy and his Office to achieve further progress in that regard.

The Syrian crisis has seen many violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law. Those responsible must be held accountable. Lasting and comprehensive peace cannot be achieved without justice or with impunity for those who committed crimes against humanity. In that regard, we reiterate our support for the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011.

Perhaps among the most important repercussions of the Syrian crisis is the fate of the refugees and internally displaced persons. Their hope must be restored for a safe and normal life, reunification with their families,

and a safe, voluntary and dignified return to their homes, in accordance with international norms and without regard for political considerations or the narrow interests of any party on the crisis. Measures, such as arbitrary detentions and the expropriation of property, are in contradiction of all efforts aimed at ensuring the safe return for refugees. We also reject any attempt to undertake demographic changes in Syria.

In conclusion, we reaffirm that there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria. A solution can be attained through international concerted efforts to implement resolution 2254 (2015). The upcoming Brussels conference will be an important opportunity to mobilize resources in order to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people and to renew the international community's commitment to resolving the conflict peacefully, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), so that the brotherly Syrian people can achieve their legitimate aspirations and realize a peaceful settlement, agreed to by all parties, while preserving the unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his first briefing to the Council. The lessons he has learned from his initial contacts and the insights he offers on the next steps in the political process are particularly enlightening. At the outset, I would like to assure the Special Envoy of France's full support.

Let there be no mistake about the current situation. It would be a serious error in judgment and a grave political miscalculation to believe that the Syrian tragedy is behind us. It is not, as the country begins its ninth year of conflict. The terrorist threat has not disappeared — far from it. The ceasefire in the north-west is regularly violated by the regime, the risk of regional escalation increases day by day due to the presence of Iran and gross human rights violations by the regime continue with impunity. The overwhelming majority of refugees do not plan to return to Syria and the humanitarian situation remains catastrophic. It is no surprise then — and I return here to my previous point — that the vast majority of refugees do not wish to return to Syria. Statistics from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which estimated that 58,000 refugees returned to Syria in 2018 — barely an increase from 50,000 in 2017 — are telling.

Nonetheless, given that forthright report, France firmly believes that, for the first time in many years, there is a small but genuine window of opportunity to put an end to the Syrian conflict. We have the shared responsibility to seize that opportunity via an inclusive political solution because it is the only way to prevent similar causes and effects of aftershocks of the Syrian crisis. In other words, to prevent another grim decade in Syria, it is the responsibility of the Council to overcome its divisions — I repeat, overcome its divisions — on the basis of our shared objectives and interests. On behalf of France, I would like to make an urgent appeal in that regard. With that objective in mind, I will focus briefly on three main points.

First, our common priority must be to continue the fight against terrorism and to work towards a national ceasefire, in accordance with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015). The fight against Da'esh continues in north-eastern Syria and in Iraq and, as the Council knows, is a top priority for France, which will maintain its involvement on that front. The imminent fall of Da'esh in Baghouz will be an undeniable military success but will in no way mark the end of the threat that Da'esh poses to the region and to our national territories. In that regard, France welcomes the United States announcement that it will maintain a military presence in north-eastern Syria. That is good news for the ongoing fight against Da'esh and for stabilizing the region in order to prevent the resurgence of the terrorist group in another form. Pursuing the fight against terrorism in the north-east requires the protection of our operational partners on the ground in the fight against Da'esh. We all know that the coalition's success against Da'esh would not have been possible without the Syrian Democratic Forces.

With regard to the situation in Idlib, I reiterate France's deep concern about the strengthening of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations. Its neutralization is our common objective but we must spare civilians and bear in mind the possible catastrophic humanitarian, migration and security consequences of an offensive. France is concerned about the increase in the number of ceasefire violations by the Syrian regime, including air strikes. That is why it is now essential to do all in our power to preserve the ceasefire. We call in particular on Russia and Turkey to exercise responsibility as they continue their efforts.

Lastly, the Council must unite to ensure respect for international law and international humanitarian law. Today, I call on members with influence on the parties to the conflict to exert pressure in that regard. First and foremost, that means ensuring the protection of civilian and humanitarian and medical workers, as well as free and unhindered humanitarian access. Obstacles to humanitarian access and the use of torture, forced conscription and arbitrary detention in areas reclaimed by the Syrian regime are clearly unacceptable. It is also imperative to discourage any use of chemical weapons in Syria and to react firmly to any new cases of such use. France's resolve in that regard remains unchanged and uncompromising.

It is more necessary than ever to pave the way for a credible political transition under the auspices of the United Nations. That is our second priority and it is inextricably linked to the first. The regime's military victory, which was achieved thanks to the support of its two allies and at the cost of considerable human and material destruction, is in no way a prelude to peace and reconciliation in Syria. Such an outcome will be possible only if the regime agrees to sit at the table with the opposition and negotiate in good faith.

To that end, France fully supports the Special Envoy's efforts to establish a comprehensive road map based on all elements of resolution 2254 (2015), which is now more than ever our common compass. That implies working in parallel with efforts on the constitution to establish credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance, preparing for free and fair elections under the supervision of the United Nations and developing confidence-building measures that can create the safe and neutral environment outlined in the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), including by addressing the issue of detainees and missing persons, property rights and forced conscription.

The United Nations alone, through the work of the Special Envoy, will be able to make genuine progress on those converging priorities. In that regard, we welcome the Special Envoy's efforts to establish a constitutional package as an entry point to the process. That would require reaching a credible and balanced agreement on both the composition of the third list for the committee and on its rules of procedure so that it can start its work quickly, under the auspices of the United Nations and within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015). We lost valuable time last year and it is clear that the Syrian regime is responsible for failing to establish the

committee, contrary to the commitments made by the Astana group and at the Istanbul Summit.

This will be my last point, and I will make it short. Today we are at a crossroads, and the Council must therefore support the efforts of the Special Envoy. Only an inclusive political solution can provide a lasting response to the Syrian tragedy, the expectations for reconciliation and the threat of terrorism. It is also our responsibility to respond to Syrian victims' need for justice, without which peace will be impossible. That is the aim of our support to the United Nations investigative mechanisms and to efforts to see justice done, including in a national capacity, as I brought up once again at the beginning of the week (see S/PV.8471).

The return of refugees will be essential in the long run, but the key to return is in Damascus, not New York, Brussels or anywhere else. It is up to the regime to establish the conditions that will enable refugees to return in complete safety and with all the guarantees necessary to ensuring respect for their freedoms and the restitution of their property. We all see clearly that those conditions and guarantees are not in place today, so we should understand that without irreversible and credible progress towards a political solution, it will not be possible to encourage refugees' return, pave the way for reconstruction, contemplate any normalization of our relations with the regime or lift the sanctions on it. France and the European Union have affirmed that clear and unambiguous position several times.

Lastly, based on that, France will continue to work tirelessly with its partners to arrive at a credible political solution in support of the Special Envoy's mission. On behalf of France, I want to once again appeal to every member of the Council to regroup on that basis, to stop running on automatic pilot and to move on from posturing to action. There is not a minute to lose, so let us get to work.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We welcome Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to the Council for his first briefing and thank him for his report. We share many of the views that he expressed. Needless to say, one of the key points he made was about the importance of restoring lost confidence not just inside Syria but around it, among all the stakeholders who are engaged in Syria.

We welcome the Special Envoy's willingness to maintain intensive contacts with the parties to the Syrian conflict and key participants in the efforts to

resolve the situation in Syria. That is clearly the key to success of any intermediary. We believe it is important to maintain a normal working dialogue with Damascus, which must be involved in all measures designed to advance the political process and stabilize the situation in the country. That also applies to the March Conference in Brussels, incidentally. On 22 January Mr. Pedersen visited Moscow, where he had extensive talks with Russia's Foreign and Defence Ministers, Sergey Lavrov and Sergey Shoigu. It appears from the results of this and subsequent meetings of the Special Envoy with Russian representatives, including Deputy Foreign Minister Vershinin and Alexander Lavrentiev, Russia's special envoy for Syria, that we have been able to surmount the unpleasant and largely artificially created incident that occurred in December with regard to the formation of the constitutional committee. Together with the Special Envoy and our Astana format partners Turkey and Iran we are continuing the work of finalizing the parameters for launching the committee, created based on the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress and resolution 2254 (2015). We hope to see it launched soon.

We should not fail to note our Turkish and Iranian partners' constructive contribution within the framework of the Astana process, which has enabled us to achieve qualitative change in the situation in Syria, ensuring a genuine ceasefire in the greater part of the country and the start of direct dialogue between the Government and the armed opposition. We hope that in the near future we, the Astana troika, will be able to arrive at mutually acceptable conclusions on the Idlib de-escalation zone and north-eastern Syria in line with the mutual understandings reached at the trilateral summit of the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran in Sochi on 14 February, and needless to say taking full account of the position of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic.

We are willing to work, including in stages and step by step, to implement the tasks ahead, which include eliminating the hotbed of terrorism in Idlib and ensuring the protection of the civilian population. The permanently frozen situation in north-western Syria, which is controlled by militants of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham militants, cannot continue, and those who want to sit on their hands should understand that. We should point out that no one wanted to take pity on the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant by freezing the situation in Hajin or Raqqa. Incidentally, there were a

great many civilian casualties in those places. In that regard we can only welcome the words — basically the admission — of the United States representative that the fight against terrorism cannot be an excuse for destroying the civilian population.

We would like to emphasize that, in addition to the de-escalation and political issues, Astana has been the platform for discussions of important confidence-building measures between the opposing parties such as the exchange of prisoners of war that the Special Envoy mentioned. The exchanges took place in November 2018 and in February of this year, and while they may have been small in number, they give us hope for further progress in this area. All these measures are contributing to stabilization in Syria. An important area of work for the international community is restoring damaged infrastructure and doing mine clearance. On 21 February the Government of the Russian Federation decided to contribute to the United Nations Mine Action Service budget in order to support the mine clearance efforts in the Syrian Arab Republic, and we urge our colleagues to join in these efforts. I think I can say on behalf of the whole Astana troika that we are open to cooperating with all interested parties who sincerely — I emphasize “sincerely” — intend to help to stabilize and advance a political settlement in Syria. The quadrilateral summit in Istanbul in October 2018 was an important contribution to the bridge-building process.

We want to emphasize that the situation in Syria has changed for the better, and many people have acknowledged the changes that have happened. We have seen positive steps on the part of States of the region seeking to normalize relations with Damascus. We believe that economic cooperation and participation in the restoration of Syria's national economy will help to accelerate that process. We hope that an openness to achieving the full restoration of relations between the Arab countries and Syria, and Damascus's speedy return to the Arab family, will lend significant support to the Syrian settlement process, in accordance with the fundamental principles of international law and the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. In its national capacity, as a member of the Security Council and a participant in the Astana troika, Russia is ready to continue working with the Special Envoy to bring peace back to Syria. Mr. Pedersen can count on our help.

Mr. Adom (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation would like to commend Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for the quality of his first briefing of the Council in a public meeting, and to wish him every success in carrying out his mission.

Côte d'Ivoire has noted with concern the violations of the agreement reached between Russia and Turkey on 17 September 2018 establishing a de-escalation zone in Idlib governorate, particularly by the jihadist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which has strengthened its control over more than 90 per cent of the area. The violation of that agreement undermines efforts to stabilize the situation in the Idlib de-escalation zone and could jeopardize the smooth running of the political process expected to lead to the formation of the constitutional committee.

My country is also concerned about the military escalation in the Hajin region, in south-east Deir ez-Zor governorate, where military operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant have continued and affected nearly 25,000 displaced persons from that region. In that adverse context, Côte d'Ivoire urges the parties to the conflict to cease hostilities and favour the path of dialogue to ensure lasting peace in the Syrian Arab Republic. It wishes to remind the warring parties of their obligation to respect human rights and international humanitarian law, whose violations shall not go unpunished, whoever the perpetrators may be.

My country therefore calls on all actors in the Syrian conflict, civil society and the international community to cooperate fully with the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. In that regard, my delegation welcomes the recognition of the authority of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to identify the perpetrators of chemical-weapons use in Syria, which occurred at the end of the fourth special session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention, held in The Hague on 27 June 2018.

Côte d'Ivoire welcomes all initiatives aimed at the political settlement of the Syrian crisis, including the holding of the tripartite summit on 14 February 2019, held in Sochi, and it takes note of the resulting final communiqué. Similarly, my country welcomes the

progress made within the pilot project of the working group established by the Astana process and the United Nations to investigate the fate of missing persons and release detainees. That progress, as demonstrated by prisoner exchanges between the Syrian Government and armed groups between 24 November 2018 and 12 February 2019, contributes to building trust between the parties to the conflict and creating the necessary conditions for the continuation of the political process.

In conclusion, my country reiterates its full support for the efforts of Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, and calls on the Syrian parties to strengthen their cooperation with him in order to stimulate new momentum in the political process, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). It also encourages the guarantors of the complementary processes in Astana and Sochi to continue their efforts towards a definitive and lasting solution to the crisis in Syria.

Lastly, it urges the parties to the conflict to agree on the effective establishment of the constitutional committee to draft the new constitution with a view to holding free and impartial elections under the supervision of the United Nations.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buyswerwe (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his first briefing to the Security Council and reassure him of our full support.

I will focus on two points — the political situation and the situation on the ground.

First, with respect to the political situation, in 2015 — four years ago already — the Council mandated the United Nations to facilitate the intra-Syrian political process for the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). In Belgium's view, the Syrian conflict can be resolved only through a negotiated political process, in accordance with that resolution and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). Resolution 2254 (2015) contains all the ingredients necessary for a political solution — a political process, a revision of the Constitution and free elections with the participation of the Syrian diaspora in an environment that protects the rights of Syrians.

A Syrian-owned, Syrian-led constitutional committee, facilitated by the United Nations, has the potential to serve as an entry point or a key that opens the door to other aspects of the political process. We

support the important role that the Special Envoy must play in its establishment. Nevertheless, if we want that committee to be a real instrument that works effectively, we must ensure that its composition is credible, balanced, inclusive and representative of all components of Syrian society and that each agreement on its composition is accompanied by procedures and working methods.

Significant work was done last year and extensive consultations have taken place. Unfortunately, that work has not yet been completed, neither in terms of the formation of the committee nor in terms of working procedures. It is now up to the new Special Envoy to put in place his own strategy and we encourage him to explore the various possible avenues, within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015), in order to achieve concrete progress.

That peaceful, inclusive and sustainable transition must take place in a safe, stable and calm environment. On the one hand, lasting peace is not possible without a reconciliation process and reconciliation is not possible without justice. We attach particular importance to the fight against impunity and, in that regard, we support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, the commission of inquiry mandated by the Human Rights Council and the accountability mechanism set up within the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

On the other hand, the voluntary and sustainable return of refugees will take place only if life in a safe and dignified context is guaranteed. In order to ensure a dignified return, there must be an end to looting, expropriation and arbitrary enforcement of the rules. Syrians aspire to a country based on the rule of law. Security goes far beyond the absence of armed conflict; it also includes the protection of fundamental rights and the absence of repression and the forced recruitment into the armed forces. Thousands of Syrians continue to be illegally arrested and arbitrarily detained. We call on all actors to continue their efforts to put an end to those practices.

Secondly, with regard to the situation on the ground, violence continues and is causing the displacement of thousands of people, particularly in the north. In Idlib, the agreement between Turkey and Russia, which

was signed in September 2018, has helped to avert the prospect of a humanitarian disaster but the situation remains particularly fragile. It is imperative that all parties remain fully committed to the agreement.

In Deir ez-Zor, the last fights against Da'esh are taking place. The end of Da'esh as a terrorist organization with a territorial base does not mean the end of the threat it poses. It is essential that the international community continue its efforts to prevent its resurgence and capacity to cause harm. While neutralizing and judging those responsible for Da'esh's crimes, parallel work is needed to avoid reproducing the causes that led to its creation and development. We must do everything we can to ensure the protection of civilians. In that regard, we call for a national cessation of hostilities.

As this is my first statement to the Council on the political situation in Syria, allow me to end with this reflection.

In order to continue this difficult mission, the Special Envoy will need the support of the international community, the parties to the conflict and the countries of the region, and he will also need the members of the Security Council to work together. The success of his mission will also depend largely on the political will of the parties to the conflict and we urge all those who have influence on the parties to use it to support Mr. Pedersen's efforts. Ultimately, it is only if there is a minimum of trust between the parties and if the sense of urgency is shared by all of us that we can really make progress towards the essential settlement of the conflict.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): First, I would like to thank Ambassador Pedersen for his briefing and wish him every success in his work as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria. We are confident that his extensive diplomatic experience will serve him well on the long and often tortuous road travelled by his predecessors in the quest for peace in Syria. We recognize that the challenges ahead are very serious.

For almost eight long years now, the Syrian people have been plunged into a conflict with devastating consequences — a conflict that has stripped millions of people of the conditions necessary to achieve a promising future. We must work to ensure that a new Syrian generation is born free from the odious scourge of war. The Dominican Republic is a faithful believer in dialogue and in the concerted search for peaceful

solutions to conflicts. We therefore understand that the process of mediation and rapprochement between the parties responsible for driving the political renewal of Syria must be promoted on the basis of the provisions and guidelines of resolution 2254 (2015), thus ensuring its full implementation.

Our task is clear — we must work together as one to strengthen the role of the United Nations as facilitator of the political process in Syria and as a guarantor of conditions that are viable for all parties but especially for the Syrian population. We know that the task ahead of us in this new stage in the Syrian conflict is not easy — how to unify criteria, purposes and objectives. That is what is implied by what we see as a political process that must be carried out by Syria and for the Syrians as shapers of their own future. That will also require the full participation of all levels of society, including organized groups, in an inclusive, transparent and safe environment. The achievement of a sustainable and lasting peace in Syria that leads to national reconciliation in a fragile and complex context leads us to reflect on two points that we consider crucial to highlight collectively.

First, we must build confidence in the political process so that the Syrian people can make it their own as part of a broader and more integral political transformation towards the attainment of their own peace. We believe it is important to emphasize that there is a need for concrete facts that demonstrate the necessary political will to move forward so that the Syrian people can see the real fruits of the process, such as the provision of sustainable solutions for the civilian population and for its security and protection, as well as the acceleration of the process of releasing detainees and hostages and the clarification of the situation of disappeared persons.

Secondly, we must ensure the full participation of civil society, in particular Syrian women, both inside and outside the country. Syrian women should no longer be seen as passive entities, victims of war or consorts of terrorists. The reality we see is that, more and more, Syrian women are owning new spaces as activists, journalists, artists and entrepreneurs. Let us put in their hands the construction of a new country and we will see extraordinary results.

As Special Envoy De Mistura said on 20 December in this Chamber (see S/PV.8434), we need a renewed sense of our common purpose and concerted action in

the Security Council if 2019 is to be the real turning point for Syria. The Dominican Republic shares this sense of renewal and is willing to participate in that spirit by building bridges and fostering dialogue. Let us be ambitious in our aspirations.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for this briefing and commend him for his active efforts since his assumption of his position to promote a political settlement in Syria.

Years of conflict in Syria have brought profound suffering to the country and its people. The Syrian people long for peace and to return home and rebuild their normal lives as soon as possible. The large-scale conflict in Syria has essentially come to an end.

China welcomes the meeting in Sochi on 14 February of leaders from Russia, Turkey and Iran to discuss the Syrian issue, which produced a joint statement reaffirming continued efforts to crack down on terrorist groups and individuals listed by the Security Council, as well as a renewed commitment to the Syrian political process. As the next step, the international community should focus on promoting work in the following areas.

First, we must continue to advance the process of political settlement in Syria. The United Nations should strengthen coordination with the Syrian Government, promote the prompt formation of a representative Syrian constitutional committee that is acceptable to all and that accommodates the legitimate concerns of the Syrian Government and all other parties with a view to launching an effective and sustained Syrian political process. The United Nations should continue to intensify its efforts and act as the main channel of mediation. The members of the Council should be united and speak with one voice in order to create the conditions for a political solution to the Syrian issue.

Secondly, we must persist in combating terrorist forces. There is a tendency for terrorist groups in Idlib to re-emerge, which threatens Syria's security and stability and hinders reconstruction and the return of refugees. The international community should strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, harmonize standards, crack down on all terrorist groups listed by the Council and prevent the resurgence of terrorist organizations to undermine the hard-won stability of the security situation.

Thirdly, we must encourage Syrian parties to meet each other half way. In accordance with the spirit of resolution 2254 (2015), on the basis of respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, and in line with the principle of a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led process, the parties concerned in the Syrian issue should promote the adoption of an inclusive political process by all Syrian parties and seek a solution acceptable to all. China has been consistently committed to a political solution in Syria. We stand ready to enhance communication and cooperation with the United Nations and all other relevant parties and to play an active and constructive role in advancing the political settlement in Syria.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): My delegation would like to welcome my good friend, Ambassador Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, with whom we look forward to working closely in moving the peace process in Syria forward. We wish once again to reaffirm our full support and cooperation for him and his team. We would also like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing to the Council today, having taken note of his various visits and meetings with all parties concerned since he took office on 7 January.

Indonesia calls on all parties to support the Special Envoy's efforts in facilitating a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis within the framework of the Geneva process and resolution 2254 (2015). We also believe that it is essential that the Security Council strongly signal to all parties our full backing of the efforts of the Special Envoy.

We have noted with thanks Mr. Pedersen's insights, in particular, the progress vis-à-vis the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Rukban, the release of detainees and the relative calm in several areas. Nevertheless, the situation is still precarious, particularly in terms of, inter alia, the continued threat of terrorism by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and the issue of internally displaced persons. We would like to highlight several points.

First, Indonesia believes that it is critical that we ensure our support and commitment to establishing an inclusive and credible political process in Syria, including the setting up of a constitutional committee that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. This is indeed key to establishing a Syrian-owned and

Syrian-led political solution that is facilitated by the United Nations, pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015).

The establishment of a constitutional committee is not an easy task, but it is indeed doable. We note that the Astana guarantors presented a third list to the Special Envoy in Geneva on 18 December 2018. We call on the Special Envoy to continue his engagement and consultations with the Syrian Government and the guarantors, bearing in mind that the necessity of having the first meeting of the constitutional committee in Geneva is greater than ever. All parties' commitment and consistency in making progress in this process is critical, as it would open the door towards efforts that could further the political process. And on this journey of finding a lasting political solution, the international community must always bear in mind that it is the Syrian people who will decide their own future.

Secondly, my delegation strongly believes that a truly genuine dialogue is crucial to the success of the peace process, as it is the most important foundation for building trust and confidence. To that end, Indonesia sincerely hopes that the dialogue among all relevant stakeholders will continue, with a view to contributing to a credible and sustainable solution to the conflict. In the short run, dialogue is also critical to moving the process forward by helping to build consensus and curb the violence and hostilities that continue to imperil the prospects of peace.

Thirdly, and as the Security Council has said for many years, all sides must cease hostilities and avoid resorting to force. This is fundamental for progress to be made on the political front. In that regard, we again call on all parties to respect the current ceasefire agreements. We believe that it is important to reiterate the important role of ceasefire agreements in facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance, which saves civilian lives and thereby promotes the cause of peace and reconciliation.

I wish to make clear that we have no option but to pursue a political solution in Syria in the spirit of resolution 2254 (2015). In addition, we all know how devastating the humanitarian situation in the country is. Having heard Special Envoy Pedersen's briefing just now on the precarious situation with regard to plight of civilians, displaced persons, refugees and poverty, we can safely say that, unless we achieve the objective of a political solution, the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate. In Indonesia's view, that is

an option we cannot afford to entertain. We reaffirm our national commitment to a comprehensive solution within the prism of full respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and within the context of the United Nations-facilitated political process.

Finally, we urge all parties to support Ambassador Pedersen in his very important task of moving the political process forward and leading the way to a peaceful resolution to the conflict. We have listened carefully to the five goals that Ambassador Pedersen laid out. We believe that they could form a valuable road map for the achievement of a durable solution. We naturally welcome the five goals, since the number five has always been important for us. We commend Ambassador Pedersen's efforts to continue engaging with all parties, including civil society actors, women and young people.

In conclusion, we would like to imagine a prosperous, stable and peaceful Syria arising in the near future, where children can roam and play freely in the streets of the Syrian Republic. We hope that Special Envoy Pedersen can bend history in the direction that the people of Syria expect and could ultimately accept.

Mr. Matjila (South Africa): The delegation of South Africa would like join others in thanking the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen, for his insightful, broad and forward-looking briefing. As this is the first time that my delegation participates in the political briefing on Syria, please allow me to join my colleagues in congratulating Mr. Pedersen on assuming his important role as the facilitator of the political process in Syria. He has a challenging task ahead of him. Our responsibility as the Security Council, together with the backing of the international community, is to provide him with all the support necessary to successfully facilitate a Syrian-led, United Nations-sponsored political process, as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015). We welcome his determination to build upon the solid progress achieved by his predecessor, Mr. Staffan de Mistura.

Next month will mark eight years since the crisis in Syria began. We are extremely concerned about the devastating and tragic consequences that the war in Syria continues to have on the people of the country. It is also having an increasingly destabilizing impact on the wider region, through the displacement of people, the exacerbation of political and sectarian differences and the spread of extremism. It is the Security Council's

responsibility to ensure that political progress is made and that Syria returns to normal. The people of Syria deserve a future that is stable and prosperous.

Since the Syrian conflict erupted, South Africa has maintained a principled position by reiterating the importance of protecting the fundamental interests and rights of the Syrian people, of maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East region, and upholding the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the basic norms governing international relations.

We reiterate our view that the only sustainable solution to the Syrian question remains the achievement of a political solution through an inclusive Syrian-led dialogue aimed at achieving a political transition that reflects the will of the Syrian people, with guaranteed protection for all groups in Syrian society. We therefore call upon the Council to unite behind the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) as the road map towards a long-term political solution in Syria.

We welcome the extensive consultations that Mr. Pedersen has undertaken with the Government of Syria, the opposition parties and key partners in the region since January, when he took up his responsibilities. Those comprehensive and in-depth engagements are critical to building trust among the people of Syria and the region and to move the process forward. Equally important to the success of the political process in Syria is the need to respect the ceasefire and de-escalation agreements and to continue to fight terrorism.

Furthermore, South Africa commends Mr. Pedersen's efforts to continue overseeing the deliberations on the establishment of the constitutional committee. We call upon all relevant parties to make every possible effort to support Ambassador Pedersen in that endeavour.

In order to ensure that the Syrian-led and United Nations-sponsored political dialogue does not end behind big walls and in great halls in foreign countries, we need to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons and refugees to resettle peacefully in their ancestral lands. We need to receive regular feedback from Mr. Pedersen and to ensure that all the groups have a seat at the table and participate in talks on progress so that the Syrian people are not reduced to being mere observers in a process that will determine their future and that of future generations. Rather, we must make

sure they participate in and own the outcome of the process and build a stable, prosperous Syria.

Finally, the Council and the international community should support a political solution to the situation in Syria as a matter of priority and continue to support the United Nations, including the Special Envoy, as well as other mediation efforts aimed at resolving the conflict. South Africa continues to maintain that democracy is an unassailable right of the Syrian people and therefore remains convinced that in a complex and diverse society such as Syria's, there can be no military solution, only a political negotiated settlement.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive briefing and commend him for his clear methodology of work. I warmly welcome him to the Security Council and wish him all the best. He has our full support.

Regrettably, as the Syrian conflict enters its ninth year, continuous violence is widespread on the ground and brutal violations of international law, including abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law, still take place. Now, at the beginning of 2019, we are at a critical juncture. We strongly believe that the Idlib ceasefire agreement introduced some positive dynamics. However, questions remain about the future sustainability of the arrangement, the degree of compliance by parties to the conflict in Syria, as well as the ongoing difficult situation of internally displaced persons and other civilians present in Idlib and its surroundings. As we heard two days ago from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the situation is especially worrying in the north-west and north-east of the country. We need to once again emphasize the need to prevent military hostilities, which could have disastrous humanitarian consequences.

Let me also briefly touch on the very important issue of accountability for war crimes. We urge all parties to the conflict to condemn arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, hostage-taking and forced disappearances, and to protect humanitarian workers and journalists.

I underscore that the political process continues to fail to gain traction, including with regard to the establishment of the constitutional committee, the first step towards a genuine political process under United Nations supervision. We see a special role for Syrian women in that regard.

Let me underline something that has already been mentioned by many around this table — no military solution to the conflict can bring sustainable peace to the Syrians. Instead, we should aim at reaching a framework for an intra-Syrian framework political agreement. A cessation of hostilities may give a chance for peace talks to succeed under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva and to gain momentum so that a political solution may finally be reached. We also call on the Astana guarantors to follow through on their commitment to protecting civilians as a matter of priority.

Let me also insist 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 the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria, has a particular role to play in that process. That is why we express our full support for all of the Envoy's efforts to establish a constitutional committee as soon as possible. We ask all the actors involved, in particular the Astana guarantors, to support that process. The constitutional committee should be established now, as a matter of priority, and further steps should swiftly follow to enable a negotiated political transition process. It will require the full and constructive engagement of all parties to the conflict. A special role must be played by the Syrian authorities, who should participate in the negotiations in good faith and without preconditions.

Allow me to reiterate the European Union's common position on the reconstruction of Syria. We believe that it should commence once an inclusive political transition is firmly under way, as we need to support the safe return of the millions of Syrian people who have fled their homes. We believe that the primary long-term solution for Syrian refugees throughout the region is their sustainable, safe, dignified and voluntary return to their country of origin, in accordance with international law and the principle of non-refoulement.

That is why the European Union is organizing the third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria in March, demonstrating our commitment to millions of people affected by the conflict. The conference will also renew international support for the United Nations-facilitated Syrian-led and -owned political process, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué.

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): Let me too welcome the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. As our Polish colleague just remarked, his briefing was very clear. He has a very clear methodological approach, and I can only say that we stand fully behind the five priorities he presented.

I believe that, on the basis of resolution 2254 (2019) and under United Nations leadership, there is a window of opportunity to find a solution to this terrible conflict. Let me also echo what my Belgian colleague highlighted — that what is key is to gain the confidence of all of the participants, which is the basis for Mr. Pedersen's success.

From a German perspective, and as a number of colleagues from Kuwait, France, Belgium and Poland have added, there needs to be a fifth priority — accountability. Reconciliation in Syria will not be possible without accountability. Germany is now prosecuting members of the Syrian regime who have been accused of abhorrent crimes. It is necessary that we stop impunity, and Germany fully supports the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. As in other crises and conflicts, no lasting reconciliation will be possible without an end to impunity.

Let me also highlight the need at this stage for confidence-building measures. I believe that the Special Envoy mentioned the releases of 42 detainees. The Russian Ambassador also welcomed that. I believe that Russia will continue to exert pressure on the Syrian regime so that there are additional releases. With regard to confidence-building measures, we therefore have to do more so that additional detainees are released, those abducted are freed and we enjoy further clarity concerning missing persons. With regard to returns, we need those confidence-building measures. People will come home only if they know that there is no torture, that there is no use of chemical weapons, that there will be no forced recruitment and that their homes are not expropriated.

Among the priorities that the Special Envoy mentioned, I wanted to highlight the constitutional committee. I think that that is extremely important. I agree with my Russian colleague, who, with regard to the third list, mentioned the unpleasant circumstances

of December 2018. Perhaps, we have a different interpretation of that. We fully support the decision made by Staffan de Mistura at that time to reject the proposals made by the Astana group concerning the third list. It is very important that, with regard to the constitutional committee, we have a credible, balanced and inclusive committee, because we need that as a basis for the political process. In that context, I wish the Special Envoy good luck in achieving that goal. I would also encourage him, in putting the list, together to ensure that women are represented. Thirty per cent representation would be a minimal amount, as they represent 50 per cent of the population. I think that it should be 50 per cent, but 30 per cent would already be a positive step. We know, after all, that the women and children have suffered most in the conflict and that they have to be represented. We appreciate his mentioning civil society and that he wants to engage the latter in finding a political solution.

My last point concerns the humanitarian situation. Germany is among the largest donors of humanitarian aid. My Polish colleague just mentioned that the European Union (EU) has scheduled another donors' conference for March. The EU is the largest donor of humanitarian aid and will also potentially be a major donor in terms of reconstruction. In that regard, we would have liked to demonstrate to our colleagues in the Security Council what Brussels can do by taking a trip there next month. In any case, I can only repeat what my French and Polish colleagues said, which is that we will participate in reconstruction only with a credible and inclusive political process and transition under way.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the convening of this meeting and for the briefing by Mr. Pedersen. We acknowledge his intense work with a view to establishing a constructive dialogue and relations built on trust with the key actors, while gaining detailed knowledge of their positions. We are familiar with his exemplary qualifications, wish him every success in navigating the delicate task ahead of him and reiterate our full support.

Given the impact of the Syrian conflict on the country's population, regional stability and the credibility of the Security Council, we reaffirm the urgent need to move forward the inclusive political process under the auspices of the United Nations. The Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015) must continue to guide our work. We stress

the importance for all parties to engage constructively in finding a political solution, while looking towards the future and showing flexibility and national unity so as to build the trust needed to promote reconciliation. That essential positive spirit must be immediately reflected in efforts to draft a new constitution laying the political and institutional foundations for achieving sustainable peace in Syria.

We hope that the constitutional committee will be convened in Geneva as soon as possible. To that end, we believe that it is necessary for the parties to continue to work on measures fostering an improved environment of understanding, including the release of detainees, the identification of missing persons and the transfer of human remains. We welcome the progress that has been made in this area under the Astana agreement, and we encourage further substantive developments.

We also stress the need to avoid any escalation of the conflict that would undermine the prospects for reaching a political settlement. Maintaining respect for the Idlib agreement, brokered by Turkey and the Russian Federation, is of fundamental importance in those circumstances. We welcome the willingness of both countries to seek peaceful solutions to the issue of terrorism, which is particularly acute in north-western Syria. Another major challenge concerns addressing the grave situation faced by millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, which entails not only the availability of financial resources, but mustering the political will to guarantee them a voluntary, safe and dignified return under internationally accepted parameters. The property rights of those persons must not be abrogated in any way.

In conclusion, I reaffirm Peru's full commitment to preserving the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Syria. Accordingly, any de-escalation or other measures, including the presence of foreign forces to combat terrorism, must always be temporary.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I will add our voice to all those welcoming the Special Envoy and thanking him for his briefing.

I think that there has been a lot of identity of view today, and it is all centred around our support for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. I just want to note that, to date, we have had resolutions, we have got principles, we have got baskets, we have got pillars and we have not had any meaningful progress, in particular with regard to the notion of a political

settlement. I believe therefore that the most useful thing I can do today is to add the United Kingdom's voice to all those pledging to support the Special Envoy, as well as to highlight one theme that I think nearly every speaker has touched upon.

As the Special Envoy said, that concerns the critical importance of an eventual settlement that is inclusive of all the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, which is related to what the German Ambassador just said about reconstruction. For Syria to be rehabilitated within the international community in the way that we all want to see, there needs to be a political settlement firmly based on resolution 2254 (2015) and a representative set of politics in Syria that address all the underlying issues that led to the crisis in the first place. We are not going to get there quickly, and I am not going to talk about the constitutional committee, which has bedevilled the Security Council for far too long. I am going to say that we trust the Special Envoy to use his very best efforts to make progress on that absolutely critical part.

To avoid any doubt, there is nothing ideological in the United Kingdom's position on this. We want a political settlement that is inclusive and credible and one that will last. We will support the Special Envoy to the hilt in reaching that settlement. I would like to put that on the table because I think it is a very critical point. I join all those speakers who have called on members of the Council with strong influence on the Syrian authorities to use that influence to support the Special Envoy in making serious progress, because the situation has gone on too long. I really hope that by the time the Special Envoy returns next month, there will be something more to say than the messages that we have repeated for so many months and so many years.

The other point I wanted to make is about Idlib. I agree with other speakers who have made the very important point about our concern for Idlib and for the safety of civilians there. The fight against terrorism is not a license to harm civilians, and I think that point bears repeating. I endorse what other speakers have said about humanitarian access.

Lastly, I would like to make common cause with the French representative and his remarks about north-eastern Syria. We too welcome the American announcement. It is very important. There is more to be done against Da'esh, even as the territorial manifestation of Da'esh is being defeated. I hope that we can continue

to collaborate on combating terrorism but that ought to be in the context of assisting an overall political settlement in Syria. I repeat that it is not an excuse or a justification to be used by the Syrian authorities to go after the Syrian people.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as representative of Equatorial Guinea.

We welcome the new Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen, and thank him for his briefing on recent developments in Syria. This was his first briefing to the Security Council. Equatorial Guinea would like to extend its full support for his new mission. We are pleased that, since his first meeting, held in mid-January with the Damascus authorities, he has expressed his full willingness to make every effort to achieve a credible political solution that will allow for a lasting resolution to a conflict that has lasted more than eight years. Such a commitment reaffirms, without a doubt, that there is no military solution to the conflict, but only a political one. Based on that premise, the Special Envoy would agree with me that it is essential to establish objective, frank and unhindered cooperation between the Syrian authorities and the United Nations, as well as with the Astana guarantors, with the aim of exploring common ground and divisions.

We would like to see progress in establishing the constitutional committee. We believe that the committee could be very valuable in promoting a peaceful and inclusive solution to the conflict. The Syrian Government has managed to strengthen its control and authority throughout its national territory. Given the situation, we believe that the Government must demonstrate considerable willingness to negotiate and make concessions in order to reach a broad-based, acceptable political solution and end the violence that has affected the country for more than eight years.

With the relative decrease in the level of violence and expected increase in humanitarian aid for a population that has been adversely affected by the war, the political process must be accelerated. The former Special Envoy made a considerable effort in the past four years to promote the political process, with the support of the Council. The current Special Envoy has our ongoing support to ensure that efforts continue with a view to reaching the desired outcome that Syrians and the international community long for. That

is why we welcome the meetings between Mr. Pedersen and the Syrian opposition, in particular the Syrian Negotiation Committee and the Russian authorities, the recent summit of the Astana guarantors in Sochi, as well as the meeting with the High Representative of the European Union.

For the Government of Equatorial Guinea, it is now time for Syria and all parties involved to move into an active phase of the political process. In that regard, we have high hopes for the transition to an active political process, which includes establishing a constitutional committee, drafting a constitution, and developing a mechanism to adopt and proclaim the constitution, which would all improve the situation in Syria. We emphasize the need to establish a mechanism to ensure that it is launched and becomes operational, under the auspices of the United Nations, as agreed in January 2018 in Sochi.

We hope that the third list, on civil society representatives, will not deviate from the objective of creating a balanced, inclusive and trustworthy constitutional committee, in accordance with the decisions of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue, held in Sochi, and resolution 2254 (2015). In that regard, we encourage the Special Envoy to continue to consult with the parties in a timely manner in order to achieve a list that enjoys the broadest possible consensus of all parties. As we recently stated, Equatorial Guinea hopes that there will be no further delays in establishing the constitutional committee and that the deadlock in negotiations will not undermine the Astana process. We encourage Special Envoy Pedersen to continue exploring all opportunities to overcome the obstacles on the path to establishing the committee. In so doing, he will be able to convene its first meeting without delay.

In the hopes that the third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, scheduled for 12-14 March, will succeed in mobilizing the \$9 billion required for the United Nations Humanitarian Response Plan to ease the suffering of millions of Syrians who have endured the consequences of the conflict since 2011, Equatorial Guinea will remain fully committed to a political resolution to the Syrian crisis, within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to welcome Mr. Geir Pedersen and thank him for his first briefing to the Council.

I sympathize with Geir Pedersen today and express my solidarity with him in the light of the worrisome number of preconditions and refusals expressed by some colleagues — I repeat, by some and not all of our colleagues — while others have encouraged him to move forward in implementing his mandate and carrying out his noble task, which has our approval.

Today, we have heard a staggering series of moody and selective opinions concerning the mandate of the so-called Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, nearly six years after the beginning of the Envoy's mission. Six years, and we are still hearing strange, moody and selective opinions concerning the mandate of the Special Envoy. Of course, the objective of those opinions is to stick a spoke in the wheels and hamper him in his efforts and mandate, while putting political pressure on him and distorting his objective reading of the situation in my country. That is why my advice for my dear colleague Geir Pedersen would be to reduce the number of briefings that he delivers to the Council so that he can carry out his noble mission in accordance with his mandate, which he knows and understands very well and which we support.

During the Special Envoy's visit last month, he held useful discussions in Damascus. We affirmed Syria's readiness to cooperate with him in order to guarantee the success of his mission and facilitate a Syrian-led and owned inter-Syrian dialogue for moving forward with the political process. That is, first and foremost, a Syrian interest, more so than that of any other country. In conjunction with that, we affirmed to him our pursuit of efforts to eliminate terrorism, put an end to the illegitimate foreign presence across Syrian territories and preserve the effective maintenance of Syria's unity, sovereignty and independence. Any political process that does not take those elements into account will remain an unrealistic solution without political prospects.

That said, I would like to recall what the statement our American colleague has just made, which was commended by my British and French colleagues, about the decision of the United States Administration

to maintain an occupying force in part of the Syrian territory. That was said in the presence of members of the Security Council, who are responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security and mandated to implement scores of resolutions adopted by the Council, which stipulate that the Council is unanimous in favour of preserving the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of Syria. The Council's members have affirmed that in more than 20 resolutions. Nevertheless, today we have heard our American colleague, commended with pride by my British and French colleagues, talking about the decision of the United States Administration to maintain the presence of 200 or 400 intelligence elements and marine troops on a dear part of our territory.

In that context, I note that we stand ready to directly consider, with Mr. Pedersen during his next visit to Damascus, issues relating to cooperation between the United Nations and Syria, including the formation of a constitutional committee and the various elements relating to that. However, it is now clear that those who are delaying the launch of the work of that committee are the same parties that are interfering in the internal affairs of Syria and seeking to impose their agenda and preconditions on the actions of the committee. In that respect, we stress that any action pertaining to the constitution must be founded on the principle that the Syrian people alone have the right to decide the future of their country, without foreign interference, given that the Constitution and all related issues are a purely sovereign matter, solely decided upon by Syrians.

The first paragraph of every resolution adopted by the Council on what has been called the Syrian crisis states that the Security Council reaffirms

“its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations”.

Those are the words of the Security Council. That commitment, which goes hand in hand with the common denominator that is supposed to bring us together — namely, respect for the provisions of the Charter and the principles of international law, — immediately requires the following.

First, the illegitimate presence of foreign forces, including American, French, British and Turkish forces, in all territories of the Syrian Arab Republic must be brought to an end and the so-called

international coalition must be dissolved so as to end the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by that coalition, including the total destruction of the city of Raqqa, which was undertaken on the pretext of eliminating Da'esh there. In addition, much infrastructure was destroyed that was symbolic of the development of the Syrian people and took many years to build.

Any foreign military presence in Syria, without the approval of the Syrian Government, is a full-fledged aggression that needs to be ended immediately. That is how we, as a State, would deal with this issue. In that context, my country categorically rejects the hostile and changing statements made by the United States Administration with respect to keeping a reduced force in my country, regardless of the pretexts given to justify such presence.

Secondly, the efforts of the Syrian State, its allies and friends to combat the remnants of terrorist groups such as Da'esh and the Al-Nusra Front, as well as entities and individuals related to them, must be supported. Any support for those terrorist groups must cease. Moreover, work to return foreign terrorist fighters, including Europeans and others, to their countries of origin and to hold them accountable for the crimes that they committed against the Syrian and Iraqi peoples must be given support. The fundamental pillar of the terrorist war to which my country has been subject has always been the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, who were brought to Syria from the four corners of the globe. Indeed, more than 100,000 terrorists were sent to Syria from more than 100 Member States of this international Organization.

Around five years after the Security Council's adoption of resolution 2170 (2014), which called for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign terrorist fighters from Syria, a European official just told us that "the return of our terrorist fellow citizens from Syria represents a danger for my country". That official has thereby deviated from the propaganda that has been broadcast by his country for years about those terrorists being birds of peace and members of the Syrian moderate opposition. Another European official just told us that those terrorists are "the enemies of European nations". That official has also deviated from his country's years-long propaganda campaign, which holds that "those are jihadists and friends of the Syrian people".

Members of the Council recall what Laurent Fabius, former French Foreign Minister, said in Marrakech on 12 December 2012, to the effect that French jihadists are doing a good job in Syria, and I now repeat his words in French in order to help my French colleague to recall them. Worse still, a third European official considers that the return of those terrorists to Europe is an "extremely difficult matter". I would like to ask this European official why it was easy for some Governments to recruit, finance, train and send those European terrorists to Syria.

The irresponsible position regarding the return of foreign terrorist fighters to their home countries and their prosecution for what they have done in Syria and Iraq clearly proves that some countries are afraid of the information that the terrorists would reveal about the role of the States that sponsored them. It also shows that those countries would like their terrorists to remain a factor of destabilization in my country and in the Middle East as a whole. They would also like to continue to invest in those terrorists and recycle them so that they can be sent to other parts of the world in the future.

We are not making this up. Some time ago, the Algerian authorities announced that they had detained hundreds of terrorists from Da'esh and other organizations on the Algeria-Niger border, who turned out upon investigation to have come from Aleppo in Syria. Who sent hundreds of terrorists from Aleppo to the Algeria-Niger border? Who provided them with transportation and logistical support?

Thirdly, in order to bring an end to the suffering of the Syrian people and give them the opportunity to return to their normal lives and meet their daily needs, the coercive economic sanctions, which have had a devastating effect on all Syrians, must be immediately and unconditionally lifted. The sanctions have caused immense losses to our national economy that go far beyond the value of the humanitarian assistance that has been offered to Syrians.

Fourthly, the Syrian State must be supported in its efforts to create an environment conducive to the return of displaced persons and refugees to their homes, towns and cities with safety and dignity. I reiterate the appeal to all those who have left the country because of terrorism to return and shoulder their national responsibility to rebuild their country, which belongs to its entire people.

Our national anthem begins with the words “Defenders of the homeland, may peace be upon you, refuse to be humiliated”. Those words demonstrate the commitment of the Syrian people to their political independence territorial integrity and high appreciation to the defenders of the country who are its strong shield, namely, the Syrian Arab Army and the armed forces that have made enormous sacrifices to preserve the sovereignty of Syria and the independence of its national decision-making to oppose foreign interference and any attempt to undermine the integrity of its land and people, not only for the last eight years but for decades before that.

That is why the Syrian Government, which has held firm over eight years in the face of terrorism and foreign interference, is now determined to reject the agendas of hostile countries. We are determined, now more than ever, to recover all our territory and liberate it from terrorism and the illegitimate foreign presence there.

In parallel, we are committed to working towards a political solution in which Syrians — and Syrians alone — decide on their future and make their choices through an inter-Syrian dialogue that is Syrian-led, without any external interference, in order to guarantee the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.