



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8674th meeting

Friday, 22 November 2019, 3.10 p.m.

New York

Provisional

<i>President:</i>	Ms. Pierce	(United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
<i>Members:</i>	Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Dominican Republic	Mr. Singer Weisinger
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbegono
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Germany	Mr. Heusgen
	Indonesia	Mr. Syihab
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Peru	Mr. Ugarelli
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	South Africa	Ms. Goolab
	United States of America	Mr. Jeffrey

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: 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 the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and Ms. Sabah Al Hallak, Board Member of the Syrian Women's League.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: On 30 October, 150 Syrian men and women gathered in Geneva to launch a Syrian-led and -owned, credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee, facilitated by the United Nations. There were 50 members nominated by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, 50 members nominated by the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission and 50 civil society activists, experts and other independents from inside and outside of Syria — a so-called middle third. This was a potentially historic moment. It brought Syrians together in one room in the context of the formal political process mandated by the Security Council for the first face-to-face talks in five years — for the first time ever, following a political agreement between the Government and the opposition and, for the first time ever, with civil society present.

This launch was a sign of hope for the Syrian people and a chance for the Syrian parties to begin a direct dialogue that they lead and own on the future of a broken country. It opened a door to a political effort to overcome nearly nine years of conflict and chart a path to a new day for Syria, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), which has all the necessary elements for a political settlement.

Over the next two days in Geneva, members of the large body offered visions for Syria's future constitutional arrangements. They adopted, by

consensus, a code of conduct and a set of initial procedural practices, and agreement was reached on the 45 members to work in the small drafting body. Thereafter, the small body — 15 from each group of 50 — convened and reviewed ideas and proposals in the speeches delivered by the members in the large body and offered other ideas, too, in order to identify potential constitutional principles. There were extensive exchanges and ideas put forward, and they agreed to return to Geneva on Monday, 25 November.

I commend Committee members for their courage and patriotism in participating in those initial proceedings and for the way that they did so. It was not easy. There was mistrust, suspicion and strong feelings among the members. There were deep feelings of anger and loss, personal and national. Narratives, positions and proposals diverged sharply. At times, proceedings were painful, and emotions ran high. And yet everyone stayed engaged. The members of the Committee agreed on an initial agenda and listened to each other's discourse. Efforts were made through language, tone, gesture and positioning to signal openness to dialogue. With each passing day, those efforts gradually increased.

I appreciated the business-like approach of the two equal co-Chairs — Mr. Ahmad Kuzbari, nominated by the Government and Mr. Hadi Al-Bahra, nominated by the opposition. They respected their responsibilities and alternated the chairmanship of meetings. They enabled Committee members to speak openly and frankly. They dealt in good faith with me and my team. Let me also note that, while we focus on what the parties say in the room, it is important that public statements show commitment to the Committee's work, based on the political agreement that both parties reached to launch it. There is work to be done in that regard.

It is too early to say that there is agreement on constitutional principles. Nor is there yet agreement on which issues should be addressed in a future constitutional text and which should be addressed in other ways. But there was a solid initial discussion and there are commonalities on which to build. I have urged the members to reflect, during the recess, on what was discussed and return ready to build on it. The 15 small body representatives of the Government and the opposition have been meeting with the remaining 35 of their respective groups to that end. I have discussed with the co-Chairs that we need them to propose a forward-looking agenda for the coming work, and they

have agreed with me that that is indeed important. My good offices are at their disposal.

Let me say a few words on the middle third, whose members include civil society, independents, experts and other Syrians of standing. They have no formal political affiliations, and none of them speaks for any other. Like Syrian society in general, there are differences in their opinions, experiences, fears, objectives and connections. Despite that, they sat together, worked together and began their own long task of building trust and confidence with one another. As this effort proceeds, it will be important to enable the 15 in the small body to consult the remaining 35 in their group. I look forward to furthering initial discussions with them and the co-Chairs in that regard.

Let me also point out that around 30 per cent of members are women. They made their voices heard on all issues. Gender equality and women's rights issues — raised by both men and women — were prominent in discussions and are areas where I sensed some potential for initial common ground.

I should add that the Syrian Women's Advisory Board was convened in Geneva as the Constitutional Committee proceedings began, and its members showed, once again, an example of how a cross-section of Syrians can build trust and work together. I look forward to them convening again in Geneva in the not-too-distant future.

I also look forward to continuing the process of consultations by the United Nations with a wide cross-section of Syrian civil society from both inside and outside Syria through the work of our Civil Society Support Room, and we expect further engagement in that framework fairly soon as well.

Let me thank the Security Council for uniting to support the Constitutional Committee. I was also glad to meet with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iran, Russia and Turkey, and earlier with representatives of the small group in Geneva before the launch of the Committee.

This brings me to the bigger picture. Undoubtedly, the work of the Committee can build trust and confidence. But if confidence is to develop among the Syrian people in the political process, dynamics on the ground need to begin to change, and that must start with fully respecting international humanitarian and human rights law and the protection of civilians.

I am extremely concerned about the renewed violence in Idlib. As the Council is aware, there are 3 million civilians in Idlib, many of whom have fled from fighting elsewhere in Syria and who have suffered and continue to suffer. There has been an escalation these past weeks in aerial bombardment, as well as ground-based attacks from both sides. Just two days ago, at least a dozen civilians were killed and 50 injured, including children, when a missile reportedly launched from Syrian Government territory struck a camp for internally displaced persons near a maternity hospital.

Meanwhile, there have been significant developments in the north-east: a Turkish military intervention into Syria together with Syrian armed opposition forces; the Syrian Government deploying troops in the north-east following an understanding with the Syrian Democratic Forces; a United States-Turkish ceasefire understanding; a Turkish-Russian understanding, leading to joint patrols along the Turkish border; and, of course, the redeployment of United States forces from large parts of the north-east to Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah, including close to oilfields. While these understandings have reduced violence in the area, reports of clashes and shelling continue. More than 90 civilians have been killed, and, while many have returned home, more than 75,000 remain displaced. Meanwhile, Israeli air strikes near Damascus, which Israel said was in response to rockets launched towards Israel, reportedly killed two civilians.

All these dynamics are extremely worrying. We must step away from any trend that could lead towards a deeper international conflagration over Syria and the continued infringement of Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.

Resolution 2254 (2015) also calls for nationwide ceasefire and a common approach to combating terrorism. The unsolved challenge of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the danger of the resurgence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and the continuing threat of foreign terrorist fighters only underlines the need for a cooperative approach — one that ensures stability, protects civilians, fully upholds international humanitarian law, promotes real calm and prioritizes a political solution.

As the violence and suffering continue, Syrians on all sides are demanding concrete actions from this process to improve their lives. I continue to consider unilateral releases of detainees/abductees and steps

for clarifying the fate of missing persons by all parties and at a meaningful scale as crucial entry points in that regard.

But I also remain convinced that a broader set of concrete actions would likely have to follow a steps-for-steps model, with some element of reciprocity, building trust and confidence between Syrians and with the international community.

I continue to pursue a discussion with the Syrian parties on the wider dimensions of the process and to offer my good offices to the key regional and international players on these issues. Russian and American officials continue to meet to discuss steps that could be taken. I had a valuable discussion on this with German Chancellor Merkel and senior officials in Berlin last week. Within the Astana group, the dialogue among countries supporting different players in Syria continues, and I continue to support the convening of an international format that could bring the key players together in a common effort.

Ultimately, I believe that all these efforts should lead towards the establishment of a safe, calm and neutral environment. That would allow any constitutional reform to be matched by emerging positive conditions on the ground, as well as an environment that would allow for inclusive, free and fair elections administered under the supervision of the United Nations, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Clearly, the steps necessary to create such an environment would also contribute to refugees having the confidence to return in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner.

It is my firm hope that with the Constitutional Committee as a door opener, the Government and the opposition will be able in time to establish a relationship; violence will abate and conditions on the ground will change; and a comprehensive and decisive solution will finally emerge for the benefit of all Syrians. The Syrian parties, who are leading and owning this process, must seize the opportunity that the launch of the Committee offers. And they, and all of us, must build around it a mutually reinforcing dynamic for the sake of the Syrian people. I appreciate the support of all members as I continue to work in this direction, in implementation of my mandate as contained in resolution 2254 (2015).

The President: I now give the floor to Ms. Al Hallak, who is briefing in her capacity as a board member of the Syrian Women's League and founding member of the Syrian League for Citizenship.

Ms. Al Hallak (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Madam President, for having invited me to brief the Council today. As the President noted, I am a member of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and a member of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. For more than half my life, I have worked for the empowerment of Syrian women and the advancement of their rights in all fields and continue to fight to achieve that. Today, I am briefing the Council in my capacity as a Syrian civil-society feminist.

The fate of millions of Syrians is still in the hands of the Council because of the continued military operations in Damascus, Idlib, Aleppo, the north-east and other governorates.

My statement will focus on three key issues: first, the gender impact of military conflict on millions of women and ensuring accountability and punishment; secondly, securing the effective participation of Syrian women in the political process as well as in all aspects of peace and security; and, thirdly, the release of detainees and forced disappearances by all parties.

The Syrian conflict, which has been ongoing for more than eight years, has had tragic impacts on all Syrians, particularly women, girls and children. As the Special Envoy noted, just this week 16 people, including women, children and medical staff, were killed as a result of a missile attack near a maternity hospital in a displaced persons' camp in Idlib. This is the sixty-fifth attack on health facilities in north-west Syria since last April, according to reports by the Syrian American Medical Society. Furthermore, tens of thousands of people, the majority of whom are women and children, have been displaced in north-east and north-west Syria as a result of the recent military operations, which have been causing catastrophic humanitarian emergencies.

The current deteriorating political and humanitarian crisis in Syria has led to an exacerbation of discrimination against women, and in turn to an increase in gender-based violence, early and forced marriage and trafficking of women. Syrian women have faced numerous threats to their rights from all sides, not only by existing Syrian discriminating laws but also by practices of other groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and the Al-Nusra Front and others, which have been terrorizing and committing violence against women and girls, as well as depriving them from their basic rights. Syrian women make up the majority of those forcibly displaced. Ensuring

conditions conducive to their safe, voluntary and dignified return to their places of origin is therefore essential, as stipulated under the international law.

All parties to armed conflict in Syria today continue to operate as if they can act with impunity. The Security Council must therefore pressure all parties to abide by their obligations in accordance international law and ensure that all those who have committed serious violations against millions of Syrian women and men are held accountable legally and punished. Any efforts by the Council to ensure legal accountability and punishment, as well as transitional justice mechanisms, must have the gender perspective and the impacts of armed conflict on women and girls at their core. That cannot wait until a political process is concluded. Despite the fact that space for Syrian civil society to influence the political process remains limited, feminists and human rights movements persevere in their pursuit to chart the future of Syria, especially on issues related to justice, citizenship and human rights. Let me be clear. There can be no democracy in Syria without gender equality or women's effective participation in the political decision-making process. I stress those demands because they continue to be overlooked in forums and decision-making platforms to this day. Since 2014, despite the efforts of the Special Envoy and the demands of Syrian feminists, there have been only two women in the Government and the opposition delegations to the negotiations process.

Many civil society activists support the ongoing constitutional process and consider it a path to the political process. The Constitutional Committee, which met for the first time this month, is a good step forward in increasing women's participation, which, as the Special Envoy mentioned, has reached approximately 30 per cent. That has been possible thanks to the efforts by the Special Envoy and very strong advocacy by Syrian feminists. We very much hope that this percentage will increase in the negotiations process. That percentage must be enshrined in our new constitution in order to ensure that women's rights are guaranteed in Syria's future.

The matter of detainees and missing and kidnapped persons is a thorny issue. Regrettably, no progress has been made since the previous Security Council briefing (See S/PV.8593) on the matter, held in August. Despite the Council's expressed sympathy, over 100,000 Syrians remain kidnapped or detained, as my colleagues from Families for Freedom reported.

They are still subject to torture and other ill-treatment. Parties to conflict detain many women and children, using them as hostages to blackmail and exert pressure on their fathers or husbands who are politically or militarily active. The majority of detained or forcibly disappeared persons over the past decade have been human rights defenders, often under the pretext of the so-called counter-terrorism efforts. Women activists, including relief workers, have faced various forms of violence that is not limited to arrest. Women and girls who are detained face gender-specific consequences for being women, particularly in our societies. That causes them acute stigmatization upon release and can result in honour killings, divorce or even suicide.

All warring parties in Syria must release all persons who have been arbitrarily detained or kidnapped, in keeping with international human rights law and the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015). Addressing this issue is a precondition to building confidence between the parties to the conflict and the Syrian people; and between the United Nations and the people of Syria, as mentioned by the Special Envoy. If the United Nations exerts pressure to prioritize this issue, the legitimacy of its role in the process will increase in the eyes of millions ordinary Syrians, who have felt for long that they have been let down by the international community efforts to put an end to their suffering.

In conclusion, I call on the all members of the Council to ensure the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), which was adopted by consensus as a road map for the future of Syria. I also call on the Council to prioritize the following actions.

First, the Council should call for an immediate ceasefire to end the current conflict and ensure that all civilians are protected from repeated attacks.

Secondly, the Council should ensure women's equal and meaningful participation in all ongoing and future political decision-making processes. A minimum of 30 per cent representation of women, on the way to reach the goal of 50/50 gender balance at all levels of decision-making, must be guaranteed.

Thirdly, the Council should ensure that the new constitution includes provisions that reflect principles of international human rights law, including with regard to gender equality and non-discrimination. The constitution must also include provisions that criminalize all forms of gender-based violence and any kind of discrimination on the basis of gender, race,

ability, color or other status. In addition, it must include provisions on the primacy of international conventions over national law.

I return to our most important priority, namely, giving the release of all arbitrarily detained persons a humanitarian priority and, accordingly, to the granting of unconditional access to all places of detention. The Security Council should also support the ongoing efforts of the Special Envoy to address the situation of detainees as part of his tasks and ensure that the gender-specific consequences for many detained and kidnapped women after their release are addressed.

The failure of the Security Council to date to stop the bloodshed in my country and end impunity in Syria undermines its credibility in terms of carrying out its core mandate of maintaining international peace and security. Members heard — just this year here, in the Chamber — briefings about the serious impacts the war has had on civilians, including women, children, persons with disabilities, the families of the disappeared and medical workers. As Syrians, all of us wish desperately for the day when all are free from violence and war. We dream of a democratic country and an inclusive future in which human rights are respected, including women's human rights. But our future, indeed our present, depends upon decisive action by the Security Council.

The President: I thank Ms. Al Hallak for her briefing.

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

Mr. Jeffrey (United States of America): Ms. Al Hallak's presentation was a very commendable and moving depiction of the problems that this terrible conflict has wrought on Syrian civilians, particularly women. We thank her very much once again. We thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his remarks and even more so for the pivotal role he played in last month's launching of the Constitutional Committee. We congratulate him personally, as well as the Secretary-General and the United Nations generally, on that signal achievement.

But while we must not mistake one individual step, however important, for the peace that we are pursuing, we must still consider the significance of what has happened in Geneva. Pursuant to a decision by the Security Council, we now have two platforms that are officially recognized by the international community

for dealing with Syria and the problems related to the Syrian conflict — the regime in Damascus and a congress of members of all political views in Geneva. We have no doubt that that balance, particularly the part of it based on the work that can be done in Geneva, can open the door to a much better future if the Council supports it fully. That is therefore our first prescription for finding a solution to this terrible crisis. The second, also pursuant to resolution 2254 (2015), is a ceasefire.

We should think about what we have seen since the Council last met to talk about Syria (see S/PV.8645). We have seen major new outbreaks of fighting with the Turkish incursion into the north-east. Four of the five outside armies concerned, as well as the Syrian army and several major non-State actors, are all manoeuvring, sometimes shooting at each other in a very confined and dangerous area. Meanwhile, in Idlib in the north-west we have seen a new increase in violence. As Ms. Al Hallak reminded us, yesterday we saw a terrible incident of a long-range strategic missile fired — deliberately, in our view — into an area for internally displaced persons next to a maternity hospital, killing and wounding scores of people.

Finally, there was an increase in violence last week involving three of the other major State military forces in the air over Syria. Blame should be placed in that regard on the Iranian Government for continuing to move long-range weapon systems into Syria in order to continue its dangerous actions through its proxies. In the past year three of our partners have been struck by those weapon systems. In particular we support Israel's right to defend itself and to act in self-defence when it needs to.

Our second priority is the achievement of a nationwide ceasefire. Our third is maintaining unrelenting diplomatic and economic pressure on Damascus by the international community to push forward on our other goals, because we believe that we will not get them without that pressure. In that regard, the United States maintains its position that no reconstruction assistance can be provided to Damascus in the areas that it controls until a credible and irreversible political process is in place, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), and until we are sure that it is well under way. We believe that position is consistent with that of many of our European and Middle Eastern partners, and we will work closely with them to ensure that this pressure is sustained. Any efforts to provide reconstruction assistance at this moment is premature,

and here we appreciate the importance of the United Nations assistance in adhering to its principles and parameters in support of a political solution. That is our third area of emphasis.

However, our fourth priority in support of a viable political solution is based on trying to find compromises and alternatives to a military solution, something that the regime, at any rate, still believes to be possible. My Government in particular has worked with many of those around this table. I especially want to emphasize our work with the Russian Federation, including Secretary of State Pompeo's trip to Sochi to meet with President Putin in May. We believe that there is a way forward, as long as we maintain a policy focused on the political process, putting pressure on the regime and on those who support it, and ultimately the achievement of a national ceasefire with a view to reaching a compromise solution that will finally put an end to this terrible war, which from the use of chemical weapons to the millions of refugees destabilizing entire areas, and from the rise of various terrorist groups to the mass slaughter of civilians, has been such a disgrace for the world.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his briefing, as well as his dedicated efforts to establish an intra-Syrian dialogue. We also listened with interest to Ms. Sabah Al Hallak.

As Mr. Pedersen has just informed us, the first round of intra-Syrian negotiations within the framework of the Constitutional Committee took place on 30 October in Geneva. Its establishment and the start of its work, with the decisive assistance of the Astana format, was unquestionably an achievement for the Syrian people. I recall the Council that the idea of establishing a Constitutional Committee was adopted in 2018 in Sochi by representatives from every stratum of Syrian society participating in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress. We are pleased by the initial outcomes of this process, which is aimed at shaping Syria's future. We hope that the next stage of negotiations, which begins next week, will be held in a constructive atmosphere, and we wish the Syrians and Mr. Pedersen every success.

We agree with the Special Envoy that this is only the beginning of a long and difficult journey. We therefore believe it is essential to approach the intra-Syrian dialogue cautiously. Any attempts to

interfere with its work and impose decisions on the Syrians that are incompatible with their national interests are unacceptable, as is the imposition of artificial time frames or demands for concessions that apply to only one of the parties involved. We believe it is also important to remember the key principle of the work in the Constitutional Committee, enshrined in resolution 2254 (2015), which stipulates that it should promote the advancement of the political process, led and implemented by the Syrians themselves. We urge all our colleagues to adhere to that principle.

As the guarantor nations of the Astana process, Russia, Turkey and Iran are ready to continue to assist the Syrian parties and the Special Envoy in the quest for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. At the same time, all of the Astana countries' actions will be based on strict respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. Today's positive turn for the better in the work of reaching a political settlement creates the conditions necessary for concrete steps to be taken towards the provision of comprehensive humanitarian assistance in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction. It is a pity that as we just heard, our colleagues from the United States are still unwilling to abandon their stereotypes and join that process.

The most worrisome humanitarian and military situation is still in areas that the Syrian Government does not control east of the Euphrates River, in the Idlib de-escalation zone and in the area occupied by the United States around Al-Tanf. Thanks to Russia and Turkey's signing on 22 October in Sochi of a memorandum of understanding, the situation in north-eastern Syria has been brought under control. The efforts undertaken have enabled the prevention of a large-scale armed confrontation and civilian casualties. We have long emphasized that resolving the issue of the aspirations of the Kurds, who are an integral part of Syria's multi-ethnic society, will be impossible as long as the Syrian Government cannot regain control of its entire national territory and borders. We are ready to continue to assist the Syrian authorities and the Kurds in establishing a broad dialogue on their most pressing issues. At the same time, we are trying to correct the harm done throughout Syrian society by those who at one time or another have attempted to take advantage of the Arab-Kurdish disputes beyond the Euphrates. Unfortunately, those attempts are still continuing. Except that now they are accompanied by open

declarations about the existence of their real motive, which is the desire to cash in on the illegal extraction and smuggling of Syrian oil.

We would like to point out that the participants in the work of the Constitutional Committee include representatives of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, civil society and the Syrian opposition, including those that control armed groups. In this way everyone with a genuine interest in the process of determining Syria's political future has come together in this peace process. And yet outright bandits and terrorists continue to threaten Syrian society. Most of Idlib is therefore controlled by militants from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, a group that the Security Council has designated as a terrorist organization. Militants are terrorizing the local population, using civilian infrastructure for military purposes and sheltering behind civilians, preventing them from leaving Idlib. Terrorists from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham regularly fire on neighbouring settlements using modern weapons. About 600 such attacks were recorded in October, and there have been more than 28 such incidents in just the past 24 hours. There are reports of executions, detentions and violent dispersals of demonstrations by ordinary people against the terrorist authorities in Idlib. Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock spoke about the situation in the besieged town of Kafr Takharim at a recent Security Council meeting (see S/PV.8664). I will say it once again. While the opposition is conducting negotiations in Geneva, terrorists are fighting in Syria. We therefore warn against attempts to pass off these jihadists as the so-called moderate opposition or local administration.

I want to point out that some of our colleagues are still relying on unverified or extremely dubious information sources in analyzing reports claiming attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. We join others in urging for compliance with international humanitarian law. We and our Syrian partners are doing all we can to protect the civilian population, whom the terrorists are using as human shields. However, we have often felt certain that a great many reports of these sorts of strikes are in fact fake. Unfortunately, the sources for the latest of these reports are regularly manipulating the information in them, and we therefore have no confidence in them, especially since there have been no active military hostilities or large-scale operations in Idlib recently, and there are none right now. We urge all of our colleagues to be very cautious before presenting

such information as the truth. Otherwise they will essentially become participants in an information war fighting on the side of the terrorists.

With the assistance of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic, together with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Nations, efforts continue to resettle Rukban camp. We hope that the problem of refugees and internally displaced persons there will be resolved soon. And we will not cease pointing to the dire situation in the Al-Hol camp. We urge all who care about Syria's humanitarian welfare to join the efforts in that regard and to provide all Syrians with humanitarian assistance without discrimination, politicization or preconditions. That includes not only post-conflict reconstruction projects but also lifting unilateral sanctions in the interests of normalizing the life of the Syrian people.

Mr. Singer Weisinger (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Ambassador Pedersen for his briefing but especially for his tireless determination, which has succeeded in getting Syria's Government, opposition and civil society to sit face to face around the same table in the framework of the Constitutional Committee. We welcome Ms. Sabah Al Hallak and thank her for sharing the insights of her extensive experience working for the good of Syrian civil society. We also thank the presidency for inviting her to our meeting today so that through her we could learn about the views and aspirations of civil society, and of women in particular, as they seek to build a new future for the country.

Following the first round of negotiations, Ambassador Pedersen described the constitutional talks in Geneva as successful, intense, substantive and very professional. He also stressed that in many ways they were painful, and that is a good thing. We are hopeful that, through the facilitation of the United Nations and on the basis of mutual respect, dedication, commitment and trust, it will be possible to build bridges and make progress even in the most difficult areas. We therefore urge all the members of the Committee, based on their shared beliefs and common interests, to continue their deliberations with enthusiasm. Women in particular have a decisive role to play in these talks, which is why their participation rate of at least 30 per cent is so crucial.

Against the current backdrop, my delegation would like to highlight the following points. It is essential to build trust through a broad-based political process, for which the Constitutional Committee is undoubtedly key. If it does its work effectively, it will strengthen the Syrian belief that their legitimate aspirations are attainable. But the work of the Committee will not be enough and will not succeed in contributing to that broad-based process if the conditions for building a unified national vision are not put in place, starting with meaningful and robust support to its constituent sectors. Progress on mutual confidence-building measures is crucial to that process. We fully agree that releasing women, children, the elderly and the disabled and people who have been arbitrarily detained who have become ill would contribute significantly to that and would also provide families with credible information about the whereabouts of missing loved ones.

However, perhaps it is up to the Syrians themselves, whether under the auspices of the Committee or another platform, to define what other measures the Government and the opposition can undertake so that the civilian population can see tangible change in their lives. That is to say, hope must be rebuilt. We believe it is more important than ever to reach a lasting national ceasefire that provides relief and calm to the civilian population. It is worth stressing the importance of providing specific assurances that all counter-terrorist activities will be carried out in strict adherence to international humanitarian law, which establishes limits even on hostilities. Those limits are clear — they apply to civilian populations and infrastructure. In that regard, we regret and condemn the reports of missiles being launched from areas controlled by the Syrian Government that have claimed the lives of 12 people and injured 56 others, including children. Many will say that no political process can bear fruit while a humanitarian tragedy continues, and that this would be too much to ask for. That is true, but we advocate treating this tragedy as the force driving every sector of the population in Syria, wherever they may be, together with all of us who want peace, to make real progress in achieving the Syria that its people aspire to and deserve.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive briefing. Let me also thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for her input.

Let me start by welcoming the beginning of the work of the Constitutional Committee on 30 October.

Poland has underlined many times that any sustainable solution to the conflict requires a genuine political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties within the United Nations-led Geneva process. That process has finally begun. We agree with the Special Envoy that the future Constitution belongs to the Syrian people alone. The proceedings of the Constitutional Committee should allow for a truly meaningful discussion on Syria's future.

All parties to the conflict need to engage in confidence-building measures. In that context, let me stress the importance of safeguarding the humane treatment of detainees, including abductees and missing persons in Syria, by placing an emphasis on their inherent rights derived from international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

The Syrian war has brought unspeakable suffering to the once peaceful country. Thousands of people remain in arbitrary detention, where many are subject to various forms of ill-treatment, including torture and rape. At the same time, thousands remain missing, with their relatives deprived of any information regarding their fate. We call for their release, particularly the release of children, women and the elderly. Some progress in that area would help to raise the level of confidence between the parties and greatly contribute to the efforts aimed at reaching a lasting peace in Syria. That is one of the most important confidence-building measures, if not the most important, between the parties to the conflict.

Unfortunately, apart from the political track, we must also note the escalation of the conflict in Idlib. Yesterday we learned that missiles fired on Wednesday night into settlements for people fleeing conflict in the country's northwest killed at least 12 people and wounded dozens more, including children. The most vulnerable groups, including the elderly, women and children sheltering in the internally displaced persons camps, must be under special protection.

We particularly condemn the attacks against medical facilities and their personnel conducted across the whole of Syria this year. We reiterate the essential need to ensure safe and unhindered access for humanitarian aid, as well as the free and unhindered movement of civilians fleeing from violence.

International humanitarian law is crystal clear. It requires all parties to the conflict to strictly distinguish between civilians and combatants and to

take constant care to spare civilians in the conduct of military operations.

In conclusion, I want to recall that we fully support the safe return of Syrian refugees who have fled their homes. We believe that a lasting solution for Syria should ensure the security of the sustainable, dignified and voluntary return of Syrians to their country of origin, in accordance with international law and the principle of non-refoulement.

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): I also want to start by thanking Mr. Geir Pedersen for his relentless work, and I congratulate him on what he has achieved. In his statement, the United States representative said that the process could open the door for a peaceful process, but it is just the first step. There are worrying statements by President Al-Assad, who is trying to disassociate himself from the Constitutional Committee. Of course, that must not happen, and we must have a guarantee that the independence of the Constitutional Committee will be respected and that its members will be safe and secure and will not be blackmailed.

We have opened the door for a political process. I would also like to remind colleagues that, from Germany's perspective, there must be a genuine political process that is comprehensive and inclusive and a transition under way before we can start to think about assistance to reconstruction.

In talking about an inclusive process, I would like to pay tribute to what Ms. Al Hallak said with regard to women. We greatly welcome the fact that Mr. Pedersen mentioned in his briefing that he had met with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board. But there needs to be the full participation of women in the political process and in all political bodies. I fully subscribe to what he said about the future Constitution, namely, that the goal of the political process is that women's rights must be enshrined in the Constitution. What Mr. Pedersen said about gender-based violence, discrimination, forced disappearances and the fact that still today women are being taken hostage is horrifying.

We need a political process. We need a ceasefire, as colleagues have said, and, as we discussed earlier this week in this body (see S/PV.8668), we need reconciliation in the country. As a first step, what is absolutely necessary for that is that the Syrian regime put an end to arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, forced disappearances and the extrajudicial killings of detainees. It must inform the families of tens of

thousands of missing persons about the fate of their loved ones, provide the United Nations or the International Committee of the Red Cross unconditional access to all detention facilities under its control, allow persons in custody access to medical treatment and release all political prisoners and arbitrarily detained persons.

With regard to reconciliation, there is one more key point that I have repeatedly stated, that is, accountability. Without accountability, there cannot be reconciliation. I therefore again appeal, including to our Russian colleagues, to fully support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, which actually creates the conditions for reconciliation and a better future for Syria.

This morning, when we discussed the situation in Yemen, our Russian colleague said that there needs to be unconditional compliance with international humanitarian law (see S/PV.8672). This afternoon, I listened to his statement and he did not mention that. When I hear and read about what is happening and what the Russian and Syrian forces are undertaking in Syria, I understand why he did not mention it. We heard the news about the sixty-fifth attack on a medical installation, in Qah, where 10 people — civilians and medical personnel — were killed. There is no excuse for indiscriminate attacks against innocent civilians and civilian infrastructure. As has been said earlier, we also support that the board of inquiry should look into such attacks and that its subsequent report should be published.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me, Madam President, to thank Special Envoy Mr. Pedersen for his valuable briefing on the political process in Syria. We also thank Ms. Al Hallak for her briefing.

We meet today following a major achievement in the Syrian political process, namely, the holding of the first round of the Constitutional Committee meetings. It would be remiss of me not to once again commend the efforts of Mr. Pedersen this year, which contributed to reaching this agreement.

We have been following the work of the Committee, which met as the large body comprising 150 people and the small group comprising 45 people in Geneva during the first half of this month. We must commend the Syrian parties for taking that vital step and for participating in

the work of the Constitutional Committee. The launch of the Committee's work is a glimmer of hope not only for Syrians, but also for the international community, after the years of suffering as a result of the conflict in this brotherly Arab country. Given the fact that we are just days away from resuming the Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva, we hope that dialogue will prevail and that the parties will engage in constructive discussions leading to understandings with regard to the Syrian Constitution.

We know that those discussions are not going to be easy and that there are competing views. However, we call on the Syrian parties to focus at all times on the interests of the brotherly Syrian people and to allow them to fulfil their legitimate aspirations through a political settlement agreed upon by all components of Syrian people — a settlement that would uphold the unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

We stress that this political process must be coupled with confidence-building measures. Most importantly, genuine and tangible progress needs to be made on the issues of detainees and missing persons, as Mr. Pedersen mentioned in his briefing. International organizations must be allowed to visit detention centres and prisons. On the issue of refugees, we once again express our position that the return of refugees must be voluntary, safe and dignified. We stress that attaining comprehensive and sustainable peace will not be possible without ensuring justice, ending impunity and ensuring accountability for all the crimes that have been committed in Syria since the beginning of the conflict in 2011. Once again, we support the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011, as well as the board of inquiry established by the Secretary-General, which has recently started its work.

We would like to refer to the press release issued yesterday by UNICEF and its horrific figures on the number of children who were killed last year — more than 1,100 children were killed. It also contains information on civilian facilities that were targeted. In that context, we express once again our concern about the latest developments in the north-west of Syria, specifically in Idlib, which has recently seen a military escalation that has led to civilian casualties.

The latest attack was on an internally displaced persons camp in Idlib, which also led to civilian casualties. We stress once again that we condemn the targeting of innocent civilians, by any party. We also condemn all attacks carried out on civilian-populated areas by terrorist groups that are designated by Security Council as terrorist organizations. At the same time, we recall that counter-terrorism operations do not absolve any party of its obligations under international law, which include abiding by the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution, and protecting civilians and civilian facilities.

We recall that the United Nations has warned that any large-scale military operation in Idlib could lead to the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century. We fear that such a military operation may adversely affect the political process and the meeting of the Constitutional Committee, and we reiterate our call for a ceasefire throughout Syria, as provided for in the relevant Security Council resolutions, especially resolution 2401 (2018). We condemn Israel's repeated attacks on Syria's sovereignty and its territories, which violate the Charter of the United Nations, international law and the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 350 (1974), concerning the disengagement between Israeli and Syrian forces.

In conclusion, we stress once again that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. The solution must be sought through a political settlement, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), which set out a road map for a transitional political process that includes a number of stages, including the drafting of a constitution and the holding of free and fair elections in accordance with that constitution, under the supervision of the United Nations. That process must engage all Syrians, including those who are abroad.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation too would like to thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his excellent briefing on the latest developments in the political process in Syria. We also thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak, representative of civil society in Syria, for her detailed briefing.

Côte d'Ivoire commends the mediation and good offices efforts of the Special Envoy, which enabled the work of the Constitutional Committee to be launched in Geneva on 30 October in a constructive spirit. We also applaud the willingness of the two co-chairs of the

Constitutional Committee to meet again in Geneva on 25 November.

Despite these positive developments, my delegation believes that the establishment of the Constitutional Committee is but one step in the political process towards the resolution of a conflict that has been going on for more than eight years. That is why Côte d'Ivoire calls on the international community and, first and foremost the Council, to strongly support all actors in their continued peace negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations.

My country also reiterates the need for a complete cessation of hostilities in order to create an environment conducive to the successful conduct of talks. In that regard, we welcome the agreements signed between Turkey and the United States and Turkey and the Russian Federation on 17 and 22 October, respectively, with regard to the cessation of the offensive against Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria. Those agreements, in addition to the unilateral ceasefire declared on 31 August by the Russian Federation and Government forces in Idlib province, seek to build the climate of trust required for successful negotiations among the Syrian parties.

In that context, my delegation remains concerned about the persistence of sources of tension in north-eastern Syria. We are also concerned about the military escalation between Tel Aviv and Damascus, which could exacerbate regional tensions and the already worrisome security and humanitarian situations in Syria. My country therefore urges both States to give priority to dialogue in the pursuit of solutions to their differences.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire hopes that the work of the Constitutional Committee will lead to the expected outcomes of peace and lasting stability in Syria. In that regard, we call on the Council to support the efforts of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to achieve a political settlement of the Syrian conflict, in accordance with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

Ms. Goolab (South Africa): Allow me to begin by thanking Mr. Geir Pedersen for his briefing on the situation in Syria. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Special Envoy and the teams supporting him in carrying out his responsibilities with dedication and fortitude. We commend the efforts of the Special Envoy towards creating an environment that is conducive towards a Syrian-led and United Nations-facilitated process to establish credible, inclusive

and non-sectarian governance and set a process for drafting a new constitution and conducting free and fair elections. I also thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for her very informative briefing.

I will focus my remarks on the following three issues: the security situation, the political and constitutional processes, and the humanitarian situation.

Regarding the first issue, South Africa expresses its grave concern at the recent reports of shelling and missile strikes in Idlib that have resulted in the injury and deaths of civilians, including children. We urge all parties to adhere to their obligations under international law, especially with regard to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. However, we also hope that as the Syrian Government forces move to gain further control of their territory, the threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and other armed groups will be fully destroyed. We must also note that while counter-terrorism activities are vital to achieving that goal, those activities must be undertaken in full compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law.

On the second issue of the political and constitutional processes, South Africa welcomes the launch and convening of the first meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee at the end of October. Reports show that tangible progress has been made in the work of the larger committee and that of the small group. We urge all members of the Constitutional Committee to faithfully carry out their duties in line with the code of conduct that was adopted during their discussions. We look forward to receiving regular updates on the progress of their work.

While the work of the Constitutional Committee progresses in earnest, the other aspects of the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) must also continue, including the active engagement of all parties in the continuing political process facilitated by the Special Envoy. As a complement to the Constitutional Committee, parties should consider bolstering that progress with confidence-building measures, including the release of civilian detainees, particularly women, children, the elderly and the sick.

My delegation reiterates 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 of Syrian society. In that

regard, we welcome the representation of women as well as the various religious groups in the peace talks, and we reiterate that resolution 2254 (2015) remains the road map for the political process in Syria.

On the third issue — the humanitarian situation and the upcoming renewal of the cross-border humanitarian assistance mandate — I would like to reiterate that South Africa will continue to work with all interested parties to find consensus on the matter. South Africa remains committed to supporting the protection of the fundamental interests of the Syrian people, the maintenance of peace and security 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, including respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Syria. We call on all parties in Syria, including the political and civil society sectors and all of the Syrian people, to unite in order to stitch together a peaceful, stable and prosperous future.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing. I also listened carefully to Ms. Al Hallak's remarks.

The consensus of the international community is that a political solution is the only way to reach a settlement of the Syrian issue. The Syrian political process has seen major developments in the past month, including the successful holding of the first meeting of the large body of the Constitutional Committee and a 45-member small group. The small group will hold its second and third round of discussions in Geneva very soon. China welcomes such developments and commends Special Envoy Pedersen's good offices and hard work, as well as the constructive participation of all Syrian parties.

The establishment of the Constitutional Committee is a good starting point for the Syrian political process. We support the work of Mr. Pedersen, on the basis of existing gains made, to continue promoting the political process according to the principle of a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process and resolution 2254 (2015). In that regard, there is a need to listen carefully to the legitimate appeals of the Syrian Government, maintain the independence of the work of the Constitutional Committee and fully respect the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the country. Syria should not be divided or torn apart. We hope that the Syrian parties will use the discussions

in the Constitutional Committee to increase mutual understanding and gradually build mutual trust. The members of the Constitutional Committee should prioritize the interests of the country and its people and reach consensus as soon as possible. The international community, including the Security Council, should provide support in that regard and do more to help the Syrian parties set their differences aside and create consensus.

Rampant terrorism represents a major potential threat to a political solution to the Syrian issue, as it will have a significant negative impact on the political process and the future of the country. This scourge deserves the attention of all parties and should be resolved. The situation in north-eastern Syria remains fragile. The parties involved should avoid any action that might undermine the achievements made thus far in the area of counter-terrorism. The current priority is to jointly deal with the risk posed by the movement of terrorists and guard against the return of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. The Secretariat should keep a close eye on the counter-terrorism situation in Syria, as well as terrorists on the move, and carefully consider the issue of bringing those terrorists to justice by proposing recommendations to that end. Idlib has become a breeding ground for terrorism, posing a threat to millions of civilians. This is a common challenge for the peace and security of Syria, the Middle East and the world at large. The international community, in line with the relevant Council resolutions and international law, should continue to align standards to fight terrorism in all its forms and undertake joint efforts to deal with the issue of foreign terrorist fighters.

While promoting the political process in Syria, we should also make efforts to improve the country's economic and humanitarian situation. The international community, including the United Nations, should adopt a comprehensive, objective and balanced perspective when considering and addressing the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Syria is currently faced with economic sanctions, oil shortages, damaged infrastructure and a lack of reconstruction funds, as well as other difficulties that exacerbate the humanitarian crisis and have an acute impact on providing food, clothing, housing and transport for its people. The large number of refugees has put economic and social pressure on neighbouring countries and constitutes a destabilizing factor in the region. The provision of humanitarian materials to Syria should not come with any political preconditions.

All humanitarian relief actors on the ground in Syria should increase their communication and coordination with the Syrian Government.

China would like to reiterate its support for the political process in Syria and is ready to play a constructive role in the early resumption of peace, stability and development in Syria.

Mr. Syihab (Indonesia): We wish to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his briefing. We also thank Ms. Al Hallak, from the Syrian Women's League, for sharing her experience and information with the Security Council.

Indonesia welcomes the launching of the Constitutional Committee and the subsequent discussions among Committee members in Geneva few weeks ago. We share the view of others that the Constitutional Committee is not in itself a solution to the conflict. However, we also believe that the current discussions in Geneva are crucial as a point of entry to a broader Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations and based on resolution 2254 (2015).

My delegation is extremely concerned by the escalating violence in the north-west, including the recent attack that affected an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Idlib, as previously reported by Special Envoy Pedersen. The people in the IDP camp, including women and children, are seeking safety; however, even their shelters are now destroyed. They have lost their homes and their shelters. We would therefore like to reiterate our appeal for a complete end to the violence in Syria.

With regard to the overall political process in Syria, my delegation would like to highlight three points.

First, it is crucial to create a conducive environment for the ongoing process of the Constitutional Committee. All parties need to support the Committee in focusing on its work, without unnecessary, additional pressure from external actors. The international community should allow the members of the Committee concentrate on the substance and let the Syrians decide their own future. We hope that the members can further discuss their visions constructively during the next round of Committee discussions starting next Monday.

Secondly, my delegation commends the role of the Special Envoy in bringing the parties together, which is not easy. We strongly support Special Envoy Pedersen's

robust efforts to build trust and confidence between the relevant parties. Trust has to be nurtured carefully in order for it to lead to a genuine dialogue. We believe it is essential that the Council reaffirm its continued support for this process and strongly signal our full backing of the Special Envoy's work to all parties.

Thirdly, in order to achieve a lasting political settlement of the crisis, it is absolutely essential that all sides support the initial pathway to peace in Syria, including by fully respecting the ceasefire agreements. Both the political process and a ceasefire should move ahead expeditiously, and de-escalation must be a top priority in the interest of the well-being of millions of people in Syria.

Before concluding, as was clearly stated by Special Envoy Pedersen, the Constitutional Committee meeting was potentially a historic moment. It is our collective moral obligation to continue assisting all parties to transform that potential into something real, namely, the beginning of a better future for all Syrian people.

My delegation wishes to stress the importance for all parties to avoid any provocative activities and/or statements that could potentially disrupt the ongoing process in Geneva.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is always a pleasure for Equatorial Guinea to listen to the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Geir Pedersen, and above all a source of great satisfaction to hear of the important advances being made in the political process in Syria. We reiterate our thanks for his admirable commitment and thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for her briefing.

Having welcomed the formation of the Constitutional Committee at our previous briefing (see S/PV.8645), the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea now welcomes the convening of the Committee's first meeting in Geneva on 30 October and the approval of the composition of the drafting group for the future Syrian constitution. This is a truly important and hopeful moment as the outcome of the first agreement between the Syrian parties since the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015). We believe that it is now essential for the Committee to participate in serious and substantial discussions to achieve positive and tangible results that serve the interests and aspirations of the entire Syrian people.

We welcome the high level of representation in the Committee of a broad segment of civil society, of various ethnic and religious groups and of different political movements, and we recall that their work must be undertaken in respect for the Charter of the United Nations, the relevant resolutions of the Security Council and such indisputable principles as respect for the unity, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.

Furthermore, we share the opinion that the Constitutional Committee must be governed in its work by the search for consensus and constructive interaction, without external interference and without outside deadlines, in order to reach a general agreement among its members that would allow for the broadest possible support among the Syrian people for its work. However, we must be aware that this is only a first step towards the political and peaceful settlement of the crisis, because after this first step we will still have 1,000 miles to go, since the Committee is not the crowning goal of all efforts to achieve a durable conflict resolution.

We also believe that attempts to present the resolution of the conflict as depending only on the work of the Constitutional Committee represent the wrong approach. The war will end when we have put a halt to hostilities across the country and to terrorism. The fight against terrorism in Syria is an indispensable condition for advancing the process of a political solution. Syrians have the same right as everyone else to live free from terrorists in their own country. Equatorial Guinea does not believe that it is possible to make progress in the political process if the guns continue to roar, hundreds of innocent lives are annihilated time and again, and mass population displacements occur.

I reiterate that there is no military solution to the war or an alternative to a political solution and that the improvement of relations between the Syrian parties regarding the release of prisoners and humanitarian aid is in the interest of the political process. Any process of any kind in Syria must respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country and involve the Syrians themselves as the main actors and protagonists, since it is the future of their own country that is at stake. There must be no imposed solutions.

Mr. De Rivièrè (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen for being with us today on the eve of

the second meeting of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, as well as Ms. Al Hallak for her intervention.

There is an urgent need to silence the guns everywhere in Syria in order to create the conditions conducive to a political settlement. We must prevent at all costs a resumption of hostilities in the north-east that would be disastrous on the humanitarian level and would only benefit Da'esh, to the detriment of our collective security. Our priority is therefore to remain united in the fight against Da'esh and to preserve the hard-won progress made by the Coalition. Da'esh continues to pose a major threat. It retains significant action capabilities, as evidenced by the resurgence of asymmetric attacks on the ground. France is pleased that the members of the International Coalition against Da'esh have reaffirmed their determination to pursuing their engagement in Syria and Iraq, including by maintaining a military presence in the north-east. France will continue to assume all its responsibilities against Da'esh.

The sharp deterioration of the situation in the north-west since late October is another source of concern. France condemns the ongoing indiscriminate strikes by the regime and its allies in Idlib, in violation of international humanitarian law. In particular, I condemn the strike of 20 November against a camp for internally displaced persons near the Turkish border, as well as those against medical facilities, some of which are supported by the European Union and France.

The fight against terrorism is a priority for my country, but it cannot be waged at the expense of respect for international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel, and civilian infrastructure is an obligation on all. We also condemn the repression of peaceful civilian demonstrations by the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham group. In this context, it is necessary to reaffirm the full and complete restoration of the ceasefire on Idlib in order to join forces against the terrorist groups listed by the United Nations.

I wish to reaffirm France's full support for the efforts of the Special Envoy to reach a political settlement in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). I congratulate him on the holding of the first meeting of the Constitutional Committee, which is a positive step. We hope that the second meeting of the drafting committee, to be held on Monday in Geneva, will bring progress towards giving Syria a new constitution. In

order to move in that direction, it is important that all members of the Committee, particularly the delegation of the regime, engage in good faith in the discussions and resort to disingenuous procrastination. We will remain vigilant with regard to any manoeuvre aimed at hindering the discussions and ask the Special Envoy to report to the Council in a transparent manner.

The Constitutional Committee is not an end in itself and represents only a first step. It is necessary to make parallel progress on the implementation of all the elements of resolution 2254 (2015), as the Ministers of the small group reaffirmed on 14 November in Washington, D.C. This involves working on confidence-building measures, especially with respect to detainees. It also requires creating a safe and neutral environment for the holding of credible elections under the supervision of the United Nations, in which all Syrians, including refugees and internally displaced persons, must participate.

Without progress in that direction, the positions of France and the European Union on reconstruction and sanctions will remain unchanged. That should in no way prevent those who believe that the conditions for reconstruction have already been met, and who are eager to begin forthwith and on a large scale, from financing that reconstruction and from rebuilding that which they, to a large extent, helped to destroy. It is also an illusion to imagine that the dignified, safe and voluntary return of refugees is possible without a comprehensive agreement, including real political and security guarantees and ensuring full and unhindered United Nations access to observe and support that return on the ground.

I would like to conclude by reiterating my call to all who have influence on the regime to bring pressure to bear so that it genuinely engages in the political process. We must all do our part in order to make progress towards peace.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I would first like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his briefing and also for his work on and commitment to reaching a political solution in Syria. I would also like to thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for her testimony.

First, with regard to the Constitutional Committee, we share the Special Envoy's positive assessment of its first meeting. Its work can and must be a first step in the political process and towards realizing the

legitimate aspirations of all Syrians, both at home and in the diaspora. In order to do that, the representatives of the Committee must be able to carry out their work in a propitious environment. We call on all the parties to honour their commitments by allowing representatives to do their job and seize the historic opportunity that the Constitutional Committee represents. Belgium continues to support an inclusive political solution in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Secondly, with regard to the situation on the ground, the unfortunate reality is that the violence continues in north-eastern and north-western Syria. We are particularly concerned about the latest reports of attacks, including on a camp for internally displaced persons in Qah on 20 November, as others have mentioned. Such violence is unacceptable and must cease immediately. We call on all the parties to establish a nationwide ceasefire, as called for in resolution 2254 (2015). The Syrian Government has a particular obligation to ensure a safe, stable and calm environment throughout the country as a backdrop to the peace talks in Geneva. That also includes protecting rights and preventing reprisals, repression and forced recruitment into the armed forces.

Thirdly, the Special Envoy reminds us every month about the importance of implementing confidence-building measures. Thousands of Syrians continue to be arbitrarily arrested and detained. We call on Syria to take on board the crucial importance of combating that issue as a sign of good faith towards its own population.

Finally, I would like to remind members that the Council will soon be considering the renewal of resolution 2165 (2014), on cross-border humanitarian aid. The importance of that resolution is indisputable, and its renewal highlights the collective responsibility of the Council in meeting the most basic needs of 4 million people.

Mr. Ugarelli (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): We are grateful for the convening of this meeting and to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive and very valuable briefing. We acknowledge the intensive work that he has done with a view to bringing the parties closer together, and we reaffirm our commitment to ensuring the success of his mandate. We also thank Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for the information she provided this afternoon.

Peru has been closely monitoring the work of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva and welcomes the constructive spirit and willingness to compromise demonstrated by all parties. We hope that will help to find the common ground necessary to move towards a process of national reconciliation. We encourage the participants to ensure that the meetings of the Committee and the various topics discussed there continue to take place within a framework of transparency, which will enable the international community, and the Council in particular, to monitor and support the implementation of the agreements reached and foster greater trust among all the parties to the peace process.

We believe that we are at a critical point, at which it is essential to act quickly on the political front and make concrete commitments in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex). The grave humanitarian situation and the latent threat of terrorism in Syria require it. We stress how important it is that in addition to those efforts all the parties continue to work on measures that foster an atmosphere of understanding, including by releasing detainees, identifying missing persons and handing over mortal remains. We underscore that progress in that area is not only a gesture of great humanity that can heal open wounds and ease tensions, but also represents an ideal way of advancing Syria's process of political dialogue, accountability and reconciliation.

As the Organization has pointed out, it is crucial that the Syrian Government and the opposition focus on achieving more extensive solutions that go beyond the current level of individual and reciprocal exchanges of prisoners towards the simultaneous release of unequally sized groups. Another major challenge that must be addressed is the serious situation facing millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, which requires not only making the necessary financial resources available but especially demonstrating the political will needed to guarantee their safe and dignified return within internationally accepted parameters. In order to achieve that, we highlight the importance of avoiding an escalation of the conflict, which would undermine the prospects for a political solution. An effective ceasefire in Idlib and its surrounding areas is vital in the current circumstances.

In conclusion, I want to reaffirm that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria and that my delegation will continue to work to put an end to

the suffering of the Syrian people and build sustainable peace in the country.

The President: The representative of the Russian Federation has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I have asked for the floor to respond to the remarks made by our German colleague. It seems that he did not listen very carefully to my statement, because I did mention international humanitarian law, for example. Besides that, his attention to the topic of the statement was also lacking, because the fact is that we are discussing the political settlement of the situation in Syria, not the humanitarian situation there, which is a separate subject. If it had been, I would of course have paid greater attention to the humanitarian situation, which was what he wanted to talk about, as I understand it. I would nevertheless recommend that he familiarize himself with the bulletins that Russia's Ministry of Defence puts out regularly, from which he would see how we deliver and ensure access to humanitarian aid for those in need. And I can assure him that we do a great deal of that.

On top of that, I conclude that despite my warning about the need for a cautious attitude to information sources on what is going on in Syria, our colleague the representative of Germany has apparently signed on as a volunteer in the army of people spreading unverified information about the actions of Russia and the legitimate Government of Syria, while forgetting to find out if that information has been refuted. And, apparently, he is not planning to resign his commission. That is of course his choice, and apparently a conscious one, but I ask him to keep in mind that every reckless statement like this merely prolongs the suffering of the residents of Idlib and other areas. It represents yet another missed opportunity for ensuring a fair trial for the people who do not want peace in Syria, and it makes ordinary Syrians' lives a living hell. His rhetoric helps to legitimize them and protect them from the punishment they deserve, the necessity for which he theoretically — I repeat, theoretically — never ceases to insist on.

The President: The representative of Germany has asked to make a further statement.

Mr. Heusgen (Germany): I wish very briefly to say, first, that I believe that international humanitarian law and humanitarian assistance are very political and

belong in a discussion about the political situation, because these cannot be separated. Secondly, I leave it up to others around the table and to the public as to who is prolonging the suffering of the people — is it Germany, or is it Russia?

The President: I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of the United Kingdom.

I was going to lead off with exactly what the German Ambassador has said, but I will come back to that later, if I may, because I think that there may have been an important confusion as to what international humanitarian law really means.

I wanted to start by thanking the Special Envoy and Ms. Sabah Al Hallak for their briefings. As others have said, what they have achieved with the Constitutional Committee is extremely welcome. It is a very positive tone and could be a very important first step towards stability in Syria. Of course, we all know the amount of effort now required, but we would use today's debate to urge all the parties to seize this opportunity and make full use of the help that he and his team are ready to provide.

We are also incredibly grateful to Ms. Al Hallak for joining us today and her reminder that the political process goes a long way beyond the Constitution. It is critical that all elements of resolution 2254 (2015) make progress in tandem. Others have referred to the release of detainees, refugee returns and preparations for free and transparent elections open to all Syrians, including the diaspora.

I want to take this opportunity to add the British voice to that of the United States, France and Germany that there will be no reconstruction assistance for Syria without such a credible political process, and it goes beyond at the Constitution.

We welcomed hearing Ms. Al Hallak's views on the situation of women. It is not just about percentages or about how many women are formally involved; it is about how genuinely their voices and the voices of civil society are included in the political process. But we recognize her tireless efforts and those of other women to overcome the barriers to being heard. I was in Geneva in 2012 and saw the efforts made there by the women of Syria to obtain a seat at the table, so it is incredibly good news that the Special Envoy and she and her colleagues have been able to achieve that. If there are reports of any intimidation of the Constitutional Committee, we

hope that the United Nations will deal with those as an urgent priority.

Turning to the situation on the ground, as I said, the German Ambassador made many of the points I wanted to make. But I did not really like the confusion between international humanitarian law and humanitarian issues. International humanitarian law is not solely about humanitarian assistance. It is about such things as attacking civilians, bombing hospitals and using weapons of mass destruction against civilians, and it is about being able to protect civilians on the ground.

I think that looked at in that light, it is not the track record of the West that is lacking. It is the track record of the Syrian Arab Republic and its ally, the Russian Federation. I want to say again in this Chamber that attacks on the West and attempts to portray us as harbouring terrorists or somehow on the side of terrorists really need to cease. We are trying hard to assist the United Nations in bringing peace to Syria. We are giving money on the humanitarian side to that end. We do not deserve — nor are the attacks in the Chamber warranted — to have it said that “we are fighting on the side of terrorists”. If that were to be repeated outside the Chamber in an individual capacity, legal action would be taken on that statement. I hope that we will hear no more about it. It is a calumny and it is untrue, like so many of the other things that have been said about the situation in Syria by the two countries represented to my right.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): First and foremost, I would like to thank Mr. Pedersen, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, for his briefing.

Two weeks ago, the Constitutional Committee met in its two formats, the large body and the small body. The Syrian State has shown flexibility and a positive attitude in the initial phase leading to the meeting of the Committee. That is what the United Nations and the Special Envoy confirmed. He explained in his briefing today that the first round of the Committee's meetings has witnessed positive discussions involving a number of questions linked to its work, and the Committee has adopted its rules of procedure.

The Government of my country reiterates the importance of fully conforming with the mandate, principal core terms of reference and rules of procedure of the Committee, in particular respect by all Members of the United Nations, especially those that are members of the Security Council, for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It reiterates also the importance of Syrian oversight and ownership of the political process and of the impartial facilitating role played by the Special Envoy, without imposing any preconditions, prejudgment or artificial deadlines regarding the work of the Committee or its conclusions, because drafting a Constitution for the Syrian Arab Republic and charting the course of the country's future is an exclusive right of the Syrian people that cannot be prejudiced or given up.

We are satisfied with the confirmation by the United Nations and the Special Envoy in this context. We hope that this will materialize during the upcoming meetings of the Committee next week at which it will discuss the Constitution. We are also pleased to see that the delegation representing the Syrian State has actively participated in the first round of discussions. We affirm that that delegation will discuss its tasks on its own on the basis of its national convictions and that the dialogue is among Syrians, Syrian-owned and Syrian-led.

The greatest risk facing the Constitutional Committee is the attempts by some parties to interfere in its work and hamper its efforts in order to achieve schemes that run counter to the basic interests of the Syrians, so this must be avoided.

All Syrians expect that all necessary and proper conditions will be created to enable the Committee to work in a positive atmosphere so as to ensure that the efforts made are successful.

Nonetheless, we were surprised to see that the support given by some regional and international parties to the Constitutional Committee to ensure its success took the form of the conquering and occupation of Syrian territories by the Turkish regime, as well as the killing of many Syrians and the forcible displacement of more than 180,000 Syrian citizens in order to assemble pro-Erdoğan terrorists and help them gain ground on Syrian territory under the pretext of the so-called safe area. That safe area is rejected by the Syrian Arab Republic. We consider it occupied territory and we will treat it

based on relevant provisions of international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

The United States Administration expressed its support for the Constitutional Committee in its own way by occupying Syria's oil fields and stealing the resources belonging to the Syrian people. That was met with silence from the Security Council penholders on humanitarian, political and chemical weapon issues and from those supporting them. That is how the American occupation of parts of my country resonates with the Turkish one in looting our resources and natural wealth. Indeed, whenever two States agree to act against Syria, usually another party joins them and, in this case, it is Israel. One loots the territory, another steals oil and the third seeks to continue its occupation of the Syrian Golan, seizing the land of Syrians and committing successive aggressions against my country in flagrant violation of international law and resolution 350 (1974) on the Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces.

The most recent Israeli evil aggression took place on 20 November, resulting in a number of civilian deaths and the destruction of many homes, while certain Council members, including permanent members, continue to protect Israel and render the Council powerless. What is more heinous is that our United States colleague has justified the Israeli aggression as an expression of Iranphobia. It is a shared sentiment on the part of the Americans and the Israelis.

My country's Government stresses that the terrorist war against Syria did not start due to national differences over the Constitution but because of international terrorism, which targeted Syria for political objectives related to trying to change the geopolitical map of the region. That means the war against Syria will end once the terrorism supported by foreign Powers also comes to an end. We say all that despite the fact that we are ready to encourage the delegation supported by the Syrian State to make efforts so that the Committee can accomplish its task. The Constitutional Committee must submit the outcome of its work to the Syrian people, which is the only authorized party to examine its conclusions and judge them.

The Syrian people categorically condemn the occupation and terrorism practised by various terrorist groups, irrespective of their name and affiliation. They include Da'esh, the Al-Nusra Front, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, all of which,

as the Council knows, are organizations that have their elements graduate from major Western universities that teach international humanitarian law in the United States of America, France, Belgium or Germany. All those terrorists studied in major Western universities. They behead people, eat livers and burn individuals. That is part of the international humanitarian law that they studied.

The Syrian people also reject any separatist scheme or semi-secessionist plan regardless of its form and the propaganda campaigns that are used to promote it. Our people call for the immediate lifting of the unilateral

coercive measures imposed on them, which amount to economic terrorism. It goes without saying that those national constants must be at the core of the work of members of the Committee discussing the Constitution. That is the situation all in the Chamber need to grasp.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 5.05 p.m.