



Security Council

Seventy-fourth year

8696th meeting

Friday, 20 December 2019, 10 a.m.

New York

Provisional

President: Mrs. Craft/Mr. Barkin (United States of America)

Members:

Belgium	Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve
China	Mr. Zhang Jun
Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
Dominican Republic	Mr. Trullols Yabra
Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Esono Mbengono
France	Mrs. Gueguen
Germany	Mr. Schulz
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Kuwait	Mr. Aljarallah
Peru	Mr. Popolizio Bardales
Poland	Ms. Wronecka
Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
South Africa	Mr. Van Shalkwyk
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . .	Ms. Pierce

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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19-42313 (E)



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

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: 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. Rajaa Altalli, co-Founder and co-Director of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy.

Mr. Pedersen is joining the meeting via video-conference from Geneva.

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

I now give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: One year ago, many believed that the Syrian conflict was winding down. Yet the past 12 months have seen a steady stream of violence punctuated by escalations that continue to this day across many areas of Syria, such as the north-west, the north-east and south. Proscribed terrorist groups have also not been defeated and continue to pose a major security threat. All of that serves as a constant, grim reminder that the need for a comprehensive political process, as mandated by the Security Council in resolution 2254 (2015), is more pressing than ever. Today, let me start by updating the Council on one aspect of that process — the Constitutional Committee.

On 25 November, the small body of the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee convened for its second session. Before arriving in Geneva, I had asked each co-Chair to put forward proposals for an agenda for the second session, in line with the terms of reference and core rules of procedures. On 21 November, the co-Chair designated by the opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission sent me a proposed work plan with 10 constitutional headings, as well as an agenda focusing on the preamble to the Constitution and basic principles of the Constitution. On 25 November, the co-Chair designated by the Syrian Government

proposed an agenda regarding national pillars, that is to say, national pillars of concern of the Syrian people. At the same time, the co-Chair designated by the Government insisted that constitutional issues could not be discussed until those national pillars were discussed. For his part, the Syrian Negotiations Commission co-Chair stated that national pillars could be discussed, provided that that would occur within the context of the agreed terms of reference and core rules of procedures or within an agenda of basic constitutional principles.

From 25 through 29 November, I sought, in line with my mandate and consistent with the Syrian leadership and ownership of the process, to facilitate consensus between the co-Chairs and bring their viewpoints closer together. We had serious discussions in that regard. Different formulas were put forward that might have enabled both sides to table and discuss the issues of interest to them within the scope of the Constitutional Committee's mandate. By the end of the week, however, it was clear that consensus would not be reached and that the meeting of the small body was not possible. During that recess, I remain focused on facilitating agreement on an agenda for the next session of the small body. To that end, I hope that I will soon be able to consult directly with the Syrian Government in Damascus, as well as with the Syrian Negotiations Commission.

My team also remains in contact with the middle third civil society delegation and I stand ready to support them along the lines I outlined in my most recent briefing to the Council (see S/PV.8674). I have also met with international stakeholders with regard to that and all other aspects of the process. This past month, I met with the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Turkey, Italy, Jordan and Algeria, as well as senior officials from the United States, France, Iran and Germany, and they all expressed support for my mediation efforts. I hope agreement can be reached promptly on an agenda that falls in line with the terms of reference and core rules of procedure of the Constitutional Committee. As things stand, and absent an agreed agenda, I see no reason to convene another session of the small body.

When I last briefed the Council, we had just concluded a successful opening session of the Constitutional Committee. That second session was obviously very different in both substance and tone, but disagreement on the agenda is typical for any political process. I do, however, believe that there are several

lessons that we can draw from the experience of the second round. Let me highlight three experiences.

First, the Constitutional Committee is and will remain fragile. Progress depends on the Syrian Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission, the two sides whose agreement made the creation of the Constitutional Committee possible, allowing their members to work professionally on the constitutional issues and without dissociating themselves from the work of those nominated. The Constitutional Committee needs to be nurtured and genuinely supported if it is to succeed. That is the responsibility of the Syrian parties. International stakeholders also have a supporting role to play. I know I can count on the support of the Council in that regard.

Secondly, any proposed agenda must comply with the terms of reference and core rules of procedure agreed between the Government and opposition. That means that all issues are open for discussion within the Committee, without preconditions and without making considerations on one issue when its outcome depends on the resolution of another issue. It also means that issues should be framed and fall under a constitutional heading. The Constitutional Committee is mandated by agreement to prepare and draft the constitutional reform as a contribution to the political settlement. If the Constitutional Committee is to deliver on that, it must focus on its constitutional mandate.

Thirdly, the second round only underscores the need for a broader and comprehensive political process. The Government and the opposition reaffirmed that when they agreed in the terms of reference and core rules of procedures on the need for a broad political process moving forward to build trust and confidence and implement resolution 2254 (2015). Indeed, I believe that, while the Constitutional Committee cannot solve the crisis, it can help foster the trust and confidence among the parties that can open the door to a broad process. Such a broad process can equally feed positively into the work on constitutional issues.

I believe that a meaningful, wider political process will be one that delivers tangible actions, such as progress on the release of detainees and abductees, and clarification on the fate of missing persons. It remains a matter of great frustration for me that there has not been meaningful movement on that issue. My Deputy and I will continue directly engaging with the Syrian parties, as well as with all the relevant actors. We also

remain committed to actively contributing to the efforts of the working group that was set up to deal with that issue. In this context, I met with senior officials from Russia, Turkey and Iran in Nur-Sultan last week and, along with discussions on other issues, I stressed the need to move beyond the one-for-one exchanges and to see the release of children, women and the sick on a meaningful scale.

De-escalating violence and a nationwide ceasefire should underpin a wider political process. North-western Syria has seen a deeply troubling escalation of violence in recent days. Assistant Secretary-General Mueller briefed the Council in detail yesterday (See S/PV.8694) on the terrible suffering of civilians there. The devastating humanitarian cost of a full-scale military offensive for the 3 million people living in north-western Syria is a price that they simply cannot afford to pay. All sides must de-escalate urgently.

Civilians also continue to suffer in north-eastern Syria, where the security situation remains volatile, even if it is calmer relative to the days and weeks after Turkey first launched its intervention. It is crucial that the various ceasefire understandings negotiated among actors there be respected and lead to a sustained de-escalation in violence. The security situation in southern Syria also remains turbulent and should be addressed.

Countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups is also imperative through an approach that is cooperative, ensures the protection of civilians and respects international humanitarian law and human rights law. As always, while the security situation is the most devastating threat, Syrians are also facing increasing economic hardship, including as a result of commodity shortages and entrenched poverty. A broader process must ultimately address that too. A broader process should respect and ultimately restore Syria's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and independence, and such a process should achieve long-lasting, real and genuine reconciliation.

A broader process must also be inclusive. We continue to consult with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board on the concerns and priorities of diverse Syrian women and their perspectives on a sustainable and inclusive political solution. Syrian civil society should be fully included in any broader process. Ultimately, the process should help develop a safe, calm and neutral environment that sees the safe, voluntary and

dignified return of refugees to their places of origin or places of their choosing; an environment in which a new constitution, adopted by popular approval, can be genuinely reflected in institutions and in practice; and an environment in which inclusive, free and fair elections can take place, which include the diaspora and which are administered under the supervision of the United Nations, in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

Many of these issues touch upon constitution-making, and some could be discussed under a constitutional rubric, but a constitution-making process itself is not likely to resolve them in a way that meets the urgent and legitimate concerns of the Syrian people. I remain convinced that the steps-for-steps model could help unlock practical progress — steps that build trust and confidence among Syrians and between Syrians and the international community, undertaken in a reciprocal fashion. I continue to press on this in all my engagements with the Syrian parties and international stakeholders. I continue to offer my good offices in that regard, and I continue to support the convening of a new international format to bring together the will of the key players.

This is my last briefing of my first year as Special Envoy. When I first briefed the Council (see S/PV.8475), I said that my priorities were a sustained dialogue with the Syrian Government and the opposition, the launch of the Constitutional Committee as a door opener, a wider dialogue with civil society, action on detainees, abductees and the missing, and international discussions in support of a political solution. Those remain my priorities, but it is now time to update them.

The Committee has been launched but needs to work expeditiously and continuously to produce results and continue progress. I appreciate my open and direct dialogue with both Syrian parties, but if we are to take it to the next level, we will need to address the full array of issues. We must enable de-escalation leading towards a nationwide ceasefire, as well as a cooperative, lawful approach to countering proscribed terrorist groups. As part of the dialogue, we must generate concrete action on detainees, abductees and missing persons.

I think that all of that could take shape for the benefit of all Syrians through a steps-for-steps approach, and I think that a key part of this is for international discussions to deepen and for a new international format to take shape to underpin the process. We know that none of this will be easy, and I will continue to

count on the full engagement of the Syrian parties and the full support of the Council.

The President: I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Altalli.

Ms. Altalli: When I was 12-years-old, my father Jries Altalli, who is a retired teacher and the sole provider of my family, was abducted by the political security branch in Damascus. He was tortured for one year in that branch, transferred to the Adra prison and subsequently to the notorious Tadmor prison. After nine years, on 16 November 2000, my father was released through a presidential pardon.

This story is the story of thousands of Syrians from before and during the conflict. It is hard to describe the suffering that Syrian women, men, girls and boys have experienced in the past nine years. Shall I talk about the bombing, starving to death under siege, chemical weapons, forced demographic changes or the indiscriminate shelling of houses, hospitals and schools? More than half of the population has been displaced, either internally or forced outside the country. Tens of thousands have been arrested and tortured.

The Syrian Government is a principal party, together with many parties, that is responsible for the situation in Syria. Yet the Syrian crisis is approaching its ninth year and, on the fourth anniversary of the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015), now is the time to end the suffering of Syrians. I call upon the Security Council, on behalf of the silent majority of Syrians, to work together and with Syrians to find a sustainable solution based on resolution 2254 (2015). Syrian non-governmental organizations, such as the Center for Civil Society and Democracy, and our partners believe that a political solution is not only urgent and necessary, but also possible. Therefore, I put before the Council today a six-point road map to end the Syrian tragedy.

First, all hostilities must end across the entire Syrian territory, including sexual and gender-based violence.

Secondly, we must improve the conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, support them and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid by all parties. An independent United Nations committee must be formed, with the participation of Syrian civil society, to supervise the voluntary and safe return of refugees and IDPs to their places of origin or the places that they choose to go.

Thirdly, a specialized gender-sensitive committee must be formed, under the auspices of the Security Council, to address all matters concerning Syrian detainees to oversee treatment and overcome the negative effects of detention for all detainees in Syria, to support the release of all detainees and kidnapped people, reveal the fate of detainees and the forcibly disappeared, and provide all necessary support to those who have been detained and abducted, as well as to their families.

Those first three points are intended to build the confidence of Syrians not only in the political process, but also in the Security Council.

Fourthly, we seek the formation of an international working group of permanent members of the Security Council to support the efforts of the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Pedersen, in the comprehensive political process, including the constitutional process, and to provide a safe, neutral and conducive environment, including by restructuring security and military agencies in accordance with the principles of international human rights. All that will pave the way for free and fair elections under United Nations supervision in 2020-2021.

Fifthly, we must support the achievement of a political agreement among the various parties, with the direct participation of Syrian women and civil society, in accordance with the following criteria: the establishment of justice and accountability mechanisms that guarantee the victim's rights; the separation of powers and the peaceful reallocation of powers based on the outcome of the negotiations; guarantees of full human and women's rights and the safeguarding of all freedoms, including the freedoms of religion, expression and association; enabling the formation of political parties and civil society organizations in Syria; and building a common Syrian identity based on diversity by ensuring the rights of Syrians from all communities, religions, gender, races and ethnicities.

Sixthly and finally, we must plan and prepare for sustainable development and reconstruction in Syria, including an effective Syrian national action plan on women, peace and security, based on resolution 1325 (2000) and its subsequent resolutions. Young people must also be included on the basis of resolution 2250 (2015). The implementation of those plans can start as soon as the agreement on transition is reached.

I implore Council members to work together as a united Security Council to achieve those measures and to take action to end the suffering of millions of Syrians. We look to the Council to support the efforts of Syrian civil society and Syrian women peacebuilders by listening to their voices, directly and permanently, at all United Nations meetings about Syria.

After everything that has happened in Syria, I feel fortunate to have been able to visit my father many times in prison and grateful for his release after nine years of incarceration. Today, 19 years later, I come to the Security Council to ask for its help in securing the release of all detainees in Syria. It should give thousands of Syrian children a chance to see their parents again. It should give those Syrian children the ability to feel joy in their hearts as we stand on the threshold of a new year.

The President: I thank Ms. Altalli for her briefing.

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

Mr. Aljarallah (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, we would like to express our appreciation to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his excellent and exhaustive briefing. We would also like to thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli for her presentation.

A few months ago, we all witnessed a glimmer of hope for the brotherly people of Syria, in particular, and for the international community as a whole — a glimmer of hope in the agreement on the definitive lists for the Constitutional Committee and the holding of the first round of its Syrian-owned and Syrian-led meetings in Geneva, facilitated by the United Nations. That was an essential step forward in the peace process and also laid the groundwork for other very important milestones, as set out in resolution 2254 (2015), more specifically the drafting of a constitution and the holding of free and inclusive elections in Syria by virtue of said constitution, under United Nations supervision and with the participation of all Syrians, including those residing abroad.

Despite the difficulties encountered during the second round of Constitutional Committee meetings as a result of disagreement on the agenda owing to differences of opinion on the priorities and the details, we still hope that, thanks to the support of Special Envoy Pedersen, the Syrian parties will reach an agreement on the issue and subsequently on understandings on the

Syrian constitution, as well as other political elements set out in resolution 2254 (2015). We call on the Syrian parties to be mindful of the interests of our brotherly Syrian people and undertake efforts to ensure that they achieve their legitimate aspirations through a political agreement endorsed by all components of Syrian society. Such an agreement would preserve the unity, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.

It is clear that there are differing opinions among the various stakeholders who have suffered for eight years because of the bitter and bloody conflict. That is normal and predictable. However, what worries us is that accelerated military developments on the ground are affecting the political process and the work of the Constitutional Committee, in particular. The political process must be accompanied by confidence-building measures among the parties to ensure its sustainability and success. The most important of those measure is achieving real and tangible progress on the issue of missing persons and detainees. The international organizations concerned must be allowed to visit prisons and detention centres. Here we note that, in June, the Security Council adopted resolution 2474 (2019), on persons reported missing during armed conflict, which must be implemented throughout conflict areas in the world, including in Syria. We reaffirm how important it is to bring those who are responsible for committing serious crimes in Syria to justice and to ensure that there is no impunity for any injustices, as sustainable peace cannot be achieved without justice.

With respect to the acceleration of military operations in north-western Syria, of greatest concern to us is the intensity of the escalation — the price of which will be a greater number of civilian casualties. We therefore once again condemn the targeting of innocent civilians by any party, including attacks by Security Council-designated terrorist groups on civilian populations and in populated areas. At the same time, we reiterate that even if operations are for counter-terrorist purposes, their actors, like any other party to the conflict, are in no way exempt from their obligations under international law, including compliance with the principles of distinction, proportionality, caution and the protection of civilians and civilian facilities.

We recall the earlier warning by the United Nations that any massive-scale military operation in Idlib governorate could lead to the worst humanitarian disaster of the twenty-first century. In this regard,

we call for an urgent ceasefire across all of Syria, as provided for in the relevant Security Council resolutions, in particular resolution 2401 (2018). In this regard, we condemn Israeli's repeated attacks on the sovereignty and territory of Syria, which also constitute violations of the Charter of the United Nations, international law and the relevant Security Council resolutions, including resolution 350 (1974) on the disengagement between the Israeli and Syrian sides. Speaking of Israeli violations, I would reiterate that the Golan is Syrian Arab territory occupied by Israel, the occupying Power. The seizure and annexation of territory by force is unacceptable and violates the Charter of the United Nations, the principles of international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, and, in this context, resolution 497 (1981).

In conclusion, given that this is the last scheduled meeting on the Syrian political process in which the State of Kuwait is participating as a member of the Security Council, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Mr. Pedersen for the efforts he has made since taking office earlier this year. We assure him of the State of Kuwait's full support, which will continue even after our membership in the Council comes to an end. We wish him every success in his difficult mission to facilitate a political process aimed at restoring stability and security in Syria, the brotherly Arab country with a long-standing history and culture for which we maintain the deepest affection, appreciation and respect.

Furthermore, I would be remiss if I failed to extend my thanks to all members of the Council for the cordial reception they extended to us yesterday and for their praise for my country, Kuwait, for the role it has played throughout its two-year term as a non-permanent member of the Security Council. We are extremely grateful for the support and cooperation we found in this Chamber, which enabled us to work together to achieve our common goals.

Mr. Schulz (Germany): At the outset, let me thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Ms. Altalli for their briefings.

We are deeply disappointed that the Syrian regime has, at the last meeting of the Constitutional Committee, yet again deployed its strategy of obstruction, delay and tactical games. That is all the more disappointing after the first round was more successful than many had expected. Unfortunately, it is a pattern that we have seen all too often over the past years — by creating artificial

discussions on agenda items, the regime wants to avoid any real and substantive debate. Unfortunately, that goes hand in hand with repeated statements by Bashar Al-Assad, in which he disassociates himself from the Constitutional Committee. We therefore strongly urge the Syrian regime to stop obstructing and finally fully commit to the constitutional process.

The current situation illustrates that the launch of the Constitutional Committee is merely a first step towards a political solution to the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that its meetings can be helpful to build some trust and therefore become a door-opener for the broader political process, as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015). However, in order for that to happen, all sides need to seriously engage.

The establishment of the Constitutional Committee in itself is not the political transition that was called for in resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué of 2012 (S/2012/522, annex). We need a genuine political process under the auspices of the United Nations that will lead to actual change in Syria and a post-conflict order that fulfils the legitimate hopes of the Syrian people for peace and security.

Germany is the second-largest bilateral donor in terms of humanitarian assistance to Syria. However, when it comes to the issue of reconstruction, we remain steadfast in our position. Germany and other States members of the European Union will only assist in the reconstruction of Syria when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition is firmly under way.

Ms. Altalli's briefing was a stark reminder that every time we speak about the Syrian conflict, we must not forget its root causes. It was, first and foremost, the Syrian regime's policy of brutal violence, repression and persecution that caused this conflict, and this policy is still keeping Syrian internally displaced persons and refugees from returning home. The Syrian regime has arbitrarily detained tens of thousands of innocent Syrians merely because they dared to make use of their freedom of expression. The Syrian regime has tortured thousands of innocent Syrians to death merely because they dared to ask for political reform and freedom in Syria. Calling ordinary citizens terrorists in order to create the pretext for their arrest and torture is outrageous.

Arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of detainees continue, even in so-called reconciled areas. The

Syrian regime's systematic use of the worst methods of torture is sickening — even children continue to be among the victims. The Syrian regime must stop such acts immediately.

Since our meeting at the beginning of August dedicated to the issue of detainees and missing persons (see S/PV. 8593), there has unfortunately been no progress on ending these gravest of human rights violations. On the contrary, in recent months, there have once again been credible reports on an increased number of detainees being transferred to the infamous Sednaya military prison in order to be executed without a fair trial. At the same time, the Astana working group on detentions and abductions in the Syrian conflict has unfortunately not been able to agree on a prisoner exchange and has not advanced on the issue. However, meaningful progress on this issue is crucial in order to build confidence. The Syrian regime must therefore finally inform the families of the tens of thousands of missing persons of the fate of their loved ones, grant 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, starting with incarcerated minors and the sick. We also call on Russia and Iran to use their influence over Damascus in this regard.

I shall now turn to the situation in Idlib. We are deeply concerned about the ongoing military attacks, including air strikes, in the so-called de-escalation zone of Idlib and remain extremely worried about a potential large-scale military offensive in and around Idlib. We reiterate our call for a genuine and lasting ceasefire, the protection of civilians and adherence to international humanitarian law. We condemn the recent air strikes and ground-based strikes by Syrian regime forces and their allies, which resulted in further civilian casualties.

Strikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure are inexcusable; they are a violation of international law and have to be part of the investigation by the Commission of Inquiry. The Syrian regime and its allies must comply with their obligations under international law and protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

We are concerned by the presence and attacks of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other United Nations-designated terrorist groups in Idlib, and we agree that the role of terrorist organizations in Idlib must be

addressed. However, the fight against terrorism does not justify indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

I would like to say a final word about the situation in north-east Syria. The risk of a further destabilization of the whole region persists, and we therefore call upon all actors in the north-east to immediately implement a lasting ceasefire and halt all military operations. We are concerned by the increased use of improvised explosive devices in residential neighbourhoods and local markets that have mainly been carried out in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups. We deplore the loss of human lives and strongly condemn any indiscriminate attack on civilians.

The risk of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) resurging and committing terrorist acts in the region and beyond remains indubitably real. We are committed to ensuring the defeat of ISIL and other United Nations-designated terrorist groups.

We also reject any resettlement of Syrian refugees into north-east Syria — or into any other part of Syria, in fact — that is not a safe, dignified, and voluntary return to the homes of those refugees or violates the rights of the local population.

We remain concerned about a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in north-east Syria and reiterate our call to all parties to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian access for all Syrians currently in need of it.

Mrs. Gueguen (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Ms. Rajaa Altalli for their briefings. I particularly wish to commend Ms. Altalli for her unwavering commitment to making the voice of Syrian civil society, the voice of the suffering silent majority and the voice of women, who must be heard and able to participate in discussions and decisions concerning their country on an equal footing with men, heard.

I wish to review two points. First, on the ground, there must be a freeze at the fronts. This is crucial to provide a relief to an exhausted and bleeding population. France is extremely concerned about the resumed attacks by the regime and its allies in the North-West, which now shows signs of a major attack and claimed 16 civilian victims yesterday. We continue to closely follow the situation and strongly warn against such an attack, which would only strengthen the terrorist

group, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, against whom we must unite our efforts. I therefore hope to clearly reiterate the call to end hostilities that France has already made on a number of occasions in the Chamber.

As winter begins, the attacks will revive the humanitarian catastrophe against which the United Nations has repeatedly warned. In this regard, I reiterate, as I did yesterday, that France strongly condemns the indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, in particular medical facilities (see S/PV.8694). War has rules that must be respected. The fight against terrorism is a priority but does not justify violating international humanitarian law. To be effective and produce lasting results, the fight against terrorism must be done while respecting the law, which imposes a moral, legal and operational imperative on all parties.

We remain vigilant with regard to the situation in the north-east, where hostilities must not resume. The resumption of fighting would jeopardize at great sacrifice the results achieved by the international coalition with local partners. Furthermore, this could not only strengthen Da'esh and create conditions for a new humanitarian crisis.

France is also concerned about the deterioration of the situation in the south-west a year and a half after its reconquest by the regime. The security situation continues to deteriorate month after month, with chronic instability illustrated by the increase in attacks and assassinations. Nor has the humanitarian situation improved at all. Public services remain nearly non-existent, and the Syrian regime continues to impose unjustifiable restrictions to humanitarian access. France calls on the Council to be particularly vigilant with regard to the evolution of the situation.

Secondly, with respect to the political process, it is more urgent than ever to get it back on track for the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). The Syrian regime's obstructions to the continuation of the work of the Constitutional Committee are unacceptable. This obstruction is contrary to the rules of engagement previously agreed upon by the parties through the efforts of the United Nations Special Envoy Geir Pedersen. It confirms once again that the regime continues to refuse to engage genuinely and in good faith in a political process after more than eight years of destructive war.

We support the Special Envoy and urge him to continue his active efforts to unlock the situation. The Astana guarantors must also put pressure on the regime. Finally, should the next session of the Committee find itself in a similar situation to the last session, we call on the Special Envoy to make it clear to the Security Council in his next briefing.

As Mr. Geir Pedersen pointed out in his briefing, the Constitutional Committee is only one element of a broader process aimed at implementing all elements of resolution 2254 (2015). France reaffirms its full support for the Special Envoy's efforts in this regard. We encourage him to make similar progress on the establishment of a secure and neutral environment, which is essential for holding credible elections under the supervision of the United Nations in which all Syrians, including refugees and displaced persons, must participate. Only by guaranteeing these conditions of security and neutrality will the Syrians be able to reclaim their future in the forthcoming elections.

Progress must also be made on the release of detainees. The lack of progress on detainees at the last meeting of the Astana guarantors underlines, once again, the need to change the scale and method and give the United Nations a free hand in the matter. We must listen to the pressing demands of the people who dare to overcome their fear, taking to the streets of Dara once again to call for the release of their loved ones, and we must not forget how the Syrian conflict began in early 2011.

Without credible progress, France and the European Union's position on reconstruction and sanctions will remain unchanged. It will also remain illusory to expect a dignified, safe and voluntary return of refugees without a global agreement, including real political and security guarantees, without which refugees will fear for their lives. Finally, it is essential to ensure the safe and unhindered access of the United Nations to observe and accompany returns on the ground, which has not been the case to date.

It is in all our interests to put Syria back on the path to peace and stability. In order to move forward, we need the efforts of all and to recreate unity within the Council. France calls on all members of the Council to demonstrate unity and responsibility in order to move forward on the path to a political settlement and also to respond to the immense humanitarian needs of the Syrian population by supporting the draft resolution

renewing the mechanism for cross-border assistance presented by humanitarian penholders (S/2019/961).

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I once again thank the Special Envoy for all the work his team is doing and thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli for being in the Chamber today and sharing her story. I am very sorry for the suffering that she and her family have experienced.

Like others, we thank the Special Envoy for his tireless efforts aimed at bringing peace to Syria, but the breakdown of talks during the second Constitutional Committee meeting is extremely disappointing. As we all know, if these long-awaited meetings are going to succeed, they require serious engagement and commitment from all sides. We support Mr. Pedersen's position that the Government and opposition Chairs need to agree on an agenda before a third round of the Committee can be convened. We regret attempts by the Syrian authorities to introduce conditions widely accepted as unnecessary to intentionally stall the talks. We call on these authorities to respect the rules of the Committee and return to negotiations.

We are also concerned that the Syrian authorities appear to be disassociating themselves from the Constitutional Committee in official statements and in the media, suggesting that the Syrian delegation represents, "the point of view of the Syrian regime but is not the regime itself". I would therefore like to ask the Syrian representative to allay these concerns by reaffirming to the Council that its delegation to the Constitutional Committee is indeed the "Government delegation".

We understand that Mr. Pedersen is not able to share the full details of the negotiations and progress towards the reopening of talks during his briefings, not least because of time constraints, but we do believe that there would be merit in considering other means by which Mr. Pedersen could keep the Council apprised of the details.

I once again thank Ms. Altalli for her briefing and would like now to turn to what she told us. The United Kingdom has always been clear that the political process should reflect a broad and diverse cross-section of Syrian society. We will need to remain mindful that a successful political settlement in Syria goes well beyond the Constitution. It is crucial that all elements of resolution 2254 (2015) be taken forward in tandem. That includes creating conditions for refugee return,

preparations for free and fair elections in 2021 and the release of detainees.

We are therefore deeply concerned to hear of the arrest of 174 people who returned to Homs from the Rukban internally displaced persons (IDP) camp, which happened despite having obtained clearance from the Syrian authorities and guarantees that they would be exempt from persecution. The Syrian authorities and Russia need to stay true to their word and respect the promises they have made.

On torture, I do not think that I can put it better than the German representative did. These are truly horrific cases. They are unacceptable and need to stop.

We support the Special Envoy in advancing all the other baskets of the political process. I would like to reiterate that the United Kingdom will not consider providing any reconstruction assistance without a credible, substantive and genuinely political process being firmly under way.

I would now like to turn to Idlib. We remain extremely concerned about the continued air strikes there. We note reports on 2 December of attacks on the markets of Saraqib and Maarat Al-Numan, which killed at least 14 civilians. Attacks on hospitals, such as in the Al-Qah IDP camp on 20 November, and other civilian infrastructure are inexcusable and run counter to the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law. Furthermore, it is unbelievable that the Syrian authorities would conduct more such attacks given the ongoing board of inquiry investigation. The United Kingdom looks forward to the board's update to the Council.

We welcome the fact that the ceasefire in north-east Syria continues, broadly, to hold, but we are concerned about reports of an attack near a school in Tell Rifaat, held by the Kurdish People's Protection Units, which killed at least 10, including eight children. We call on all parties involved to respect the ceasefire and their obligations towards civilians under international humanitarian law.

I would like to say a few words about Syrian refugees. Syrians have a right to return to their homes voluntarily, in safety and dignity, in line with international humanitarian law. We support the United Nations judgement that conditions in Syria are not yet conducive to safe and dignified return.

Finally, the United Kingdom, as a member of the Global Coalition against Da'esh, is proud of its role in the successful fight to liberate the territory held by Da'esh in Syria and Iraq. We remain committed to securing the enduring defeat of Da'esh. Much remains to be done, and we cannot lose sight of the threat they pose, even without territory. The group's dangerous and pervasive ideology needs to be eliminated.

Mr. Trullols Yabra (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank Ambassador Pedersen for his briefing and renew our full support for his efforts to bring about greater rapprochement, reconciliation and dialogue among the Syrian Government, the opposition and civil society. We recognize the significant obstacles and challenges that have been overcome in order to reach the current situation. We urge him to continue, without wavering, along that path — sometimes with very sharp curves — towards broad political renewal in the Syrian Arab Republic in order to restore hope of a better future to a people beset by nine years of conflict.

We are grateful for the participation of Ms. Altalli, whose perspective as a woman and an activist confirms the important role that women can and must play in the political process in Syria.

The Dominican Republic regrets that it has not been possible for the small group to reach an agreement on the agenda for its deliberations in the framework of the second meeting of the Constitutional Committee. We hope that, in the not too distant future, both parties will be able to agree on common points to guide their discussions and proceed with a new round of meetings. We support the points just made by Ambassador Pedersen as immediate steps to be taken to that end.

We are fully convinced that this process must be Syrian-led and -owned. We therefore understand that, as the guarantor of the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015), the Security Council has the responsibility to continue to urge the parties to show the greatest possible degree of commitment and flexibility in order to promote its full implementation. After so many years of waiting, and so much mutual distrust, it is essential that both the Government and the opposition participate in those meetings empowered to carry out their functions with the understanding that the current situation is a point of no return in the Syrian peace process. They need our robust support.

I would like to highlight some very specific aspects with regard to the issue we are considering today.

First, we reiterate our conviction that the only way to resolve this very complex conflict is on the basis of dialogue and political negotiation. There is no military solution that can open the door to sustainable national reconciliation.

Secondly, as the political process gains momentum and moves forward, it is critical to build intra-Syrian trust and confidence with concrete gestures from all the parties involved. Respecting ceasefire agreements, ending all arbitrary detentions, including those of health workers, and releasing arbitrarily detained persons are some of the measures that must continue to be implemented. We recognize the achievements of the working group within the framework of the Astana guarantors, and we urge them to aim for more ambitious outcomes in this area.

Thirdly, my delegation believes that all refugee returns must be voluntary, safe and dignified, and take place within the framework of internationally established guidelines. Refugees should be allowed to return to their places of origin or of choice, have their basic subsistence and documentation needs met and be offered prospects for a better future in their country.

As this is the last meeting scheduled in the December programme of work, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the delegations of Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Kuwait, Peru and Poland for their excellent work as non-permanent members of the Council and for their spirit of collaboration and fellowship, and to the President for conducting our work in a professional and transparent manner. I thank and congratulate one and all.

Mr. Van Schalkwyk (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing on the political situation in Syria. We welcome his dedicated efforts and those of his Office in carrying out his mandate. We also thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli for her briefing and statement.

At the Council's previous briefing on the political situation in Syria (see S/PV.8664), South Africa welcomed the launch and first meeting of the Constitutional Committee, held in Geneva, and expressed our hope that it would lead to tangible progress towards a sincere constitution-building process. We welcome the convening of the second round of talks by the small body of the Constitutional Committee and note the need for building blocks to be put in place to achieve progress on substantive matters. We encourage

all parties to recommit to the Constitutional Committee as an effective and essential part of the Syrian political process. In addition, my delegation urges the various parties to make every effort to work together, with the support of the Special Envoy, to find agreement on a realistic agenda, before the start of the next round of talks, to guide the work of the Committee. While the Constitutional Committee is part of a larger political process designed to bring peace and stability to Syria, it is a vital one that must be supported.

With regard to the other components of the political process, and as a way to buttress the Constitutional Committee's process, there is a need to build trust and confidence among the various parties and communities. Actions in that regard, at all levels of society and Government, including through the release of civilian detainees, would contribute to healing and reconciliation. We, as South Africans, know that trust and confidence among parties is an essential component of any negotiation and hope that actions that build on those principles will be of benefit to all. The only long-term solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive, Syrian-led dialogue that is reflective of the voice of the Syrian people and will safeguard the universal rights and fundamental interests of all Syrian society. In that regard, we call on all parties to fully implement resolution 2254 (2015) as the blueprint for a long-term political solution in Syria.

South Africa believes that the political and humanitarian situation in Syria cannot be addressed independently of each other. The continuation of violence and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation negatively affect the political process. In the same vein, progress in the political sphere will support efforts towards ensuring that all Syrians are able to live in a safe, secure and prosperous environment, free of violence and terrorism. The Council met yesterday (see S/PV.8694) to discuss the humanitarian situation in Syria and try to find consensus on the renewal of the cross-border assistance programme. We remind all Council members of their duty to uphold the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their moral imperative to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. South Africa calls on all Council members to make every effort to find a compromise and reach consensus to ensure that the mandate of that vital, life-saving humanitarian assistance programme is renewed.

Mr. Zhang Jun (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): First, I wish to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing. Because of the strong sunlight behind me, I cannot see him very well. However, I hope that light is a sign of a brighter future for the political process in Syria.

The establishment of the Constitutional Committee is a good start for the Syrian political process, with both the large body of the Constitutional Committee and the 45-member small body initiating their work in the time since late October. China welcomes such progress and appreciates Special Envoy Pedersen's mediation efforts, as well as the constructive participation of all Syrian parties. At the same time, there are differences among the Syrian parties in the Constitutional Committee. Although that is inevitable, we hope that all parties will maintain political dialogue through the Constitutional Committee to enhance mutual understanding and trust.

China supports Special Envoy Pedersen's work to build on the achievements that have already been made, in accordance with the Syrian-led and Syrian-owned principle and resolution 2254 (2015), and to continue to advance Syrian political process. Attention should be focused on maintaining the independence of the Constitutional Committee's work — there should be no outside interference or imposition of arbitrary time limits. Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity should be fully respected and the legitimate demands of the Government of Syria heeded. Syria cannot be divided or fragmented. We expect the members of the Constitutional Committee to put the interests of Syria and its people first and participate in the dialogue with political will and the spirit of compromise.

China welcomes the new round of the Astana dialogue that was convened last week in Nur-Sultan by Russia, Iran and Turkey, and hopes that it will help the Syrian parties to bridge their differences and build consensus.

The eradication of terrorist forces is a necessary security precondition for the Syrian people to be able to return to a peaceful and orderly life. Countries should continue to act in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international law to combat all forms of terrorism with uniform standards. The problem of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria has come to the fore — Idlib has become a breeding ground for terrorism, the risk of terrorism spreading across north-eastern Syria is increasing and there is still a possibility

of a resurgence of the Islamic State. Such developments threaten peace and security in Syria, the Middle East and the world. All parties should avoid taking actions that undermine counter-terrorism achievements and instead try their best to work together and earnestly explore the issue of how to bring the terrorists to justice. We recommend that the Secretariat pay close attention to the counter-terrorism developments in Syria and the flow of terrorists there, while proceeding to establish a terrorist database and providing timely and relevant information to the countries concerned so that they can solidify the conditions necessary for the next step in resolving the issue of foreign terrorist fighters, as well as other problems.

While advancing the Syrian political process, the international community should also work to improve the economic and humanitarian situation in Syria through efforts to address and alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the country in a comprehensive, objective and balanced manner. Syria is currently facing economic sanctions, oil shortages, damaged or run-down infrastructure, insufficient resources for reconstruction and other difficulties, all of which have exacerbated the humanitarian crisis on the ground and had an extremely adverse effect on the lives of the Syrian people.

The large number of refugees has also exerted economic and social pressure on Syria's neighbouring countries and become a destabilizing factor in the region. There should not be any political preconditions attached to the provision of humanitarian supplies to Syria. Humanitarian relief operations in Syria should be carried out with increased communication and coordination with the Syrian Government and with respect for the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

China wishes to reiterate its support for the Syrian political process and stands ready to play a constructive role in the early restoration of peace, stability and development in Syria. At the same time, all parties should make a joint effort to contribute to the Syrian political process, help build mutual trust and work towards the same goal through compromise. China does not support the holding of discussions on the Syrian human rights issue in the Security Council, or the use of human rights issues to impose pressure on Syria or make accusations against it. Such actions are not in line with the mandate of the Security Council, and neither

are they conducive to creating a good atmosphere for advancing the Syrian political process.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): At the outset, let me thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive briefing. Let me also thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli, Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Center for Civil Society and Democracy, for her input.

Poland has underlined many times that any sustainable solution to the conflict in Syria requires a genuine political transition negotiated by the Syrian parties within the United Nations-led Geneva process. We agree with the Special Envoy that the future of Syria belongs to the Syrian people and them alone. The work of the Constitutional Committee could be the beginning of a meaningful process in that regard. We urge all parties, including the authorities in Damascus, to engage in good faith in the work of the Constitutional Committee. In that context, let me also underline the importance of civil society in the process of achieving sustainable peace and justice in any country.

All parties to the conflict need to engage in confidence-building measures. In that connection, let me stress again that the Syrian war has brought unspeakable suffering to the whole country. Thousands of people remain in arbitrary detention. Moreover, thousands remain missing and their relatives deprived of any information on their fate, as our briefer mentioned. We call for their release, particularly children, women and the elderly. Progress in that area would help raise confidence among the parties and greatly contribute to the efforts to reach lasting peace in Syria. It is one of the most important confidence-building measures.

The most vulnerable groups in Syria, including people with disabilities, the elderly, women and children, have to be under special protection. In that regard, as discussed yesterday with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (see S/PV.8694), we condemn any attacks on medical facilities and their personnel anywhere in Syria. 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.

I want to recall that we fully support the right to a safe return of Syrian refugees who have fled their homes. We believe that a durable solution should guarantee the safe, sustainable, dignified and voluntary return of Syrians to their country of origin

in accordance with international law and the principle of non-refoulement. We fear that the conditions for the voluntary repatriation of Syrian refugees, as defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, are not in place. In addition, we reiterate that we will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties to the conflict on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex), is firmly under way.

As this is probably the last time that I take the floor on the subject of Syria in the Chamber during Poland's term on the Security Council, I would like to thank Mr. Pedersen for his tireless efforts and assure him of my country's full support even once it has left the Council. Allow me also to say that serving in the Security Council has been an honour, privilege and unique and enriching opportunity. I would like to thank my fellow members of the Council for their support, friendship and excellent cooperation. I would like to thank the Security Council Affairs Division for its invaluable assistance. Special thanks also go to the interpreters, security staff and engineers. We all have worked incredibly hard over the past two years. I also thank my colleagues from the Polish Mission for their support and excellent performance in the Security Council and pay tribute to their commitment and dedication. Finally, I wish every success and best of luck to the incoming members of the Security Council.

Mr. Djani (Indonesia): It is a bright day today, but it is a pity that Mr. Heusgen is not here to see the curtain be opened.

On a more serious note, we thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his comprehensive briefing and Ms. Rajaa Altalli for being here with us today.

My delegation is following closely the development of the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned Constitutional Committee, facilitated by the United Nations. The launching of the Committee, the adoption by consensus of a code of conduct and a set of initial procedural practices, as well as the agreement on the small drafting body, are indeed commendable advances. We note that the second session of the Constitutional Committee, last November, did not really go as planned. Obviously, we regret that it was not possible to convene a meeting of the 45 members of the small drafting body. However, my delegation believes that this is part of an ongoing

process, which we all knew would be far from easy. Disagreements will always arise in such processes, but the most important thing is that dialogue and consultations among the relevant parties continue. Compromise and flexibility are required. With patience, the objective of a final result that is good for the people of Syrian can be reached. That should be the main objective. Indonesia sincerely wishes that the two co-Chairs of the Government and opposition delegations will soon agree on the agenda and move forward with the next session. I would like to highlight a further three pertinent points.

First, it is critical for the international community, particularly Council members, to continue supporting the work of the Constitutional Committee. That includes supporting Special Envoy Geir Pedersen in his efforts to facilitate the process, including the reaching of consensus among the members of the Committee. We hope that the members of the Committee can concentrate on their work, without unnecessary external interference that could jeopardize the ongoing process. We concur with what Mr. Pedersen underlined in his remarks, namely, that the Constitutional Committee must be consistently nurtured. It is not an easy word or an easy task. The success of the Constitutional Committee at this stage is important in order to build trust and confidence, which are badly needed on that issue, and, as Mr. Pedersen also mentioned, to ultimately open the door for broader political processes that we hope will be beneficial for the people of Syria. We in the Council should continue to support that effort.

Secondly, Indonesia reiterates the importance for all parties to reaffirm their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It is a necessary foundation for advancing the political process within the framework of resolution 2254 (2015).

Thirdly, in the absence of a political solution, the situation in Syria will continue to deteriorate, and we should not let that happen. Many Council members have voiced their grave concerns about the humanitarian situation in Syria, urging that we should immediately end the suffering of the civilians in need. Again, the only sustainable solution to the crisis is through an inclusive, Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. Only they will decide their own future.

We appreciate the various dialogues supporting the United Nations-facilitated political process in Syria. We also appreciate the involvement of various stakeholders who would see peace in that area. The constructive approach needs to continue and be enhanced. The international community has its own role to play in assisting Syria in overcoming the crisis, and the Council also has a responsibility to help alleviate the hardship of millions of civilians in Syria. Hopefully, we will fulfil that responsibility today by adopting the draft resolution on the cross-border mechanism. Inshallah.

On another note, we would like to echo Ms. Wronecka's statement. I do not know whether the timing is right, but I was informed that this is the last scheduled meeting of the Council — hopefully. This being the last scheduled open meeting of the Council for this year, Indonesia would like to extend its appreciation to all our colleagues and the outgoing members — Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Peru, Poland and our neighbour in the Chamber, Kuwait — for their strong cooperation and commitment to maintaining international peace and security. We have worked closely this past year, and it has been a great pleasure to work with all the Permanent Representatives, mission staff, experts and political coordinators, who have done quite a lot in pursuing the mandate and quest of the Council to ensure peace and security. Once again, we extend our best wishes to all colleagues. We look forward to working with the incoming members beginning on 1 January. A merry Christmas and happy New Year to all.

Mr. Pecsteen de Buytswerve (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing. We support his efforts and his commitment to arriving at a political settlement in Syria. I would also like to thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli.

I would like to speak on two points, the first of which is the Constitutional Committee and confidence-building measures. There seemed to be new momentum on the Syrian political track after the establishment of the Constitutional Committee. There was hope that after nine years of conflict Syria would take a first step towards peace. We regret that the Committee in its second session was unable to reach an agreement on the agenda. The Syrian Government appears to have little interest in an inclusive process. We hope that the parties will seize the opportunity of the next session of the Constitutional Committee, to be

held in Geneva soon. The degree of good faith of the Syrian authorities will be evaluated based on its results.

The fact is that the Committee's work can be a first step in the political process only if the parties are fully committed to it. We call on States with influence on the Syrian authorities to bring it to bear. However, the political process is not limited to the Constitutional Committee. Belgium considers transitional justice extremely important. It is the job of the various stakeholders to arrive at a common understanding of the facts in a transparent manner and on an equal footing so as to ensure that reconciliation can take place. Reconciliation is not an isolated process but the culmination of a long and arduous path that the parties will have to walk together, in a process where trust must be established. Every month the Special Envoy has reminded us of the importance of establishing those confidence-building measures. Thousands of Syrians are still being arrested and arbitrarily detained. We once again call on Syria to take account of the crucial importance of this dossier as a symbol of good faith.

Secondly, the reality of the situation on the ground is bleak. In the north-east, thousands who were displaced during the Turkish incursion are still displaced. In the north-west, we are receiving reports indicating the launch of a new offensive in Idlib this very morning, after having previously been informed of an escalation in the violence in early December. We call on all the parties to establish a national ceasefire as soon as possible, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). The Government has a special responsibility to establish a safe, secure, stable and calm environment in Syria and to guarantee an absence of armed conflict. That also requires the protection of legal rights and ensuring that no one is pursued, repressed or forcibly conscripted into the army.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes the convening of this briefing on the latest developments in the political process in the Syrian Arab Republic and thanks Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his comprehensive briefing. We also thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli, the representative of Syrian civil society, for her briefing.

My delegation once again welcomes the launch of the work of the Constitutional Committee on 30 October in Geneva, which was commended by the whole international community, 20 months after

the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi on 30 January 2018, which led to the decision to establish the Committee. Those developments, resulting from the mediation efforts and good offices of the Special Envoy, which led to the conclusion of an agreement between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Syrian Negotiations Commission on the composition of the Constitutional Committee, are very encouraging signs and a glimmer of hope for a resumption of the peace process.

My delegation also welcomed the holding on 11 December in Nur-Sultan of the fourteenth round of the Astana talks, which brought together Iran, Russia and Turkey, the guarantors of the Astana process, the Syrian Government and opposition, and Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and the United Nations as observers. In the joint statement that paved the way for the meeting, the guarantors of the Astana process confirmed their ongoing commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. They also expressed their concern about the increase in terrorist activities in Idlib governorate and their willingness to cooperate to eradicate terrorist groups in Syria, including the Islamic State, the Al-Nusra Front and other groups that the United Nations has designated as terrorist.

We noted with regret the difficulties encountered during the discussions in Geneva on 29 November during the Constitutional Committee's second session and the failure to hold a meeting of the 45-member Committee owing to a lack of agreement on the agenda between the Government and the opposition. In that context, Côte d'Ivoire urges all the parties to continue to work constructively to continue the talks. We also call on all regional and international stakeholders to uphold their commitment to the political process and support it firmly. We appeal to the parties to the conflict to cease hostilities throughout Syrian territory, continue confidence-building measures such as the reciprocal or unilateral release of detainees, and ensure the protection of civilians in the Idlib de-escalation zone and the surrounding areas.

Côte d'Ivoire calls on the Syrian parties to prioritize dialogue and the interests of the Syrian people and to resume the work of the Constitutional Committee with a view to holding the fair, credible and transparent elections that can ensure lasting peace and stability in Syria and the region. We urge the Security Council to give full support to the efforts of Special Envoy

Pedersen to reach a political settlement to the Syrian conflict, in accordance with the relevant provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

Since this is the last scheduled public meeting that my delegation will take part in before the end of my country's term, on behalf of Ambassador Léon Adom, Permanent Representative of Côte d'Ivoire to the United Nations, President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, and the Ivorian Government and people, I would like to convey a message of profound gratitude to the members of the Security Council for their invaluable support to Côte d'Ivoire during these two years. We also wish to warmly thank Secretary-General António Guterres and all members of the Secretariat for their valuable support throughout our term, especially during Côte d'Ivoire's presidency of the Security Council in December 2018. I would be remiss if I did not conclude by extending our deep appreciation for the fruitful collaboration between my delegation and the other outgoing members of the Council and wishing every success to the incoming members. Côte d'Ivoire has been honoured to participate in the work of the Security Council during the past two years and will continue to share its experience, values and principles in the other bodies of the United Nations.

Mr. Popolizio Bardales (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): *We thank you, Madam President, for convening this briefing, as well as Ms. Altalli and Mr. Pedersen for their comprehensive briefings this morning. We commend Mr. Pedersen for his hard work and prudence in seeking to bring the parties closer to an inclusive political solution. The impact of the Syrian conflict on its population and on regional stability leads us to reaffirm the urgent need to make progress in the process that the United Nations has been supporting. The Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015) must continue to guide our efforts.*

We are therefore concerned about the developments described this morning by the Special Envoy, which point to the limited progress made in the second round of the work of the Constitutional Committee, which is attributable to an apparent lack of willingness on the part of the Syrian Government. This situation is not in keeping with the high expectations of the international community with respect to the work of the Committee, which is expected to draft a new Constitution that will lay the political and institutional foundations for sustainable peace.

We note the sense of urgency to record tangible results on this issue because of the negative impact on the credibility of the process if there are further delays in such basic understandings as the finalization of the Committee's agenda and its work plans. We encourage the parties, especially the Syrian authorities, to show genuine flexibility and commitment, with a view to finding points of convergence that will lead to a better climate of understanding. We note the central role of the Special Envoy in this regard, as facilitator and consensus builder, and underline the broad support that the international community should therefore give him.

We believe it is essential that, in addition to the efforts made within the Constitutional Committee, we promote the adoption of confidence-building measures that will contribute to a more favourable environment for Syrian reconciliation. In particular, we expect more substantive developments in the identification of missing persons, the handing over of mortal remains, and the release of detainees and missing persons. Another great challenge is to address the serious situation that millions of refugees and internally displaced persons are facing, which requires not only the availability of financial resources, but primarily political will, to ensure their safe and dignified return within internationally accepted parameters.

We also stress the need to avoid an escalation of the conflict that would undermine the chances of reaching a political settlement. The prospects for achieving sustainable peace in Syria, such as the aforementioned Constitutional Committee, depend to a large extent on preventing Idlib from figuring in the playing out of a new humanitarian tragedy.

We reaffirm Peru's full commitment to the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Syria. In this regard, any de-escalation or other arrangements, as well as the presence of foreign forces, must always be of a provisional nature and must not lead to a de facto partition of the country.

As some of my colleagues before me have done, we assume that this is probably the last meeting of the month under the presidency of the United States and the conclusion of our participation in the Security Council. In this context, I would like to congratulate you, Madam President, and your entire team for your outstanding performance in conducting our work in December. I also express our best wishes for success to the delegation of Viet Nam in its upcoming presidency

in January, as well as to the newly elected members who will join the Council in 2020 — Estonia, the Niger, Tunisia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Peru wishes to thank all the members of the Security Council and the Secretariat for their ongoing support, cooperation and friendship during these two intense years in our shared efforts aimed at maintaining international peace and security. It has been a privilege for Peru to participate in the Security Council.

Mr. Esono Mbengono (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): We thank the United States for convening today's meeting and congratulate it on its presidency in December. We also thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his update on the political process in the Syrian Arab Republic. We renew once again our highest consideration for his admirable efforts as facilitator of the Constitutional Committee. We also thank Ms. Rajaa Altalli for her briefing.

With regard to the work of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea regrets the lack of progress made since the first round of discussions and encourages the various delegations to overcome the divergences that made it impossible to adopt the agenda of the second meeting at the end of November. In this context, the convening of a third round of negotiations is indispensable for the achievement of positive and tangible results that serve the interests and aspirations of the Syrian people.

The Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea is optimistic and hopes that common ground can be found to bridge the gap between the parties and that they will participate objectively in the work of the Committee. We recall the need for there to be no external interference, as this is a fully sovereign and Syrian process that must be guided by the search for consensus exclusively among the national parties meeting in Geneva. If the political process is to move forward decisively, there must be no forces that seek to undermine the process of reconciling the Syrian people and amending their Constitution.

We agree that the threat of external interference clearly contradicts resolution 2254 (2015). In this regard, my Government continues to rely on the good offices and leadership of the United Nations to support this process, putting an end to attempts to block the work of the Committee. We reiterate once again that the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic must be fully respected

throughout this process. We welcome the joint statement of the fourteenth round of consultations of the Astana guarantors in their determination to support the work of the Committee and other key issues that could restore peace and stability in Syria.

We must remain cognizant of the need for the Committee to work constructively, which requires action by all to prevent tensions in the north-west from hindering its efforts. Furthermore, we again emphasize the importance of confidence-building measures as a means to energize the political process. As we have been reiterating, large-scale reciprocal releases of detainees and abductees could certainly serve as an important step in this regard.

On a different note, and following my colleagues who have spoken before me, from this month's programme of work, I understand that this is the last regular meeting in which the delegation of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea is participating as a non-permanent member of this great body. In this regard, we would like to thank the delegations of the French Republic, the United Kingdom, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation and the United States of America for their continued dedication to maintaining the active role of the Security Council in the promotion of international peace and security assigned to it by the Charter of the United Nations. We also thank all our fellow non-permanent members, including those we are leaving behind, for having intentionally and constructively contributed and continuing to contribute to the fulfilment by the permanent members their great task.

To the new non-permanent members that will assume their mandates on 1 January, we wish them success in their respective terms. We leave the Council with the hope that it will continue to work in a spirit of consensus and wisdom to resolve the heated conflicts and threats that our beloved world is currently facing.

We thank everyone, including the staff of the Secretariat and of the Security Council Affairs Division, as well as the interpreters and conference technicians, for providing us all with the necessary support and for having taught us a great deal. I would be remiss if I did not also thank the diplomatic staff and the personal and local experts of the Permanent Mission of Equatorial Guinea for the work, contributions and sacrifices they have undertaken for our country here in New York, especially given that Equatorial Guinea had never

before served a term on the Council. We are very proud of them all.

Finally, I would like to say that as we approach the end of our term on the Security Council, over the past two years Equatorial Guinea has tried with great pride, willingness and determination to live up to the trust that everyone has placed in us, to serve and be useful to the world and humankind in our quest for lasting peace and security and to contribute to efforts to the peaceful resolution and settlement of conflicts and disputes in order to make the world a better place for all of us. All of that is inspired by the peaceful and supportive nature and devotion of the people and institutions of Equatorial Guinea, and above all by the political will and political philosophy of His Excellency Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, on behalf of whom I once again convey our thanks to all departments of the United Nations for their cooperation.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his comprehensive briefing. We listened with interest to his ideas about the methodology for facilitating a Syrian settlement. We also listened to the statement by Ms. Rajaa Altalli.

Russia remains committed to the principle of pursuing a peaceful settlement to the Syrian crisis by political and diplomatic means. In the interests of advancing that process, the Constitutional Committee was established under the auspices of the United Nations and began its work on 30 October in Geneva. The creation of the Committee, with the critical assistance of the Astana format, is an undeniable achievement for the Syrian people. As the Special Envoy noted earlier, no one expected the Committee's work to be easy. For the first time, Syria's two opposing camps have come to the negotiating table, where they will discuss the future of their country, a future that will take into account the interests of every sector of Syrian society. That is a great responsibility and a difficult task. During the second round of dialogue in Geneva, the parties tried to reach agreement on the principal approaches for their future efforts. We hope that the divergent views they have expressed will enable them to better prepare for the next meeting.

We believe it is counterproductive to overdramatize the situation and designate guilty parties. It is important to give Syrians an opportunity to understand how to

proceed to reach an agreement among themselves. The pivotal principle of the work of the Constitutional Committee is enshrined in resolution 2254 (2015) and presupposes the facilitation of a political process led and owned by the Syrians themselves. The Special Envoy should help them to do that, and we in our turn are ready to support his efforts. We must neither pressure the Syrians nor burden their efforts with unrealistic time frames. They are embarking on a dialogue on fateful issues that cannot be resolved overnight. For our part, we will encourage a constructive approach by all the parties. To that end, we are continuing our collaboration within the Astana framework with our partners from Iran and Turkey. On 10 and 11 December in Nur-Sultan we took part in the Astana format's fourteenth international meeting on Syria, with the constructive participation of delegations from Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon as observers. The meeting resulted in the adoption of a joint statement of whose content members may be aware. It was also stressed that all the activities of the Astana guarantor countries will be based on the strictest respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Besides the political track, the Astana discussions cover other aspects of the situation in Syria, such as the strengthening of confidence-building measures and the humanitarian situation, including the delivery of humanitarian assistance throughout Syria without discrimination, politicization or the imposition of preconditions. The Astana format working group is continuing its efforts to ensure the release of forcibly detained persons. In that connection we would like to point to something that many have overlooked, which is that on 21 November the Syrian authorities, with the mediation of Russian military personnel, released 120 detainees in a significant humanitarian act also designed to build confidence. The current turn for the better in the work on a political settlement sets the stage for concrete measures for providing comprehensive humanitarian assistance and aid in Syria's post-conflict reconstruction.

We would like to point out that representatives of the Syrian Government and civil society, as well as the Syrian opposition, including the part of it that controls the armed groups, are all participating in the work of the Constitutional Committee. It means that all who have a genuine interest in the process of determining Syria's political future have joined that peaceful process. And

yet the Syrian people continue to be threatened by outright thugs and terrorists such as the militants from Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which the Security Council has designated a terrorist organization, and who have entrenched themselves in Idlib. The terrorists in Syria must be got rid of once and for all.

We want to emphasize once again that Syria is one of the key States of the Middle East and an integral part of the Arab world. It cannot be artificially wrenched out of its overall regional context. In that connection, we urge for restoring Damascus to the family of Arab countries as soon as possible, which will help to rebuild harmony among Arabs and improve the situation in the Middle East. That is a natural and objective process that is progressing despite external opposition. We call on all who are genuinely interested in establishing peace in Syria to join our efforts in a constructive spirit.

In conclusion, I would like to thank those of my colleagues who are leaving the Security Council — for many of whom today's meeting will be their last, or at least their last in this cycle — for their collaboration over the past two years. We have travelled far and accomplished much. I would also like to thank them for the friendship we have found and to wish them the very best. And I wish everyone happiness for Christmas and the New Year.

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

I thank Ms. Altalli for sharing her personal story with the Security Council today. It is really important for the Council to hear about her work and that of the other human rights defenders who work at great personal risk. Their efforts on the behalf of all Syrians are courageous and valuable. We deeply value and support the voices of representatives of Syrian civil society, particularly with regard to women's roles in the political process. I would also like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen for his briefing today and for his leadership this year.

Thanks to the determination of Special Envoy Pedersen, the willingness of the Syrian parties to step forward and the support of the international community, especially the small group and Turkey and Russia, we witnessed a notable political breakthrough after almost two years of negotiations. Following the successful October launch of the Constitutional Committee, the United States and many on the Council believed that there would be momentum to move towards the creation of a

constitutional reform package, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). However, the delegation of the Al-Assad regime entered the second round of negotiations with preconditions, which stalled any progress. The regime's call for agreement on a set of national pillars not only represented barefaced propaganda, it also violated the spirit of the Constitutional Committee's rules of procedure and obstructed the work of an important diplomatic initiative, an initiative supported by the United States, our small group partners and the Astana group.

In the new year, the Council must fully support the Special Envoy's efforts to facilitate the work of the Committee. As a sign of support in that regard, the United States calls for the Office of the Special Envoy to circulate formal written summaries of the most recent round of the Committee's meetings in November. We call for similar reports to be issued after all future meetings. With written reports in hand, the Council can bolster Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to hold representatives accountable and, we hope, bring an end to the obstruction and delays. However, if Damascus is not serious about the Constitutional Committee's work, the Council should reconsider whether the Committee is a viable mechanism for producing the reforms called for in resolution 2254 (2015). Beyond the issue of the Committee, in 2020 we expect to see progress on two specific goals of resolution 2254 (2015) that will support progress in the political process, a nationwide ceasefire and the immediate unilateral release of civilian detainees, especially women, children and the elderly.

The Al-Assad regime and its supporters — Russia and Iran — should commit to an immediate nationwide ceasefire. This week, ongoing hostilities continue to kill civilians, destabilize the region and threaten to destroy any progress made by the Constitutional Committee. There must be no Christmas offensive in Idlib, and any attack on civilians or civilian infrastructure must cease.

The United States also calls on the Al-Assad regime to ensure the immediate unilateral release of civilians whom it continues to hold in detention centres and prisons without just cause and who are even subjected to torture. At this moment, we are displaying photographs in the lobby of our Permanent Mission, dedicated by the Syrian Network for Human Rights to several of the approximately 128,000 Syrians who have been unlawfully detained and, in many cases, tortured and killed by the Al-Assad regime. I want to reflect just

briefly on one of the human stories behind the images in our windows.

Leila, a paramedic with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, was shot by a Government sniper and then arrested — not once, but twice — for providing material support to terrorists. She was subjected to daily beatings in regime detention. What was her crime? It was providing medical care to individuals injured while peacefully protesting for reform. This is simply outrageous.

Sadly, Leila's story is all too common, and although individuals like her remain dedicated to providing medical assistance to all in need, they are unable to safely return to Syria for fear of being targeted by the regime. We must see the mass release of those who have been arbitrarily detained. I want to be clear today that there will be no lasting peace until the regime's inhumane and destructive behaviour against the Syrian people is reversed and accountability measures are established.

The United States firmly believes that achieving those goals in the next 12 months will yield meaningful progress towards an end to the conflict and a sustainable, negotiated peace. We are eager to work with every member of the Council to reach those goals and advance all aspects of resolution 2254 (2015) in the coming year.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Falouh (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his briefing.

A few days ago, the fourteenth round of the Astana process meetings took place. Its final communiqué confirmed respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of Syria, as well as cooperation with the Syrian Government until the terrorist groups on its soil are eradicated. The communiqué also rejected the illegal seizure of oil fields in Syria and reaffirmed the right of Syria to retake possession of them. While we thank the two guarantors — Russia and Iran — and the host State of Kazakhstan for contributing to the success of that round of meetings, we reaffirm the need to ensure that all parties honour the outcome of the Astana process, in particular the eradication of armed terrorist

groups, ending all forms of illegal military presence and supporting the political process. We deplore that, to date, the Turkish regime has had scant interest in honestly and seriously honouring those commitments.

On 29 November, the second session of the small body of the Constitutional Committee took place, wherein no meetings among parties to the intra-Syrian dialogue were held. Furthermore, no agreement was reached to decide on the agenda. It was an unfortunate occurrence for which responsibility falls on the delegation of the so-called the High Negotiations Committee, which came to the discussions with a set of preconditions characterized by obstinacy, misinformation, procrastination and contravention to the terms of reference, principles and rules of procedure of the Constitutional Committee on which the parties had agreed.

The delegation of the so-called High Negotiations Committee came to discussions also supported by a hostile media campaign that contravened what had been agreed upon in the code of conduct. It was very clear that the goal of that delegation was to seriously obstruct the launching of the work of the Committee from the very outset and to distort the facts by accusing the other parties of doing so. The Governments of certain States were complicit in that fabricated media campaign through statements made by their officials and the way in which their national media outlets portrayed the second round of meetings to prompt the delegation of the so-called High Negotiations Committee to practice disinformation and take a hostile stance towards other participants in the Constitutional Committee. Of course, those Governments are the same ones that have been hostile towards Syria for nine years.

Despite all that, the Syrian national delegation withstood these flagrant and substandard acts of manipulation and constructively adhered to the principles of cooperation. We learned from members of the national Syrian delegation that they had repeatedly offered to enter the meeting room so that both sides could present their positions. However, the other party rejected that proposal and insisted on imposing preconditions and put forward views and terms of reference that had been imposed upon them pre-emptively.

The vision of the Syrian national group was based on creating an opportunity to build trust among the parties to the dialogue and to engage in discussions

on everything involving Syria's future. In that regard, we learned that the ideas of the members of the Syrian national group, which they presented very openly and transparently, were based on national pillars that should enjoy the support of all Syrian citizens, including renunciation of terrorism, extremism and violence; the rejection of any aggression or occupation; and the struggle against the adverse consequences of the economic embargo imposed on the Syrian people. In that regard, we reiterate that the Syrian national group has sufficient freedom and flexibility to make the proper decisions required during the course of intense and serious consultations among its members so as to arrive at positions and present constructive prospects to settle any issue before the Constitutional Committee.

My delegation listened with great interest to the briefing by Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General. Accordingly, the Syrian Arab Republic reaffirms the need to support Mr. Pedersen's efforts to facilitate the work of the Committee, ensure its independence and that it is exclusively Syrian-owned and Syrian-led, and support the two co-Chairs of the Constitutional Committee to ensure that they can guide the meetings in an effective way, in accordance with agreed parameters and the critical components of the rules of procedures for these meetings.

We have heard statements by the representatives of certain States members of the Security Council, in particular the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, that clearly reflect an interventionist policy with regard to domestic Syrian issues. It is all too clear that the Governments of these States, as well as the Turkish regime and other parties, will not stop blatantly interfering in Syrian affairs, whether by continuing to support the terrorist

group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib, extending support to its allies, conducting direct acts of military aggression on Syrian territory or imposing unilateral coercive economic measures on the Syrian people. We want to ensure that the situation is clear to all. Those Governments will not stop the playing same negative roles and will continue to exert political and economic pressure on Syria.

I urge all present to recall that those who attack the Syrian Government here in the Security Council are the representatives of States whose military forces are occupying areas of Syrian territory and whose Governments are imposing an economic blockade that is suffocating the Syrian people. Those States are preventing reconstruction and recovery, obstructing the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes and occupying oil and gas fields in Syria. They have publicly declared how much they love Syrian oil, that they have seized it and will do whatever they wish with it. Can we therefore reasonably expect any positive results from the involvement of those Governments or the Turkish regime in building a future for my country or ensuring the well-being and security of the Syrian people?

In conclusion, the Syrian Arab Republic has adhered and will continue to adhere to an independent national policy in line with the interests, beliefs and sovereignty of the Syrian people. Once again, that leads us to call on certain members to refrain from exploiting the Security Council as a tool to exert pressure on the work of the Constitutional Committee, which must be able to operate independently so as to meet the needs and aspirations of the Syrian people, reassuring them of their Constitution and their future.

The meeting rose at 12.10 p.m.