

*As Delivered*

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O PEDERSEN  
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL  
3 December 2024**

Thank you Mr President,

1. In the last week, we have seen dramatic shifts in frontlines in Syria, radically altering a status quo that had been largely in place well over four years. The situation is extremely fluid and dangerous. But as I brief you today, a vast swathe of territory has come under the control of non-state actors, including Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and armed opposition groups, including the Syrian National Army. These groups now *de facto* control territory containing what we estimate to be some 7 million people, including Aleppo – Syria’s second biggest city and a vast and diverse metropolis of more than 2 million people.
2. On 27 November, the al-Fateh al-Mubeen Joint Operations Room—a coalition containing both HTS and armed opposition groups – launched a ground operation, with drone cover, across agreed de-escalation lines, taking *de facto* control of almost the entirety of Aleppo and Idlib governorates.
3. Syrian Government forces have since regrouped and established defensive lines in Hama, repelling some fighters. But as I speak to you this afternoon, these are being severely tested, with HTS and armed opposition groups gaining ground today, advancing very close to Hama – a major city of some 1 million people.
4. Pro-Government airstrikes have intensified in recent days, with reports of strikes on both military and civilian targets, including civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, causing civilian casualties.
5. As HTS and armed opposition groups have advanced, they have fired barrages of drones and rockets, with reports of civilian casualties as a result, in Aleppo and also in Hama.
6. Meanwhile, we have seen violence erupt on a second axis, with the opposition Syrian National Army launching an operation on 30 November on Tal Rifaat, a pocket north of Aleppo city under the *de facto* control of SDF-affiliated forces. In response, SDF forces in northeast Syria moved rapidly to connect with these pockets. The SNA has now largely defeated these forces in these areas, with a large-scale evacuation of fighters and tens of thousands of civilians to northeast Syria.
7. In addition, the potential for conflict on other axes remains alive. This morning the SDF took seven villages previously under the control of Government forces in Deir-ez-Zor, citing an imminent ISIL threat, reportedly with military support from the US-led International Coalition. There has been increased front-line hostilities between the SNA and SDF in areas of the northeast, with reports of escalating tensions as we speak near Menbij now. Israeli airstrikes hit the Syrian-Lebanese border this week, as well as Damascus today.

Mr President,

8. The Syrian Government has said the terrorist attacks pose grave dangers to Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, to regional security, and to the international community. It has stated its intention to combat terrorism and restore all Syrian territories to its control. Russia and Iran have expressed their support, saying the attacks are a violation of Astana agreements, and also blaming external forces.
9. The Syrian Opposition and affiliated institutions initially framed the operation as deterring what they said were escalating attacks by Syrian Government forces on civilians, and enabling the return of the displaced. Statements since have said the operation will continue until the Government engages in a political process to implement resolution 2254 and announced the intention to seize territory from the Syrian Government and the SDF.
10. Türkiye has characterized events as a response to repeated violations of the Astana agreements, stating it is not involved in current clashes. Türkiye has said these events show that Damascus must reconcile with both its people and the legitimate political opposition of Syria.
11. The United States, which has forces on the ground in eastern Syria, has said it has nothing to do with the offensive, calling for de-escalation and a credible UN-led political process.

Mr President,

12. Let me stress the situation is in flux and it is very early days, with an unclear information environment. But you need to be aware, that these developments have provoked different reactions among the Syrian people – a grave threat for some, a signal of hope for others.
13. We have seen a series of public pronouncements by different armed actors in the north-west, including Security-Council designated HTS, offering reassurances to all civilians, including minorities, and including assurances of religious freedom. In the last three days, we have seen some media reports of civilians in Aleppo continuing their normal lives, for instance with churches holding services this weekend.
14. But Mr President, some civilian and minority voices have expressed to us despair and fear about what it would mean over time for these areas to come under the control of armed factions that include a Security Council-listed terrorist group. Some women leaders have expressed particular fears or concerns and are seeking reassurances.
15. There are reports of services resuming in Aleppo. But there are also fears about what it will mean for service delivery, if designated entities oversee *de facto* administrative arrangements in a city of 2 million people. This is particularly concerning and therefore it will be important that this Council renew the relevant provisions of the humanitarian carveout in Security Council resolution 2664. I hope all of those with influence can address these issues.
16. There are videos and testimonies of detainees - men and women - being released from detention centers, including some who say they were detained for over a decade. But equally there have been videos of large-scale detention of prisoners of war by HTS and armed opposition groups.

17. There are signs of many displaced persons, from inside and outside of Syria, returning to their homes for the first time in years, or even a decade. But equally tens of thousands have already been displaced – some by airstrikes, some by increased hostilities and some by shifts in control. In Sheikh Maqoud and other neighborhoods in Aleppo city, there are tens of thousands of civilians under the control of some remaining YPG or SDF units, expressing fears that they too may soon be forced to leave their homes.
18. Underlying all of this is an enormous uncertainty about the immediate future, and the danger that more bloodshed could be on its way.

Mr President,

19. My first core-message is simple: we need de-escalation and we need calm. I appeal to all parties to their obligations under international law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure and allow safe passage for Syrians fleeing violence. But Mr President this alone does not suffice. Further military escalation risks mass displacement and civilian casualties. The last fourteen years of conflict have decisively shown that no Syrian party or existing grouping of actors can resolve the Syrian conflict via military means. We must de-escalate and ensure a cooperative approach to countering listed terrorist groups.
20. But – and this is my second core message – de-escalation needs to be accompanied by a credible political horizon for the Syrian people. For almost half a decade we saw frontlines frozen, and violence often elevated but somewhat contained, due to a patchwork of ceasefire arrangements agreed between international actors in 2019 and 2020. This was positive. But without being pegged to a political process to resolve the crisis, this amounted only to a conflict-management approach. And this is not enough.
21. I have long been warning that this was unsustainable – especially after rising violence within Syria the last three years, alongside regional spillover and expanding Israeli strikes. Now, in the space of a week, we have seen the de-escalation lines agreed in 2020 and earlier, entirely unravel.

Mr President,

22. The Syrian parties and key international stakeholders need to be seriously engaged in meaningful and substantive negotiations to find a way out of the conflict. That is why today I call for urgent and serious political engagement – among Syrian and international stakeholders - to spare bloodshed and focus on a political solution, in accordance with Security Council resolution 2254.
23. To this end, I have been working the phone with the full range of Syrian parties and key international stakeholders, urging concrete and immediate action on these two fronts including with the Syrian Government, the Syrian opposition, Türkiye, Russia, Iran, the United States and Arab and European players. I will be in the region in the coming days for a range of high-level meetings.
24. I have clearly signaled – and signal here once again – my readiness to use my good offices to convene international and Syria stakeholders in new and comprehensive peace talks on Syria.

25. I have been sharing and discussing ideas in this regard for several months, precisely because I anticipated that the unsustainable status quo would collapse and a common consensus on a comprehensive approach would be needed – an approach that goes beyond only the resumption of Constitutional Committee meetings, but which addresses the full range of aspirations and concerns: the political process, sovereignty, security, economic conditions and sanctions, the detained and missing, and refugees, and the displaced. These ideas are more, not less relevant, following the events of this week. I urge all parties to engage not only on containing the crisis, but on resolving this conflict. That is what is needed now.
26. There is no military solution to this conflict. If we do not see de-escalation and a rapid move to a serious political process, involving the Syrian parties and the key international players, then I fear we will see a deepening of the crisis. Syria will be in grave danger of further division, deterioration, and destruction. The consequences for the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, and for the wellbeing and aspirations of the Syrian people, could be grave indeed. Mr President, this should be in no-one's interest.

Thank you, Mr President.