

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

17 December 2024

Thank you Madam President,

1. I'm now briefing you from Syria. I'm here together with my Deputy and as you just rightly said Tom Fletcher is also here, and will be briefing you on the humanitarian situation. Of course, what we have seen during the last few weeks are events of historic proportions.
2. After the Assad regime that ruled Syria for some 54 years fell in two short weeks, Syria faces a wholly new reality.
3. Let me start by reiterating my sincere condolences for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have lost loved ones over these nearly 14 years of conflict, and my solidarity with the millions who faced displacement, exile, destruction, detention, abuse, suffering and loss through the conflict, and also for decades under the former regime. I express my heartfelt solidarity with families still searching for information about their missing loved ones.

Madam President,

4. It is only 11 days since the fall of the former regime. But I have already had the pleasure of meeting with a whole range of actors and my outreach to Syrians will continue. I hear hopes and I hear fears.
5. There is a profound and shared sentiment among Syrians that this new situation belongs to them, that it is their moment to realize their legitimate aspirations. There is a great hope that Syria now has a real chance to move towards peace, economic stability and growth, inclusion for all Syrians and accountability and justice.
6. But many are apprehensive about the future. The challenges ahead are enormous. I worry that, if this is not handled right by both the Syrians and the international community a turn for the worse again is possible.
7. Let me update you on the situation on the ground, outline the challenges Syria faces, focus on what the political transition process requires, and address accountability too.
8. As you are aware in Damascus, a Caretaker authority has assumed power, installed by the leadership of the Military Operations Command the dominant armed coalition in Syria, which is led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its commander Ahmed al-Sharaa. So far, this Caretaker authority is composed of Ministers from the Syrian Salvation Government that had been the *de facto* governing authority in Idlib for some years, under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir.

9. At the same time, and this is important Madam President, there are armed opposition groups that operate outside of the Military Operations Command – for instance, parts of the Syrian National Army, most of which acts under the auspices of the opposition Syrian National Coalition.
10. In addition, the northeast – as well as in some neighbourhoods of Aleppo city – remains under the control of the SDF, supported by the US. There have been significant hostilities in the last two weeks, before a ceasefire was brokered between Turkiye and the United States along the Euphrates river. A five-day ceasefire has now expired and I am seriously concerned about reports of military escalation, as well reports of military build-ups. Such an escalation could be catastrophic.

Madam President,

11. Moreover, there is a new situation in the southwest. UNDOF continues to observe IDF personnel and equipment in multiple locations in the area of separation and one location in the area of limitation in the vicinity of the Bravo line. There are media reports of Israeli advances several kilometres into Syrian territory. Israel has carried out more than 350 strikes on military facilities, equipment and supplies across Syria since the former regime fell and these continue – including an enormous attack in Tartous.

Madam President,

12. Such attacks place a battered civilian population at further risk and undermine the prospects of an orderly political transition. We have also seen reports of the Israeli cabinet's plan to expand settlements in the Golan. Israel must cease all settlement activity in the occupied Syrian Golan, which are illegal. Attacks on territorial integrity must stop.

Madam President,

13. Let me now move to the challenges Syria faces. **This brings me to the first major challenge – the conflict has not ended yet.** Yes, we are seeing a Syria that is stable at present in many parts. Many in Damascus tell me that law and order improved significantly after two initial days of instability. But stability can be fragile in many parts of Syria, and in the northeast there are still front-lines and open hostilities in which civilians are being killed, injured and displaced. Civilians must be protected wherever they are. There must be de-escalations towards a nationwide ceasefire, as well as efforts to address tensions between military factions.

14. **A second challenge is the sheer scale of needs.** ravaged by this dreadful conflict, its infrastructure destroyed, with 90 percent of Syrians living in poverty. Let me just stress that these are enormous challenges that will require all of our support, in a manner that will have to go beyond the humanitarian – in terms of economic development, reconstruction and a process to address and ultimately end sanctions.

15. **And, Madam President, the third challenge is of course political.** The Syrian people have sacrificed so much, so that they can determine their own future and realize their legitimate aspirations. We must ensure that the political process remains on track, otherwise I fear new instability.

Madam President,

16. Before traveling to Damascus, I joined representatives of the Arab Contact Group on Syria, along with Ministers and representatives of Bahrain, France, Germany, Qatar, Turkiye, the UAE, the UK, the US and the EU. This meeting expressed a common belief that the transitional political process must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned and produce an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative government formed through a transparent process based on the principles of Security Council resolution 2254. The Aqaba statement emphasized support for my mandate.
17. In addition, Madam President, I think there is broad understanding that resolution 2254 cannot, in the new circumstances, be applied mechanically. But the core principles have wide Syrian consensus. And while resolution 2254 identified two parties, one of whom has been toppled and cannot feature in the process, it is still the case that a political transition is needed and that this will require an inclusive intra-Syrian process.

Madam President,

18. What can this look like?
19. First, Syrians need an orderly transition that provides for preservation of state institutions that serve their interests and provide them with critical services. Here let me take note of the efforts to ensure this already, in terms of safeguarding ministers of the former government to transfer power, and calling on state employees to continue their work. This provides a strong first basis. But it is not in itself enough.
20. Second, the transition must also be credible and inclusive, including the broadest spectrum of Syrian society and Syrian parties, so that it inspires public confidence. And here let me emphasize that this is a clear desire expressed by Syrians themselves. Just as we saw significant military coordination between many groups in the recent operations, now, as we are moving into a political phase, this should be matched by inclusive political engagement.
21. Third, there must be a new constitution, in line with resolution 2254.
22. Fourth, there must be free and fair elections, inclusive of all Syrians, as resolution 2254 envisages, in accordance with international standards.

Madam President,

23. Here let me say: I fully appreciate the need to ensure quick service delivery and law and order. Stability is fundamental. Competence is key too. But none of this is incompatible with a credible and inclusive political transition – it is precisely such an approach that can enable stability and indeed prevent new conflict.

Madam President,

24. I discussed all of these elements in-depth in Damascus.

25. I met with the Commander of the New Administration Mr Ahmed al-Sharaa and Prime Minister of the Caretaker authorities Mr Mohammed al-Bashir.
26. I also met here in Damascus with representatives of the Syrian Negotiations Commission, including armed group representatives, and remain in contact with their leader Badr Jamous.
27. I also met with Syrian civil society and women. It was heartening to see so many of them - for years speaking across front-lines - now together, in their capital, here in Damascus. They continue to be at the forefront of the emergency response and relief to all Syrians. Their inclusive participation is a cornerstone to sustainable peace.

Madam President,

28. Concrete movement on an inclusive political transition will be key in ensuring Syria receives the economic support it needs. There is clear international willingness to engage. The needs are immense and could only be addressed with broad support, including a smooth end to sanctions, appropriate action on designations too, and full reconstruction. It is clear that the period ahead will be critical, and there are international signals that broader measures can gain traction with progress on a credible and inclusive political transition. This was an important theme in Aqaba, which stressed that Syria at last has a chance to break decades of isolation. This chance, Madam President, must be seized.

Madam President

29. Finally, let me note my meeting with Syrian women here in Damascus, as well as the engagement of my office with women across Syria and those in exile. Syrian women seek assurances that their status and rights will be respected and built upon in any transitional arrangements, with the needs of women and girls fully taken into account. Because the reality remains that Syrian women these last years have reported significant backlash. And not only this - Syrian women must be a part of the transition itself, otherwise it cannot be considered to be inclusive.

Madam President,

30. Yesterday, I saw with my own eyes the dungeons, torture, and execution chambers of Sednaya prison, a testament to the barbarity of the fallen regime towards its own people. I met a man released from Sednaya just ten days ago, who told me how he was tortured. An elderly woman, also recently released, said she wanted first and foremost justice. Another woman was desperately seeking clarity on the fate of her son - who was detained and whose four children she raised single-handedly.
31. Of course, Syrian, UN and other organizations have been documenting this for years, thanks to the courage of survivors and witnesses. But seeing the reality first hand was a stark reminder of the centrality of transitional justice, the need for clarification of the fate and whereabouts of missing and disappeared persons, and ensuring due process in criminal prosecutions as a necessary safeguard against acts of revenge. Without this, Syria and Syrians will not be able to heal.

32. And, Madam President, here let me stress an urgent first step: the protection of evidence and material, as well as sites of mass graves. We must safeguard the right of the victims and their families and survivors to both truth and justice. And we need the immediate release of all those still detained arbitrarily across the country.
33. Let me say that on this, and across all fronts, I have been in contact with many parts of the UN system, and there is a determination across the system to strengthen the UN presence here in Syria.

Madam President,

34. Syria is for all Syrians. Now is the time for Syrians to step forward and lead. Now is the time to reassure all Syrians that their stake in the future is understood and that it will be embodied in credible and inclusive transitional arrangements. I have made clear, in Damascus, my invitation to a dialogue on resolution 2254 and all other issues relevant to Syrians, so that we can identify a Syrian-owned and led way forwards.

Madam President,

35. Of course, it is only 11 days since the fall of the former regime. My door is open and I hope in the coming days we can build the dialogue. I understand we all do the massive challenges facing the authorities, and the need to help, concretely, now. We understand the need for stability. But stability will not last long if not built on credible and inclusive foundations. The time is to build those foundations now.

Thank you, Madam President.