

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
8 January 2025**

Mr. President,

1. Today, Syria seeks to chart a new course following the fall of the former regime just one month ago. Decisions taken now will determine the future for a long time to come. There are great opportunities and real dangers. Syrians and the international community need to get the next phase right, and the UN stands ready to do everything we can to facilitate, to help and to support.

Mr. President,

2. Today, I have six points.
- 3. First: the caretaker authorities continue to work to structure and consolidate their authority.**
4. The caretaker authorities are formed largely of individuals from the former Idlib Government. Several governors have also been appointed – not all officially announced – who appear to be their affiliates or armed group members.
5. There are reports of an in-principle agreement to merge factions under a single Ministry of Defense, though implementation status remains unclear, with some factions reportedly not yet party to this agreement. We have also seen some incidents of local forces restricting access of forces affiliated to the caretaker authorities from entering areas that these local forces control, especially in the south. Meanwhile, a process has also been initiated to settle the status of former army officials through reconciliation centers.
6. The caretaker authorities have issued the first list of military appointments in the new Ministry of Defense. These appear to be drawn from a range of factions, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and also include fighters from foreign countries.
7. The caretaker authorities have held meetings with a very broad range of representatives and individuals, of different Syrian groups and components. They also met with visiting foreign ministers and senior officials, and the caretaker Foreign Minister al-Shaibani has just returned from a regional visit.

Mr. President,

- 8. My second point: there are signs of instability within areas under the control of the caretaker authorities.**
9. While there are many areas where law and order appears to be good, we have seen multiple reports of incidents of violence – in the coastal region and Homs and Hama in particular – including accounts of degrading and humiliating treatment.

10. Caretaker authorities have also carried out patrols and what they term “combing operations”, arresting former officials or elements that they accuse of war crimes or of refusing to hand in weapons and settle.
11. There have been some reports of clashes with what are described as former regime elements, resulting in casualties including from within the caretaker authorities.
12. There have been videos circulating of what appear to be abuses or extrajudicial killings of officials from the former regime – though we note reports of the caretaker authorities arresting some perpetrators.
13. There are also reports that plans for public sector restructuring may leave many without livelihoods, which may push them into need and further jeopardize stability. On this and on all issues we urge the caretaker authorities to extend a hand of reassurance and trust to all communities in Syria, fostering the active engagement of all in building the new Syria.

Mr. President,

14. Third point: there are significant areas outside the control of the caretaker authorities, the conflict continues, and there are also very real threats to Syria’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

15. The northeast, as well as parts of Aleppo city, remain under the control of SDF and YPG. Despite a US brokered ceasefire near Manbij in December, there have been reports of clashes and exchanges of artillery fire between the SDF and Syrian National Army forces in particular. Türkiye has made statements indicating a clear possibility that Turkish military operations could intensify in the northeast.
16. At the same time, channels of dialogue have been established between the caretaker authorities and the SDF, who met last week in Damascus. Public statements suggest the charting out of positions but not yet the prospect of imminent agreement.

Mr. President,

17. I continue to call for and support the further development of all channels of dialogue and to urge all parties to find a way forward without military confrontation.
18. We are deeply concerned by continued Israeli military presence and activity, including beyond the area of separation in violation of the 1974 Disengagement Agreement. Furthermore, restrictions on UNDOF’s freedom of movement imposed by IDF should be lifted without delay. Attacks on Syria’s sovereignty and territorial integrity must stop. Reports of the IDF using live ammunition against civilians, displacement and destruction of civilian infrastructure are also very worrying. Such violations, along with Israeli airstrikes in other parts of Syria – reported even last week in Aleppo – could further jeopardize the prospects for an orderly political transition.
19. ISIL remains a significant concern, with ongoing ISIL activities and worries that they may seek to take advantage of security flux in some areas. US-led coalition operations against ISIL continued, including US and French targeted airstrikes.

Mr. President,

20. My fourth point: the needs of the Syrian people remain acute.

21. Tom will obviously say more on this, but access to basic and essential services, including healthcare, water and electricity and housing, remain enormous challenges. The obstacles to the return of IDPs and refugees remain considerable – particularly lack of livelihoods, destroyed and damaged infrastructure, and also widespread landmines resulting in mounting casualties.
22. I welcome the recent issuance of a new temporary General License by the United States government. But much more significant work in fully addressing sanctions and designations will inevitably be necessary.

Mr. President,

23. My fifth point: the way forward on political transition is unclear. There are positive developments to build on, but also points of concern that Syrians are expressing.

24. The leadership initially projected that the current caretaker authorities would operate for up to three months in order to ensure no state collapse, followed by broader transitional arrangements. However, there are significant decisions or positions being taken that many Syrians feel should be left to a more inclusive transitional phase – such as articulating positions on the character of the state before a constitutional phase; such as issuing long-term policy decisions with regards to the security sector or in fields such as education.
25. In a wide-ranging interview, Mr Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that there would be a national dialogue process, which would be inclusive and comprehensive of many of the Syrian sects, with voting on important and critical issues that should be the foundation of the transitional period. He spoke of a constitution-drafting process carried out by experts, that could take two to three years. He spoke of elections that could take up to four years, given what he says are necessary preparations including civil documentation and population data.
26. Some Syrians have received signals from the caretaker authorities positively, especially in terms of stressing inclusiveness and the need to engage a broad spectrum of Syrians in shaping the transitional phase and to draw on expertise of Syrians of all kinds.
27. But at the same time Mr President, we have heard concerns at a lack of transparency on the timing, framework, goals, procedures in any national dialogue conference – as well as participation, in terms of criteria for attendance and balance of representation.
28. It is crucially important Mr President that the process is not rushed and that it is well prepared and thought through. In this regard, I welcome the fact that the caretaker authorities have now clarified publicly that the conference has been delayed, until an expanded preparatory committee can be formed that includes what was called comprehensive representation of Syria from all segments and governorates.

Mr President,

29. This leads me to my sixth point: we are ready to work with the caretaker authorities on how the nascent and important ideas and steps so far articulated and initiated could be developed towards a credible and inclusive political transition.

30. Further to this Council's important press statement of 17 December, I believe it is well understood that resolution 2254 cannot be applied in a literal manner. For instance, the former regime will not be a party to any future process. And there are of course other examples too. Clearly, there is a need for new approaches and modes of thinking on many fronts. But there is wide consensus that a transition *does* still need to achieve the main things that resolution 2254 laid out:

- First: a credible, inclusive and transparent Syrian-led and owned transition. And on this, let me be clear: I do not believe any Syrian is asking for quotas based on sect or ethnicity or importing models from other countries, but rather including the broadest spectrum of Syrian society and Syrian parties, so as to inspire public confidence in the transition.
- Second: ensuring a credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian transitional government.
- Third: a new constitution prepared through a credible and inclusive process.
- Fourth: free and fair elections, inclusive of all Syrians, in accordance with international standards.

Mr. President,

31. Syrian women these past weeks have reinforced their expectations and intent to participate in decision making throughout the transition process and beyond, at national and local levels. They stress their expectation that any constitutional revision safeguards women's rights and evolved roles and status. Syrian women have much to contribute and the country should grasp this collective capacity fully.

Mr. President,

32. Let me also stress that the call for justice, accountability and reparation is being strongly echoed across different spectrums of society and is a necessary and fundamental safeguard to sustainable peace and social cohesion. This is a long process obviously. But immediate practical steps are necessary, such as access and authorizations for specialized organizations, both local and international, to undertake their work on preservation and documentation. Syrians have accumulated years of work on these issues that must be built on and optimized. So too has the United Nations, including the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism, the Commission of Inquiry, and the newly-established Independent Institution on Missing Persons – all of which have a fundamental role to play today.

Mr. President,

33. The points I have described are widely shared among a broad spectrum of Syrians, civil society activists, women, and political forces. I take good note of the fact that the caretaker authorities' leadership have spoken of the need for inclusiveness including participation from different components, as well as the need for a new constitution and elections. There are therefore tremendous opportunities for building a foundation for lasting peace and stability in Syria. But Mr. President, missteps or missed opportunities could pose risks to Syria's future and plant seeds of instability. But I believe that common

ground on these issues can readily be developed in dialogue with the caretaker authorities. And there is genuine expertise and support that can be made available, to support a Syrian-led process.

Mr. President,

34. I also firmly believe that working on an inclusive political transition is the most effective means to inspire confidence and ensure that Syria quickly receives the economic support that it desperately needs – which requires in turn a smooth end to sanctions, appropriate action on designations too, and major funding including for reconstruction.
35. I have informally and formally sought to follow up with the caretaker authorities on the transition and all related issues in an open manner and in partnership, and I believe it is vital that this take place.
36. In order to provide all the necessary engagement and support, we are already moving to strengthen the presence and expertise of our political mission in Damascus. And there is active UN planning to ensure delivery as one across all themes of potential support to a credible and inclusive transition.
37. My Deputy Special Envoy Rochdi and many members of my team are in Syria at present to follow up and to conduct further outreach with a wide range of Syrians. And, Mr. President, I would hope to return to Damascus at the earliest possible time.

Thank you, Mr. President.