

**UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
12 February 2025**

Mr. President (China, Amb. Fu Cong)

1. We are at a very important moment in the unfolding political situation in Syria. Let me first update you on where things stand when it comes to the transition.
2. On 29 January, a broad range of military factions assembled in Damascus and issued a declaration dissolving the 2012 constitution, exceptional laws, the former parliament, the former army, all previous security agencies, former regime allied militias, and the Ba'ath Party. The declaration said that all revolutionary and military factions – including notably “civil and political revolutionary bodies” – were dissolved and were to be integrated into state institutions. Mr. Ahmad al-Sharaa was declared “interim president” and “head of state for a transitional period” – and the declaration authorized him to establish and appoint a provisional legislative council.
3. The next day on 30 January, Mr. al-Sharaa made an address to the nation, in which he pledged to “work to form a comprehensive transitional government that expresses the diversity of Syria, its men, women, and youth”. And, he said, he would also work towards “free and fair elections”. He mentioned as specific steps that he would announce a “preparatory committee” to select a “small legislative council”, after which he would announce a constitutional declaration to serve as the legal reference for the transitional phase. He also said a preparatory committee for a national dialogue conference would be formed. He has spoken in the media of “free and fair” elections taking place in four to five years.
4. The caretaker authorities subsequently briefed me on these issues in more detail and said that we could expect moves in a very short space of time. And indeed today, the establishment of the preparatory committee for the national dialogue conference was officially announced.
5. The leadership of the caretaker authorities have repeatedly committed publicly and to me that the new Syria will be for all Syrians and built on inclusive and credible foundations. And given the specific roadmap being laid out – as regards governance, constitution, and elections – the words of the caretaker authorities show considerable overlap with the key principles of Security Council resolution 2254. The key of course will be implementation.

Mr. President,

6. I have made it clear to the caretaker authorities that my mission stands ready to offer counsel and support, as does the entire UN family, and I went through the full range of areas where support can be given. The caretaker authorities have so far committed to consulting closely with me and my office on all steps of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned transition. We look forward to seeing this commitment translated into concrete follow up action. We for our part remain ready to work meaningfully and constructively on the next

steps with the caretaker authorities as was agreed, in support of a Syrian-led process, in line with the key principles of Security Council resolution 2254.

Mr. President,

7. While in Syria, I met a diverse range of representatives, groups and individuals from all parts of the country, involved in a full range of political, community, religious, and organizational activities.
8. I was deeply struck by the shared conviction among all the Syrians I met that the success of Syria's political transition is essential, and that it cannot afford to fail. All understand it may be imperfect. But many are concerned that there has been no rule-of-law, with no constitutional or legal framework for appointments and policy decisions, nor systematic communication or transparency. Some expressed concerns that the caretaker authorities are taking decisions that go beyond a caretaker mode, including in terms of restructuring state institutions, with potential impact on specific communities.
9. All Syrians with whom I met welcomed the public commitments of the caretaker authorities over the past two months, but want these to be translated into concrete steps. I heard many stress to me how much they want institutional appointments, the transitional government, the provisional legislative body, the national dialogue process, and any preparatory committees, to be credible and inclusive – with the participation of all segments of society, ideally identified by a transparent process of consultation, and a clear and timebound roadmap forwards on next steps -- including a constitutional process and towards free and fair elections, and on transitional justice too, as Mr. al-Sharaa himself has promised.

Mr. President,

10. Many Syrians – men and women – expressed concern at reports of discriminatory practices targeting women, and of increasing social pressure towards certain norms. Of course, we have seen caretaker authorities reassure women on their rights, and in some instances we have seen those involved in discriminatory practices detained. But Syrian women also want more than protection – they want meaningful participation in decision-making or appointments in key positions, based on their qualifications. They want to participate in transitional institutions, so that their perspectives are considered, including on issues related to the status and rights of Syrian women.

Mr. President,

11. It is important to underscore that the current efforts towards a political transition are unfolding in a situation of territorial division and hot conflict in northeast Syria, which is extremely concerning. There are still daily front-line hostilities impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure, exchanges of artillery, and airstrikes, and a series of car bombs in mostly residential areas, prompting serious civilian casualties.
12. I welcome that caretaker authorities and the SDF opened a direct channel, even if progress has not yet emerged. I strongly encourage the United States, Türkiye, and regional and Syrian partners to work together on genuine compromises that enable peace and stability to take hold in northeast Syria. It is vital to avoid further conflict, which

could have drastic effects on Syrian civilians, stability, the economy, the transition, the fight against ISIL and potentially international peace and security. And it is crucial that all doors remain open to ensuring the inclusion of all parts of Syria and all key constituencies within the political transition process.

Mr. President,

13. It is also important to stress that the security landscape remains complex in the rest of Syria too. The caretaker authorities continue to consolidate their presence including through efforts to build a national army, with widespread support for ensuring that no weapons are held outside of the state. But many groups still exercise some or even significant autonomy. Many Syrians expressed fears about security fragmentation and fears it could be exploited by external actors – particularly if the transition goes awry. And many expressed parallel concerns that ongoing efforts for public sector restructuring may push hundreds of thousands into need – including former security elements – potentially jeopardizing stability in the future. And there are further layers of security complexity – especially with the ongoing threat and presence of ISIL, areas of security vacuum, and reports of rising crime rates in some areas.
14. I believe that moving towards the shared goal of stability and a national army will likely be linked to the overall political transition and its credibility and inclusiveness. And let me also clearly appeal to all international stakeholders to maintain a coordinated front in supporting this goal.
15. Let me also add, many Syrians have expressed serious concerns on the inclusion of foreign fighters in the senior ranks of the new armed forces, as well as individuals associated with violations.
16. I also wish to note the visit of an OPCW delegation to Damascus and their meeting with the caretaker authorities.

Mr President,

17. Let me note a related challenge - the very concerning reports of incidents still taking place against the backdrop of the authorities' security operations, including men killed in the exchange of fire, and reported serious ill-treatment in detention. In addition, residents are reportedly facing incidents of kidnapping, looting, expropriation of property, and forced evictions of families from public housing.
18. The caretaker authorities told me plainly that there is no policy of revenge or retribution, and they have reportedly taken some steps to hold to account those responsible. They have also released hundreds of detained persons, but there is still lack of clarity on the due process of those detained including access of specialized humanitarian organizations to places of detention. And there is a risk of a trend of individual incidents developing into a cycle of retribution and revenge. It is the responsibility of the caretaker authorities to ensure all armed actors cease these kinds of actions, to amplify their assurances into concrete procedures, and also to work on a comprehensive transitional justice framework.

Mr. President,

19. The caretaker authorities have made important statements regarding Israel. UNDOF says that the IDF has established multiple positions in the area of separation in violation of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. Such facts on the ground are not easily reversed. I appeal to the Security Council to hold Israel to its commitment that this is a temporary presence and stress that Israel must withdraw. The UN is engaging Israel and the caretaker authorities to this end.

Mr. President,

20. Syrians also impressed on me the urgent need for the international community to help ensure economic stability, particularly with moves on sanctions. The economic challenges are mounting fast – especially with sudden humanitarian donor cuts. Many Syrians will be measuring success in hours of electricity, the price of food and levels of employment. Sanctioning states should make meaningful moves towards sanctions easing from the outset, including in the critical sectors of energy, investments, and finance— including the central bank.

21. I welcome the important decisions and signals from the EU and US in recent weeks and I hope that these moves can be built upon quickly. I have also conveyed to the caretaker authorities the assessment that, as indicated by sanctioning states, a credible transition will be essential to continuing and expanding positive and bold sanctions moves.

22. Syria needs tremendous support in other areas too – including large-scale investments in Syria’s recovery, reconstruction and long-term prosperity. What I hear from key member states who have the capacity to provide such support is that their confidence to make such investments will go hand in hand with concrete steps toward an inclusive, transparent transition, as well as reforms to overcome previous corruption and mismanagement, and actions in other areas we have discussed – security, terrorism, and chemical weapons.

Mr President,

23. To conclude: I encourage the caretaker authorities to make good on their commitments to the Syrian people by clear and concrete actions, on the transition and in engagement with my office. I encourage the international community to do its part, on sanctions and the economy and Syrian sovereignty – all essential to a successful transition too. And I stress that the UN will continue to render its support to the Syrian political transition through the political work and support of my office, and to deliver as one across the full range of the UN family, and to stress the importance of all key international actors working together in a coordinated manner.

24. Let us remember that the challenges Syria faces are myriad and immense, including an ongoing conflict, a fragmented security landscape, a battered economy, and a population emerging from fourteen years of war in a situation of great hope but division too. An inclusive, credible and transparent political transition, that is Syrian-owned and Syrian-led, assisted by the United Nations and with a united international community, in line with the key principles of Security Council resolution 2254, remains the best and only path to addressing these challenges. The Syrian people must finally be given the opportunity to restore their sovereignty, overcome this conflict, determine their future and realize their legitimate aspirations.

Thank you, Mr. President.