

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

25 March 2025

Mr. President (Lars Lokke Rasmussen, Foreign Minister of Denmark),

1. It is less than four months since the fall of the former Syrian regime and the opening of a new era in Syria's history. The legacies of 14 years of war and conflict and five decades of one-man rule are huge. So are the immediate challenges facing the Syrians today. The great hopes and huge fears of the Syrian people have been starkly laid bare this past month. Many rejoiced at being able to gather in public spaces without fear to mark the events of 14 years ago, and more recently many were able to openly celebrate Nowruz. But many others faced a harrowing episode of devastating violence on the coast, resulting in mass civilian casualties and heightening fear and anxiety in many quarters about the future. Let me turn to this immediately.

Mr. President,

2. On Thursday March 6, armed groups associated with the former regime attacked and ambushed caretaker authority forces across the coastal region. Reports indicate attacks on military and internal security targets, and also several hospitals. The scale and sophistication of the attacks were striking, with many claimed by groups of former regime officers. The caretaker authorities have claimed influence from external actors too.
3. That same day, Mr. President, forces streamed into the coast from other parts of Syria - including forces under the control of, or affiliated, or at least nominally associated with the caretaker Ministry of Defense, including foreign fighters; and unaffiliated groups taking up arms spontaneously. Serious armed confrontations ensued, resulting in significant numbers of casualties among the warring factions.
4. But far more disturbing was the appalling civilian death toll, including widespread summary killings of civilians and unarmed individuals, including accounts of entire families executed at point blank, and widespread footage of grave violations of a plainly sectarian and retaliatory nature – [including] singling out Alawites.
5. The situation was comparatively calmed after several days. However, we continue to receive reports of harassment and intimidation, including with heavy sectarian overtones. There have been reports of reinforcement of security presence in the area. Meanwhile, a leader of former regime remnants has issued a video vowing to continue the fight.

Mr. President,

6. The coordinated attack on the caretaker authority, the heavy counter-attacks against this, and the mass killings of civilians all came against a background of already-fomenting insecurity on the coast – marked by multiple reports of killings by unidentified perpetrators, looting, and kidnapping. And there was a broader context of hate speech and misinformation before, during and after the events. There was a sense of exclusion from

the transition and the public sector. And there were pent-up grievances and anger towards persons associated with the former regime.

Mr. President,

7. I welcome the clear condemnation by the Security Council and its reaction to these events. Further investigation is needed to fully determine the perpetrators of the shocking violence against civilians. For their part, the caretaker authorities have stated that civilians were killed by forces on *both* sides, including by what they acknowledged were “some volunteer and other associated factions”. They announced an independent investigative committee tasked with examining violations by all sides and submitting its findings within 30 days. In my dialogue with the caretaker authorities, I have stressed the importance of investigations being effective, transparent, independent, and comprehensive, in line with international standards, and that witnesses are not intimidated and are protected. Findings need to be made public, and those responsible held accountable, with a clear signal that the era of impunity in Syria is in the past. The committee met with my team in Damascus two days ago, and its members are engaging with the relevant UN bodies, which all stand ready to support.
8. The caretaker authorities also announced the formation of a high commission for civil peace in the coastal region. The need to repair deep sectarian fractures and mistrust is huge, and their work alone will not be sufficient. They need to associate the many Syrian civil society organizations who play a crucial role in local dialogue and vital peacebuilding efforts. And we for our part have been active in facilitating needed contacts to try to contain the aftermath and build a modicum of trust.

Mr. President,

9. On 10 March, Mr. Ahmed al-Sharaa and Mr. Mazloum Abdi signed in Damascus an eight-point agreement which, inter alia, spoke of “integrating all civil and military institutions in northeastern Syria into the administration of the Syrian state.” The agreement spoke of committees, which have until no later than the end of 2025, to “work and seek” to implement these agreements.
10. We have been encouraging progress on this track and I welcome this agreement on shared objectives and the first follow up that has taken place. We will continue and deepen engagement in support of this process.

At the same time, Mr. President,

11. We still see worrying signs that conflict in the northeast is not over yet. Exchanges of fire between the SDF and SNA factions have continued, and there were reports of Turkish airstrikes last week that hit SDF controlled areas.
12. Violence continues elsewhere too. Last week saw worrying cross-border clashes between Syria and Lebanon after reports of kidnapping and execution of Syrian soldiers and firing of missiles into Lebanon. I welcome that Lebanese and Syrian authorities were able to contain and de-escalate the situation after two days of clashes and support all efforts for stronger dialogue between them.

Meanwhile, Mr. President,

13. February and March saw several incidents of reported Israeli airstrikes in southwest Syria, Damascus, Homs and the coast. The IDF has also publicly confirmed it has built multiple positions in the area of separation, which are a violation of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement. Such facts on the ground are not easily reversed. I am concerned by Israeli statements on the intention to stay in Syria “for the foreseeable future”, as well as demands for the “full demilitarization of southern Syria”. I appeal to the Security Council to hold Israel to its commitment that this is a temporary presence and stress that Israel must withdraw and respect Syria’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and independence. The UN continues to engage Israel and the caretaker authorities to this end.

Mr. President,

14. On the all-important issue of the political transition, February saw a National Dialogue Conference take place in Damascus after two weeks of traveling consultations in regions. It produced a final outcome statement containing non-binding recommendations.

15. In March, the caretaker authorities issued a constitutional declaration, which I hope will move Syria toward restoring the rule of law and promoting an orderly inclusive transition. Some Syrians have commended the effort to fill the constitutional vacuum, and noted the incorporation of international human rights norms as an integral part of the constitution among other things. But others have expressed reservations about the non-transparent process of its drafting and the substance itself – particularly a very strong presidency with unclear checks and balances between state powers and ambiguity regarding the transition steps.

16. I wish to inform the Security Council that my office was consulted informally and then formally towards the end of this process, and gave advice including conveying international best practices and norms. Some of this was taken on board, some was not. I believe we should build on this and deepen cooperation on the transition going forward.

Mr. President,

17. I will be returning to Damascus soon to continue the engagement. I would highlight several priority areas for attention:

18. First: Syrians await the announcement soon of a transitional government to be appointed by Mr. al-Sharaa, and a transitional legislative council that is partially appointed by him and partially elected by a process to be determined by persons he appoints. I believe Syrians will be able to tell whether the members of these bodies reflect the very diverse sources of competency and constituency in Syria, both women and men.

19. Second: early further moves are advisable on constitutional issues. Caretaker Foreign Minister al-Shibani had told me that a constitutional committee will be formed to prepare a permanent constitution. This process, and then the securing of popular approval, and preparing for free and fair elections, are extremely important undertakings. I look forward to further discussing the assistance of the United Nations that we can provide on these

issues in support of a Syrian-led and owned process in line with my mandate and the core principles of resolution 2254.

20. Third: the atrocities laid bare the urgent need for credible and efficient accountability for crimes committed over so many years. Syrians have made it clear that they seek not only prosecutions, but also a comprehensive process to address the right to truth, reparation and safeguards against non-recurrence – the only true signal to end an era of impunity. The caretaker authorities are engaging with the Independent Institution on Missing Persons, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism and the Commission of Inquiry, with whom we are in close coordination. We hope engagement will translate into real partnership optimizing all international and Syrian resources and expertise, including within civil society.
21. Fourth: Mr. President, a clearer way forward on security issues needs to be developed in a landscape of significant complexity and fragmentation. The goal that armed groups have committed to – one army with no weapons outside state control - cannot be achieved overnight or by declarations. An effective approach to comprehensive security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration is needed. The dissolution of the former army and security forces left hundreds of thousands without salaries and fearing exclusion. Meanwhile, many armed groups remain in possession of their weapons and have not yet integrated. Inclusive politics, resources and vetting processes in line with international human rights obligations will all be essential, alongside a genuine nationwide ceasefire. I encourage the caretaker authorities to seek support and partnership including with the United Nations on these issues.
22. Fifth: The issue of foreign fighters in the senior ranks of the new armed forces, as well as individuals associated with violations, remains a key concern – to Syrians and internationally, as the Council recently made clear. I continue to urge the caretaker authorities to address this robustly.
23. Sixth: Syrians need an economic future, and they need serious international support to enable this economic recovery. I welcome the humanitarian pledges at the 9th Brussels conference last week to support Syria's recovery and host communities in neighbouring countries. But more resources will be needed to ensure that Syria does not fragment over scarce resources, and that the Syrian people – including the displaced – have the breathing room and bandwidth to focus on rebuilding not just their own lives but their country.
24. We also need to see fast and broad sanctions easing, with relevant targeted and sectoral suspensions including in energy, investments, finance, health and education. Some steps have been taken, but more is needed if Syrians are to be given the chance to recover. Countries in the region have expressed readiness to step in and some have announced plans to provide Syria with electricity, and support in this sector is of course really critical. It is essential that sanctioning states consider the important restrictions that still persist and that hamper response. At the same time, I will keep making clear to the caretaker authorities that a peaceful, credible and inclusive transition creates the most enabling environment for further easing of sanctions.

Mr. President,

25. Syria stands at a crossroads. Down one road would be a return to violence, instability, monopolies of power, conflict and fragmentation, with Syria's sovereignty routinely violated by external powers, and regional and international security endangered. This road is totally unacceptable, cannot be in any responsible actor's interest, and must not come to pass.
26. The other road is viable – an inclusive political transition, where the Syrian people restore their sovereignty, overcome this conflict, revive their economy, realize their legitimate aspirations, and contribute to regional stability. That future requires the right Syrian decisions. But the Syrians cannot do this alone. It also needs increased and continued international support. I count on your support.

Mr. President, thank you.