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UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA GEIR O. PEDERSEN
BRIEFING TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL
18 September 2025

Thank you, Mr President (Republic of Korea, Chargé d'affaires Ambassador Sangjin Kim).

1. And let me welcome you, Ambassador Ibrahim al-Olabi, in your new role as Permanent Representative of Syria to the United Nations Headquarters in New York. I wish you well in these historic times.

2. Let me start with a point that bears repeating, because it is easy to forget: the interim authorities in Damascus are grappling with a massive legacy of war and autocracy. They have inherited not just the ruins of shattered buildings, but the deeper wreckage of a battered social fabric, decayed institutions, and a hollowed-out economy. Syria urgently requires international material assistance on a scale commensurate with its needs and ambition. We need to see the private sector's footprint back in Syria including through nurturing Syria's domestic private sector, to ensure that what exists survives and thrives. To achieve this will require more support from the region and the wider international community, and sustained sanctions and export controls relief, reassurance to banks and companies, and an accelerated path of domestic reforms. It also, of course, requires political stability.

3. Foreign Minister al-Shaibani underlined to me when I met him recently in Damascus how vital international support is for Syria, as well as strongly calling for an end to foreign intervention. And I strongly echo this call.

Mr. President,

4. Regrettably, the spectre of external interference continues to loom large. This month has seen further intervention by Israel, including Syrian state media reporting an incident of Israel killing several Syrian soldiers, and Israeli commandos landing south of Damascus, as well as further strikes in early September. Mr President, this kind of external intervention is unacceptable and must stop. We must insist on the full respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, and that any security concerns are addressed based on international law, the 1974 agreement, and diplomatic dialogue. I hope that the meetings between Syria and Israel can lead to concrete results, to bring about de-escalation and stability.

Mr. President,

5. In Sweida, the ceasefire announced by the Syrian authorities on 18 July has largely held. I continue to welcome the joint efforts of the United States and Jordan with Syria to address the crisis, recently embodied in a comprehensive joint statement on 16 September containing a roadmap with several important and positive elements, including on accountability, humanitarian and commercial access, the restoration of services, reconstruction, detainees, security measures, integration and reconciliation. However, a statement from a committee in Sweida aligned with Sheikh Hikmet al-Hijri rejected the statement and spoke of self-determination through "self-administration or secession". Mr

President, it is absolutely vital that solutions are found that *both* safeguard the sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity of Syria, *and* address the legitimate and understandable fears among the Druze community about their safety, human rights and political future within Syria, and that the state acts only as a protector and is not seen as a threat. Given the deep distrust and polarization, this situation needs confidence-building measures and continued dialogue and diplomatic support. We have made clear our readiness to be helpful in this regard.

6. I do wish to highlight that the 16 September statement includes a call by the Syrian government for the United Nations Commission of Inquiry to investigate the July events. This is a welcome opportunity for the existing, and encouraging, cooperation between the authorities and the United Nations on these issues to further develop.

Mr President,

7. I also continue to encourage the publication of the conclusions of the national committee for investigation and fact-finding into the coastal events in March, and to see follow-up steps being taken. Both regarding the coast and Sweida, the Syrian public needs to see that abuses are both acknowledged and addressed in accordance with international standards and the Constitutional Declaration – so that all citizens and communities in Syria can develop confidence that there will be neither recurrence nor impunity.

8. An example of the sensitivity of justice-related issues are recent events in Sumariya, a predominantly Alawite area of Damascus, historically inhabited by families and relatives of former army personnel. In August, an armed group, affiliated with the security forces of the interim authorities, reportedly conducted a series of house raids there, in the context of alleged eviction orders, with reports of violence and looting. I welcome that tension in the neighbourhood has abated with the intervention of the Interim Authorities themselves. But Mr President and this is important, complex issues related to housing, land and property and to transitional justice need to be addressed with care, prioritising the protection of civilians based on the rule of law and in line with international standards.

9. My recent visit to Damascus also further cemented my conviction of the centrality of transitional justice to the success of entire political transition. We reiterate the readiness of the United Nations to support the Syrian national commissions on transitional justice and missing persons and to coordinate international assistance.

Mr President,

10. On the northeast, efforts continue to move forward with implementing the 10 March agreement. We welcome the recent contacts between the interim authorities and the SDF and the exchanges on the key issues, including the critical question of military and security integration, and also a dialogue on political aspects and confidence-building measures. The fact that channels are active between the parties is positive, even if the challenges are very real, and we have had detailed discussions with the parties as they seek to find the path forwards. Our message to both is the same: this will require bold moves and genuine compromise.

11. In areas under the control of the interim authorities, security challenges continue, with immense challenges to be faced on security sector reform, on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and on the issue of foreign fighters too. Nor has the scourge of terrorism faded: ISIL cells and extremist violence continue to threaten the fragile shoots of recovery.

12. But let me also appeal to Member States to heighten engagement on repatriation of their nationals in Al-Hol, and underline that the United Nations is ready to offer guidance and support in line with international human rights law and other applicable standards.

Mr. President,

13. Syria is without a legislature, and while regulatory authority can be exercised via Presidential decree, the establishment of a credible interim legislative body is an important step so that urgent areas of reform during the transition can be addressed. In this regard, preparations for the indirect election of two-thirds of the members of an interim People's Assembly are now well underway, but no date has yet been formally announced. It is important that this process follows realistic timelines and is not rushed.

14. While these indirect elections -- and also the appointment of the remaining third by the President -- are a unique arrangement that reflect the transition's exceptional circumstances, transparency and broad inclusion, including the meaningful participation of women and the representation of all communities, will be essential to confer legitimacy. This must not be an exercise in rewarding loyalty but in ensuring genuine representation and embracing difference.

15. We recognize that there are major challenges in areas where disputes remain between the central authorities and areas outside their control, and that is why we have counselled caution and giving more space and time before taking irreversible steps. Equally, it is vital that all parts of Syrian society step forward and engage with the electoral process: this is a two-sided equation.

16. The interim authorities have told me in the past that they view the People's Assembly as a chance to make the institutions overseeing the transition more inclusive than they have been until now. It is vital that this is what is happening in practice. Without genuine agreements with key stakeholders, the new Assembly may start to function, and the transitional process may continue, but critical voices could find themselves excluded. And this could flow through to the subsequent steps of transition, including the shaping of a new constitution.

Mr President,

17. Let me also stress that in addition to our extensive engagement with the interim authorities and other parties, I and my office continue to meet with civil society and community representatives from all parts of Syria – inside and outside the country. Many share the tremendous sense of dynamism and opportunity in this current moment. Others express fears about a shrinking civil space, insufficient efforts on meaningful inclusion, and a rise in hate speech and communal tensions.

18. And Syrian women continue to share their own efforts to document violations against other Syrian women from across Syria. Violence against women remains a significant barrier to their engagement in public life, restricting further their ability to play consequential and equal roles and highlighting issues of public policy that the transition needs to consider from the perspectives of women.

Mr President,

19. To conclude: the Syrian interim authorities and the Syrian people are attempting a transition in the face of challenges and realities as complex and difficult as have been faced almost anywhere. And viewed by that standard at least, we can point to remarkable changes in a short period of time.

20. But equally, wider experience tells us that many political transitions in modern history have, alas, not been successful, that the key determinant of success has been genuine inclusion. Let me remind you all: we are speaking of a process of political transition over five years. Key steps ahead—particularly the new constitution and that process of forming that new constitution, and free, fair elections, but also all other processes too, will only succeed if all communities and critical groups are inside the tent in shaping this transition as Syrians.

21. The international community must support Syria and robustly stand against foreign intervention. But equally: the success of the transition will above all rest on the state acting as a state for all, not just in word but also in deed - and the forging of a genuine Syrian consensus, and as enabling all Syrians to voice their views, including their fears and political dissent, and to find genuine representation in the political transition.

22. If this central challenge is mishandled, the consequences could be dire. Syria may find itself indefinitely gridlocked, unable to heal or rebuild—and, at worst, slipping into fresh waves of strife and external intervention. This scenario is in nobody's interest, and this transition simply cannot fail.

23. But I remain convinced that if the challenges are well handled, and met with genuine negotiation and bold compromise, unity is within reach, and success against the odds is possible. In this light, it was particularly reassuring to hear President Sharaa affirm that only dialogue – not force – can unite Syria. And as you know he will be in New York next week for the high-level segment of the General Assembly – the first Syrian president to do so since 1967.

24. Mr President, we look forward to continue working the Syrian authorities and Syrian partners to realise the promise of the commitments the authorities have made, and to realise the promise of resolution 2254. The United Nations stands ready to support efforts on all fronts. The journey must be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned. But let it be collective, courageous—and above all, inclusive.

Thank you, Mr. President.