

22 Jan

2025

NEAR VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE BY UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA MR. GEIR O. PEDERSEN

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Really a pleasure to see you all. It's great to be back in Syria. It's the second time since the 8th of December, and I had the pleasure to meet with a wide range of Syrians and to be listening very carefully to their messages. Of course, including from the Caretaker Authorities.

I have good news in the sense that there is what I believe a strong international consensus that there needs to be support for the new Syria. We need to see the political transition, that it succeeds. I think it's a shared opinion that it cannot fail. We need an inclusive transition leading to a new constitution, free and fair elections, in a Syrian-led, and Syrian-owned political process that will restore Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and it's also meeting what they're saying, the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

You all know that these are what we call the core principles of Security Council resolution 2254. This time, it's for the Syrian people themselves to take the lead and to make sure that we are moving in the right direction.

The international community needs to be there to provide the necessary support. There are obviously a lot of challenges, or interlinked issues. In my two meetings I've had so far, the latest on Monday with Mr. Sharaa, I think I would say that there are, let's say, six, seven core challenges. Let me mention them and just sort of summarize the main topics that we discussed.

Obviously, number one, bringing armed factions that are holding arms into one national army. Two, the specific challenges of the Northeast. And three, the protection of all Syrians. And four, what I already alluded to, the political transition. And five, the question of transitional justice. And six, the question of sanctions, economic recovery, and reconstruction. And seven, last but not least, the Israeli presence.

I really appreciate the detailed and substantive discussions I had with Mr. Sharaa and the caretaker foreign minister, Mr. Shaibani, who you know I also met in Riyadh during the international conference that were there on the 12th of January.

Let me say that I have taken very careful note, and I welcome the many clear commitments and messages that have been conveyed to the Syrian people and to us in the meetings we have had with Mr. Sharaa. I think we have understood the priorities and the ideas for the political transition and where there are areas of cooperation with the United Nations.

And of course, also Mr. Sharaa's appeal for the international community to come in and support them in critical areas. And Mr. Sharaa is right. We need to see both that the Syrian people and the international community come together and deliver on this.

And I can assure you that we, the United Nations, we will be working with the Syrian people and we will be working with the international community to make sure that it can deliver support. I'm staying here for quite a while and I'm looking forward also to follow up with the Caretaker Authorities.

Let me just say a couple of things about the period we are in. I think we all understand that I recall, what we are called the caretaker period. And it's obviously very early months. It's only after six weeks since they took control of Damascus and most of Syria. And this as we all know is following 14 years of war and conflict and 54 years of one-man rule. And any country and caretaker authority that would take power in such a situation will obviously face huge challenges.

And you all know, you have been seeing it yourself, that there have been and continue to be incidents, unacceptable things, things that ought not to happen. And we are monitoring that, and we will be following up. But, and this is important, I also welcome the message I heard from the Caretaker Authority. And this has been stated very clearly that the need should be no revenge, and assurances that all Syrians will be protected and have a stake in the future. And I think it's important that these messages are enhanced so that they can reassure the Syrian people.

I also welcome the clear assurances I heard from the Caretaker Authority that there will now be a move towards a new phase and that this phase will be inclusive. Because this is really what is needed. We need to move along a path from the current realities established in emergency conditions and into a credible, inclusive, transparent and effective political transition process. Obviously, a key in that is the formation of one Syrian national army, because that is vital for stability. But it obviously also requires careful management in a way that avoids competing armies and fragmented command structures.

I mentioned at the beginning that one of the key issues I discussed with Mr. Sharaa was the situation in the Northeast. And this obviously could turn out to be a serious challenge for the new Syria. So, we need to see a solution to that. And it is my appeal to all parties that they now grasp the opportunity to move forward. And that, let me also say I welcome the initiatives that have been taken. The fact that we had a meeting between Mr. Sharaa and the leader of the SDF here in Damascus a while back, I think that was an important initiative.

And I hope that they will continue to explore to resolve the situation peacefully and diplomatically. Obviously, much more is needed. But it is important that they get the time they need to solve this peacefully. And I think it requires obviously a compromise from everyone.

Then a few more words about the National Dialogue and the National Conference. Obviously, how the conference and the National Dialogue will develop is uniquely in the hands of Syrians. And ideas for this conference, as far as I can understand, are still not settled. It is still in the making. But it's critical to get the settings of this process right, and that it is prepared carefully.

And you know that this has also been my message to the Security Council again and again since the 8th of December. In my dialogue with Syrians, many are asking me, what does it mean that the process needs to be inclusive? Let me just repeat, this is obviously a Syrian-led process. So, I'm not going to impose some external definition of what this is.

I believe we all understand the major challenges, and that we do not let perfection be the enemy of the good. But I also do believe that all Syrians can tell the difference between a one-colored process and one that is inclusive of all. One that brings together all the regions, all segments, all forces with critical weight to take part in the process.

And of course, with the effective participation of women, half of Syria's population, if not more.

One of the key issues I have discussed now two times with Mr. Sharaa is, of course, the issues related to, as I said, transitional justice. Calls for justice, accountability, and reparation are strongly echoed across the different spectrums of society all over Syria.

And I believe they are necessary and fundamental if we are to safeguard a sustainable peace and social cohesion here in Syria. And linked to this, let me also emphasize, and you know this has been at the core of our efforts from day number one, the importance of the issue of the missing and their families. We obviously need to continue to support the families and to make sure that all the questions they have are answered.

Let me conclude by saying just a few words about the international community. You all know very well that international community was one of the drivers in the conflict here in Syria. And what I'm now hearing from all Syrians is the same message, that we now need to see a different international mentality and a new approach from the international community. I really hear, I'm hearing this across the board. And I think what we have seen so far, as I said, is a willingness to support Syria. I heard that when I was in Aqaba, I heard it when I was in Riyadh. I heard it in my three briefings to the Security Council since the 8th of December. And of course, that the UN has an important role to try to coordinate and to help in this. And I have of course noticed that with all the visits coming to Syria, that many states are expressing their solidarity to Syria.

And of course, there is in particular one issue that Mr. Sharaa has asked us to raise, and nearly all Syrians I'm meeting with asking the same, and that is of course the issue of sanctions. These sanctions were of course imposed of the former regime, and I think it's extremely important that all the sanctioning states are now looking into this, and to see what they can do to help the emergence of a new Syria. And I can promise you that we will be working with the Europeans, and that I'm looking forward to working with the new Trump administration on all of these issues.

Then I mentioned to you of course the Israeli occupation forces, and what they are doing to Syria. Just let me repeat that this is unacceptable. We have heard from the Caretaker Authorities very important statements. There is no excuse for what the Israelis are now doing, and this needs to stop. So let me end here by saying that this will continue to be a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned process, where the international community and the UN is ready to support. As you know, we have always engaged with a wide range of Syrians, and we know what Syria can achieve and what they can do. And I do believe that the last six weeks have been the testament to the Syrian people, their goodwill, and their desire to unify and to rebuild their country. And I can promise you that we are here to help you and to assist you, together with the rest of the international community. Thank you so much.

Questions (Abridge): My question is, is the UN Resolution 2254 over or not? My question is about the North-East Syria issue. Is there any solution to resolve the conflict between Damascus and the Iraqi forces? And my other question is, are there still battles in the North-East Syria? Do you have any promises for the United Nations in that regard? Can the UN help Syria with two issues, first the political transition and second bringing together the different factions?

Mr. Pedersen: Thank you. You may have seen that Security Council issued a statement on the 17th of December that emphasized that the principles of Security Council resolution 2254 is still valid. What do we mean by that? Of course, we all understand, let me say, what we don't mean by that. We don't mean now that there should be, as the resolution says, that there should be negotiations by the government, between the government and the opposition. That is obviously no longer relevant. So, when we say the two principles, the core principles is one, I think something all Syrians will agree to, and that is the protection of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its unity.

The second principle is about the need for a political process that is going through a transitional phase that is inclusive and, as it says in the resolution, it is non-sectarian, with the help of the United Nations. And then there are many other issues in the resolution. It's about the missing and detained, it's about refugees, it's about humanitarian assistance, and all of this. That being said, there are now also discussions going on about the possibilities to have a new resolution supporting what is now the transitional phase going on in Syria. But this will most probably take time. It is, of course, up to the Security Council itself.

So what is the role of the United Nations? As you all know, the United Nations are many different things. So we, the United Nations, are here to support whatever you call political issues, governance issues. Obviously, we continue to support on the humanitarian front, humanitarian assistance. We all know that there are still more than 17 million people in Syria in need of humanitarian assistance. Then, of course, the issues related to development and economic support. And, of course, here, all the issues related to sanctions that will be critical to be addressed if we are to see real reconstruction taking place.

Then there are issues related to, you know, the rule of law, human rights, and what I mentioned to you on transitional justice. In all of these areas, the United Nations have experience, and we can contribute. But the United Nations will never impose itself on anyone. It needs to be invited to take part in the cooperation. And I, for instance, when it comes to the transitional process, we know that there have been, you know, more than 40 countries going through transitional processes where the (United Nations)* have helped. We are also here to help, now. But as I said, this is all, this needs still to be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned.

This can only succeed if the Syrian people themselves are ready to take the lead in this and to move forward. And from what I've been hearing in the last few days, you know, I'm encouraged by what I'm hearing, and I hope we will know, you know, within the next foreseeable future, we will see a movement towards the next phase of the transitional period.

On the situation in the Northeast, I think we should all, you know, we are all following it extremely carefully. Obviously, we need to give the negotiations between the Caretaker Authority and the SDF a chance. It goes without saying that also Türkiye and the United States have a key role to play in supporting this.

And we are hopeful that we will now allow the two parties enough time to be able to move forward so this does not end in the full military confrontation that cannot, that will not serve the interests of the Syrian people.

Questions (Abridge): What is the fate of the sanctions imposed on Syria and what is the fate of UN humanitarian assistance with most of the Syrian population under poverty line? Any discussions between you and Mr. Sharaa regarding his statements last week welcoming UN forces, did you discuss that? Also regarding the National Dialogue, you said it was not settled, but any time frame set? The question regarding the political transition and whether the new Caretaker Authorities have invited the UN to take part in it?

Mr. Pedersen: As I said, the question of sanctions, if you are to see a rebuilding of Syria, you know, the real reconstruction, and to be able to come out of the poverty that you rightly described, we need to see an end of sanctions. It is, we know that this is a complicated process, but the European Union, for instance, is meeting already on the 27th of January, and we are discussing closely with our European friends, and hopefully there will be some positive results from that meeting. Then, as you know very well, Mr. Trump took office, was it yesterday or today? Yes, anyway, he just took office, so it must probably take a little bit of time before it's possible to have a proper dialogue with them, but we will do our utmost to start that work, and to hopefully, with the positive development that we hope to see here, it will be possible also to see progress on that. You are absolutely right that there is an immense need for continued humanitarian support, and I can assure you that we will continue to appeal for that. There has been a problem because of the many different crises around the globe, but hopefully we will now see more coming in.

I don't have a timeline for the national conference or the national dialogue, obviously this is, we will have to ask the Caretaker Authority for how they are moving forward on that. Linked to the third question, as I said, we are discussing it with the Caretaker Authority, we are listening very carefully, we are providing our ideas, but it's not a formalized cooperation, it is, as I think you would expect in a situation like this, that the Caretaker Authority is listening to different views, different opinions, and will hopefully be moving forward in a proper manner.

On the Golan, this is obviously a key question. The point is, I think, is that it is possible to go back to status quo, and I think that is what we should be seeing now. And I know that my colleagues within the United Nations are working on this. And I hope we can pretty soon see some positive outcomes and results of this.

Questions (Abridge): We know about some violations across the country against some minorities, how can we be sure that the new authorities will uphold the rights of minorities and women in all regions? Is there any coordination with Kurdistan region to resolve the conflict in northeast Syria? What about all the documents that have emerged from all the meetings of the members of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, will these be of use?

I will say that I've been discussing this, the question of the serious incidents that we've heard about, as you rightly mentioned, in quite some detail with Mr. Sharaa and his response has been very clear, and I'm sure that's also what he will be telling you, and that is that there can be no revenge, that there needs to be proper justice. And of course, that justice means also that those who have committed serious crimes needs to be prosecuted. And meaning also that if there are criminal activities, if there are people who are taking justice in their own hands, they will also be prosecuted. So, I think we have heard a clear message on that. But as I said, this is always an area where all of us are hearing, we will continue to follow. And that is also obviously one of the roles also of the United Nations to follow this very carefully, and part of our mandate.

I think the important thing with the discussions in the Northeast is obviously that this is a Syrian-Syrian conflict and we need to see that it is solved between the Syrian parties themselves. And as I said already this is my appeal that we give time to the Syrians within the SDF and HTS, the Caretaker Authorities to solve this issue.

On the question of all the documents that have been worked out through the years now with the Constitutional Committee that used to meet in Geneva, I am absolutely sure that these documents can be made available if there is an interest also for the future work on a new constitution here in Syria so it is a good reminder, thank you.

Questions (Abridge): Do you have information regarding the negotiations that took place between SDF and Caretaker Authorities? Is there a possibility for a military confrontation between the two sides if negotiations fail?

Mr. Pedersen: Obviously, you will have to ask the two parties themselves about the details of the negotiations, but my appeal, just to repeat that is that we need to give the two parties the time to find a solution so that we avoid exactly what you said, that we avoid a full-scale military confrontation. A full-scale military confrontation will have a very negative impact on Syria and should be avoided because I think we are now looking for the beginning, for a new Syria, then hopefully that will also include the Northeast in a peaceful manner through a diplomatic process. Thank you.

Damascus, 22 January 2025

**Academic literature suggests there have been about 40 transitions since the end of Cold War, the UN has assisted in some of them.*

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