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New York

President:	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett	(Guyana)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Bendjama
	China	Mr. Dai Bing
	Ecuador	Mr. De La Gasca
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Japan	Mr. Yamanaka
	Malta	Mrs. Frazier
	Mozambique	Mr. Afonso
	Republic of Korea	Mr. Hwang
	Russian Federation	Mr. Nebenzia
	Sierra Leone	Mr. Sowa
	Slovenia	Mr. Žbogar
	Switzerland	Mr. Hauri
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Dame Barbara Woodward
	United States of America	Mr. Wood

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria; and Mr. Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: Let me first express my deep concern about the situation on the ground in Syria and the devastating impact it is having on civilians. This month, we have seen further spillover effects from conflict in the region. Multiple air strikes attributed to Israel, including on residential areas of Homs and Damascus, reportedly resulted in both civilian and military casualties, including advisers from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In some instances, Israel confirmed that it carried out air strikes in what it said was a response to ongoing rocket attacks launched from southern Syria towards the occupied Syrian Golan. The United States carried out what it described as retaliatory strikes following a drone attack on a United States post in Jordan near the border with Syria that resulted in military casualties. The United States claimed that Iranian-backed groups were behind that and other attacks on United States bases — a claim that Iran denies. The United States strikes hit dozens of what it says were Iran-linked targets in Syria and Iraq, with Syrian State media reporting both military and civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, all other vectors of the Syrian conflict itself continue and remain the biggest cause of civilian casualties and displacement. This month, the entire north of the country, containing millions of civilians, has seen multiple front-line skirmishes, exchanges of artillery and rocket and sniper fire, along with pro-Government and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and Turkish drone strikes. Attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant continued to increase in quantity and impact, particularly in the central and north-eastern regions. Southern Syria remains violent and unstable, with further killings and clashes in Dara'a and fresh confrontations between the Jordanian army and what it says were armed smugglers on the Syrian-Jordanian border.

Plainly, the tensions in the region must be urgently de-escalated, starting with the immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza that the Secretary-General has called for. And we equally plainly need urgent de-escalation inside Syria, building on existing ceasefire arrangements towards a nationwide ceasefire in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Security Council-listed terrorist groups must be fought in a manner that is cooperative and firmly in line with international law and that prioritizes the protection of civilians. I impressed those points on key international stakeholders when I convened an International Syria Support Group ceasefire task force plenary meeting here in Geneva earlier this month. All voices around the table assured that none wished to see further escalation — a welcome sentiment that I heard in engagements with regional ministers too. It is vital that all stakeholders act accordingly.

A year after the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye, which killed thousands and displaced millions, Syria's humanitarian crisis has only deepened. On the one hand, we have received some good news, with the Syrian Government's recent extension of its authorization for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai border crossings. But the broader humanitarian trends are bleaker than ever, and I am sure Mr. Griffiths will provide more details on how serious the situation really is. However, I would just like to remind members of some of the headlines. What it needed is more access by all modalities, including cross-line convoys; more donor support, including for early recovery and livelihoods; and greater efforts to mitigate any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians.

Meanwhile, we still see no concrete results in addressing the situation of an estimated 100,000 arbitrarily detained, forcibly disappeared and missing

persons, as called for in resolution 2254 (2015). This month, I met once again with families of missing and detained persons hailing from all areas of Syria, who continue to live in both agony and the hope of seeing their detained loved ones released, or at least knowing their whereabouts and fate. On that, let me reiterate my support for the General Assembly's decision to establish the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. We have a collective responsibility to help its work.

More than 18 months ago, I issued invitations for the ninth session of the Constitutional Committee, which was to take place in Geneva. That session did not take place because, as Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov confirmed this month, Russia no longer considers Switzerland a neutral venue, and the Syrian Government did not accept Geneva as a result.

From the outset, I have been clear about several points. Let me remind members about four of them.

First, I have reminded everyone that the Syrian Government and Syrian Negotiations Commission, in the terms of reference for the Committee, agreed on Geneva and stressed that the process should take place without foreign interference.

Secondly, as a facilitator, I will be creative in trying to find a way forward for all parties, including exploring all possible alternatives.

Thirdly, if the Syrian Government and Syrian Negotiations Commission reach consensus on a venue other than Geneva, I will support that.

And fourthly, this non-Syrian issue must be overcome so that the Syrian-led and -owned United Nations-facilitated process can continue.

Based on that approach, over 18 months, with the support of various outside stakeholders, including the Astana guarantors and the Arab contact group, various venues have been floated. But I am sorry to say that the reality is that not one of them has yet received the minimum consent required both from the Syrian parties and the potential host itself. I warned that this could be the case when the issues were first raised 18 months ago. I myself recently proposed a further option — that the ninth session could be convened at the United Nations Office in Nairobi. I appreciate the fact that my United Nations colleagues in Nairobi are ready to do everything required to help us host. I recently commended this way out to the Syrian parties and relayed a further suggestion from one Syrian party to the other on an alternative venue in the region. However, I regret to say that no consensus could be found among the Syrian parties on either venue, just as was the case with earlier suggestions.

Having left no stone unturned to find an alternative venue, I believe the only way forward at this time is to reconvene in Geneva, at least as a bridging proposal while there is no consensus on an alternative venue, while also remaining open to an alternative venue for future sessions, if consensus on that can be found. That is something I have flagged for some time as what may be the only way forward if no alternative can be found. Today I am therefore issuing formal invitations for a ninth round in Geneva in late April. I appeal to the Syrian parties to respond positively and to all key international stakeholders to support the actions of the United Nations as a facilitator, and to refrain from interfering with regard to a venue that the Syrian parties themselves had formerly agreed to. I believe it is important for the Constitutional Committee to meet as soon as possible and to continue its work. An indefinite hiatus can only undermine the Committee's credibility and work.

At the same time, I have always said that the Constitutional Committee cannot solve this conflict alone. Resolution 2254 (2015) speaks to a wide range of issues. Let me once again remind the Council that clear ideas for step-for-step confidence-building measures, addressing core elements of resolution 2254 (2015), remain on the table. I stand ready to enter into discussions to flesh out all the details and operational aspects with all the Syrian parties and other stakeholders, where willingness is shown regarding the proposals submitted or to receive alternative ideas.

As we look to find ways to fully implement resolution 2254 (2015), we continue to draw on the insights and advice of a broad spectrum of Syrians, including the Women's Advisory Board and the Civil Society Support Room, which convened in Geneva this month and also met with each other. It was heartening to see a wide spectrum of Syrian women and men discuss common ground and practical ways forward, despite significant differences among them. They discussed essential issues such as local governance and possibilities for a coherent, decentralized approach for the whole of Syria, in line with national sovereignty and territorial integrity and resolution 2254 (2015). The members of the Women's Advisory Board

held insightful discussions on other challenges and opportunities, including areas for commonalities, such as in the field of education.

Finally, I have outlined some elements for immediate action — getting the Constitutional Committee back on track, traction on step-for-step confidence-building measures and immediate de-escalation. However, we must be honest with ourselves. Such entry points cannot solve the Syrian conflict in and of themselves. I continue to hear from many Syrians and outside players, on different sides of the conflict, that we must embed the initiatives we have developed in a broader approach and package — one that puts all of the needs and concerns of Syrian and international stakeholders on the table and involves all necessary stakeholders, as well as compromise from all players. Ultimately, that is how to ensure the protection of Syria's civilians and enable the Syrian people to realize their legitimate aspirations, while also, in lockstep, ensuring Syria's socioeconomic recovery and restoring its sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.

I know this may seem an inopportune time. I am aware that international attention is focused on multiple other crises. But there might also be a sense in some quarters that this conflict is easier to just manage and far too difficult to solve. Such thinking is mistaken. Look at the trends — regional spillover is only the most recent accelerant in a conflict that is growing in complexity with each passing year. The situation is worsening on almost all indicators and the status quo is unsustainable and unmanageable. As I discussed with members last month, we have to prepare the ground and work for a broader approach to resolving the conflict in Syria in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

The President: I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Mr. Griffiths.

Mr. Griffiths: I thank you, Madam President, for inviting me to speak here today.

As Mr. Pedersen said, this month marks one year since the catastrophic earthquakes that struck Türkiye and Syria on 6 February 2023 at 4 o'clock in the morning. It is a time that none of us will easily forget. And as we reflect on the first anniversary of that tragedy, our hearts go out to the families across the region and in those countries that have endured such profound loss, and in some cases continue to do so. The earthquakes, among the most severe in a century, wrought untold devastation. I remember it well. They claimed thousands of lives and left millions of people in both countries injured, traumatized, in particular, as I remember, and homeless. And with the remarkable support of the international community, crucial emergency relief was provided, including first aid, food and protection assistance and shelter support. But in Syria, where, as Mr. Pedersen said, the conflict is about to hit the 13-year mark, it is clear that much more is still needed to address the long-term humanitarian impact of the earthquakes, which includes ensuring the restoration of services, early recovery and the provision of basic services and adequate shelter for those still suffering from that awful morning, particularly displaced pregnant women and girls.

And the same goes for the wider humanitarian crisis in Syria. It is not just the earthquake zones that suffer and need our help. That crisis, which was already one of the most severe in the world a year ago, as Mr. Pedersen just said, has only deteriorated over the past seven months. Just when we think it cannot get any worse, it becomes even more problematic, despite the best efforts of the Government of Syria, and we need to focus on it, both through Mr. Pedersen's fundamental leadership and whatever support we can give.

Therefore, in 2024, Syria's humanitarian outlook remains bleak. A staggering 16.7 million people now require humanitarian assistance — nearly three quarters of the population and the highest number of people in need since the start of the crisis 13 years ago. Expanding hostilities in the north of Syria and recent attacks in Damascus — as Mr. Pedersen has spoken about — as well as in rural Damascus and Homs governorates continue to cause civilian casualties, displacement and extensive damage. When looking at some of the terrible scenes of desecration and desolation in Gaza, I was reminded of some of those early years in Homs, in the early years of the Syrian conflict, where we saw similar destroyed buildings and streets empty of people.

The reduction in services and in electricity, water and cooking fuel has exacerbated food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable members of society. Across Syria, the ongoing hostilities, the decline in essential services, prolonged water shortages and a dire economic situation are all serving to increase people's reliance on sparse and scarce humanitarian aid.

Access challenges, including daily security incidents, are constraining our ability to safely deliver essential assistance and to directly engage with affected populations. Therefore, of course, as always, I reiterate my call on all parties involved to respect international humanitarian law and to take constant care to spare civilians and civilian infrastructure. That includes allowing and facilitating the rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief to people in need, including across the lines.

I welcome the decision by the Government of Syria earlier this month — and I thank them for this — to renew its permission for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai crossings to deliver humanitarian assistance for an additional three months, until 13 May 2024. We had all hoped for longer, but we are still alive, and we are still delivering through those crossings. I thank the Government of Syria for that.

I want to take this opportunity to welcome our friend, Ambassador Aldahhak, back from Damascus, where we used to meet often. I am pleased to see him back here where he belongs, and I hope that we will work closely together. The extension he announced follows an earlier, equally welcome decision by the Syrian Arab Republic in January to extend its permission for the use of Bab Al-Hawa crossing to deliver assistance into north-west Syria for an additional six months, until July 2024.

In 2023, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners moved more than 5,000 trucks carrying essential aid through those crossings. Already in 2024, we have carried out more than 40 cross-border missions. That has allowed us to provide essential aid to 2.5 million people every month and to administer more than 1 million medical procedures. We continue to advocate for humanitarians to be afforded the space needed to decide on the quickest, most efficient way to deliver assistance to those who desperately need it. It is evident that cross-border assistance will continue to be needed and to be crucial for people until the peace that Mr. Pedersen has spoken of visits Syria.

It is also clear, and I want to be very clear about this, that the expansion of cross-line deliveries — expansion is a nice word to use in this context — or rather the initiation of cross-line deliveries must be pursued with vigour, including to the north-west. It is a humanitarian imperative and a matter on which we are constantly engaged. The humanitarian community remains committed to providing the assistance that people need across Syria. We cannot do so unless we have the required funding. We thank everyone in this Chamber who has been so generous in the past. The humanitarian response plan last year, however, received less than 40 per cent of the required funding. It was the worst-funded response plan since the start of the conflict.

The earthquakes of February 2023, as devastating as they were, could have been the moment when we said to ourselves and to all around us, "the people of Syria have suffered enough, let us put an end to this." However, international attention, the generous mobilization of resources and solidarity — indeed, particularly from the region behind the response — unfortunately proved momentary. One year on, the people of Syria are facing a worse humanitarian situation than before that day.

As international attention wanes and, of course, is taken up by other conflicts, the suffering and despair of the people of Syria is intensifying. The horizon — a future, a hope, a desperate hope for their children's future — is difficult to sustain. But we must not allow ourselves to become resigned to that. We must continue to urge respect, as I did, for international humanitarian law, and we must see an increase in levels of funding for the humanitarian response and, indeed, the humanitarian response to the earthquake.

Members will recall that the flash appeal we put out approximately a week after the earthquakes was fully funded in Syria. I think it was fully funded in Türkiye. Therefore, we know that the generosity of the international community exists. We must hope to see it happen again this year and, as we said the previous time we met, we look to Mr. Pedersen for his leadership and fully support all of his priorities.

The President: I thank Mr. Griffiths for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Hauri (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings.

My thoughts once again go out to all the victims of the earthquake a year ago, and I will return to that subject later, in the humanitarian part of my statement.

On the security front, the situation continues to deteriorate throughout Syria, with increasingly violent hostilities. The attacks carried out by numerous

State and non-State actors throughout the country demonstrate the ongoing spiral of regional violence. We call on all parties, as well as those with influence over them, to exercise maximum restraint. Any action taken must comply with international law, including international humanitarian law. Civilians, as well as civilian infrastructure, must be protected. Switzerland calls for the implementation of a nationwide ceasefire in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

On the political track, we welcome the tireless efforts of the Special Envoy to relaunch the process. His contacts with stakeholders at the regional and international levels fall within the framework provided for by the abovementioned resolution and his step-for-step approach. Switzerland remains available to facilitate any type of talks and initiatives, including meetings of the Constitutional Committee, aimed at promoting a lasting political solution under the auspices of the United Nations.

Remaining attentive to civil society remains fundamental at each and every stage. Switzerland welcomes the recent meeting of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board in Geneva. As inclusive spaces for dialogue, those platforms are an essential link for transmitting the voice of Syrians at the international level. We further welcome their work to identify a common approach on topics such as local governance and decentralization. The fruits of those efforts represent entry points for the political process in Syria. Furthermore, we recall the importance of the fight against impunity and the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism in that regard.

As penholder on the Syrian humanitarian file, I now turn to the humanitarian situation. We remain concerned about the ever-increasing humanitarian needs. According to the United Nations, in 2024, 16.7 million people in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, 45 per cent of whom are children. It is worrisome that, at the same time, funds are decreasing significantly, and humanitarian organizations are being forced to reduce or even suspend their operations.

Syrian children are paying a particularly heavy price in the conflict, which has lasted for almost 13 years. An entire generation is growing up with no memory of a time without conflict. There are 2.4 million school-age children who do not attend school, which has a significant impact on their future opportunities. Children are particularly vulnerable to a multitude of risks, including child labour, early and forced marriage and human trafficking. They continue to be at risk of recruitment and of becoming victims of the fighting, and their schools continue to be attacked. We call on all parties to do everything in their power to protect children and put an end to those grave violations.

In Syria today, a third of schools have been destroyed in the fighting, damaged by earthquakes or used as shelters for displaced people. In that respect, early recovery projects are essential to restore access to basic services in Syria, including education.

Given the scale of the needs, it is crucial that the Council keep a close eye on those developments. In that respect, we welcome the fact that authorization for the Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai crossing points has been extended beyond 13 February. However, humanitarian actors need greater predictability to plan their activities, especially as resources become increasingly scarce. Humanitarian access must not be limited in time. All aid modalities, including cross-border aid and aid delivered across the front lines, are necessary. We recall that allowing and facilitating the passage of humanitarian aid is an obligation under international humanitarian law.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that it is our responsibility as the Security Council to put in place the political and security framework provided for in resolution 2254 (2015) so that the humanitarian actors can work effectively and without hindrance. For that to happen and for real progress to be made towards a political solution, all parties must resume constructive dialogue.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings. This 6 February marked one year since the devastating earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria. Three quarters of the death toll in Syria occurred in the non-regime-controlled north-west, where 4.2 million people depend on humanitarian assistance.

Given those needs, we welcome the three-month extensions for United Nations access through the Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai crossings. Those additional crossings have provided important capacity and enabled faster, more efficient aid deliveries to communities in need, on top of the vital crossing at Bab Al-Hawa. At the same time, we have made clear that reauthorizing those crossings for 90-day increments is not a sustainable

approach to addressing the scale of humanitarian needs in Syria. Humanitarian aid providers and distributors need time to plan. We call for continued and more predictable, sustainable access.

Given the sobering statistics shared by today's briefers and that humanitarian needs are at the highest level since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, there is no reason why the regime and all parties in Syria should not guarantee humanitarian access for as long as needs persist. Indeed, humanitarian access to all Syrians, wherever they are and through all modalities, must be unhindered. That includes cross-line humanitarian deliveries to the Rukban settlement, where the regime and Russia continue to block United Nations convoys.

One consequence of the failure to resolve this conflict in Syria and of the Al-Assad regime's failure to reform is the rise in illicit drug smuggling from the country. We urge all Council members to join us in calling on the regime to address that scourge. The Al-Assad regime has made Syria into the world's leading exporter of Captagon, using its ports and land borders to smuggle millions of pills throughout the region. The volume of drug seizures conducted by border officials of neighbouring countries belies the scope of the Captagon trade emanating from Syria. The regime security apparatus is blatantly complicit in the trade of Captagon and protects the narcotics-producing laboratories operating in its territory.

The United States has not stood idle in the face of that threat. In March 2023, the United States, in coordination with the United Kingdom, designated six key individuals and two associated entities for their roles in facilitating the production or exportation of Captagon. We are working with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the International Narcotics Control Board to address that threat. And in July, Secretary Blinken launched the Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats, including Captagon trafficking.

Turning to the political process, we call on the Syrian regime to do its part to implement a nationwide ceasefire and to finally engage in the political process in good faith. The Al-Assad regime has hidden behind Russia and refused direct negotiations for far too long. At the same time, we must not overlook Russia's role in obstructing political progress for Syria, as laid out in resolution 2254 (2015), the only internationally established path to end the conflict. Russia has undermined the work of the Constitutional Committee, a Syrian-led and -owned process facilitated by the United Nations, by imposing demands that have nothing to do with Syria and have kept the Committee from meeting since July 2022. Russian diplomats from Moscow participate frequently in international conferences and meetings at the United Nations in Geneva. Yet when it comes to the Constitutional Committee, they suddenly complain about the host country. We will continue to work towards the full implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and support Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to reconvene Syrian parties in Geneva for the Constitutional Committee.

Mr. Nebenzia (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir Pedersen and the head of Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Martin Griffiths, for their briefings.

Our meeting is taking place in the context of an unprecedented surge of violence in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone. The conflict has been going on for more than 140 days and has implications not only for the military-political situation in Syria, but also for the entire Middle East region. We are particularly concerned about the intensification of the so-called retaliatory strikes in the region by the United States Air Force, as well as Israel's ongoing air strikes on its Arab neighbours, including from the occupied Syrian Golan and the Blue Line, which risk drawing both Syria and its neighbours into a full-scale regional confrontation.

Over the past month alone, Israeli aircraft have repeatedly attacked international airports in Damascus and Aleppo, which serve as the main gateways for the entry of United Nations aid into Syria and have carried out strikes in the areas of Deir ez-Zor, Abu Kamal and the Golan Heights. The targets of American air strikes were the facilities and positions of the Syrian Armed Forces in the east of the country, where the Syrian military continues its persistent fight against the remaining fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, to whom Washington, contrary to its statements, is in fact providing protection and patronage. We have no doubt that the recent incessant American attacks on facilities in Iraq and Yemen, no matter how Washington tries to justify them, pose a direct threat to international peace and security and undermine the world order based on the supremacy of universal international law and the central role of the United Nations.

For our part, we strongly condemn the ongoing air raids on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic. We consider them to be a flagrant violation of the sovereignty of that State and of the basic norms of international law.

We note in general that the American intervention in Syria, under the pretext of allegedly fighting terrorism, continues to play an extremely destabilizing role. The whole situation clearly demonstrates Washington's glaring double standards. Our American colleagues are trying to whitewash the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham terrorists, as designated by the Security Council, who control Idlib. The United States is condemning the authorities of Damascus and its allies for fighting Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. At the same time, the inhumane and bloody Israeli military operation against the civilian population of the Gaza Strip is being portrayed as a fight against Hamas, which is not recognized as a terrorist organization by the United Nations. The United States is trying to portray it as a fight against terrorism and the exercise of Israel's right to self-defence.

Despite the lack of alternatives to advancing the political process in the Syrian Arab Republic, led and implemented by the Syrians themselves, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015), the Syrian political track continues to stall. The resumption of the work of the Constitutional Committee, as the main platform for direct inter-Syrian dialogue, has encountered difficulties in finding a venue acceptable to the Syrians themselves. I would like to stress that this is, first and foremost, for the Syrians themselves and not for any external supporters of that process. If Mr. Pedersen believes that Geneva, which is not neutral anymore, will once again become acceptable to the Syrian parties, so be it. If not, we expect Mr. Pedersen to finally fully focus his efforts on finding a solution with regard to the venue for the next round of Constitutional Committee consultations without trying to impose any of his own preferences on the Syrian parties.

We note that the humanitarian situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. The reasons for that include the widespread destruction during the years of crisis and last year's earthquake on the Turkish border, as well as the suffocating illegal unilateral sanctions, the theft of the country's natural resources by occupying United States forces and the extreme politicization of the humanitarian dossier as a whole. The latter is seen, among other things, in the record low level of funding for the United Nations humanitarian response plans for Syria. Last year, less than 40 per cent of the necessary funds were raised. Needless to say, that is insufficient to cover even the basic needs of Syrians. The issue of early recovery in general is basically being sidelined from the humanitarian agenda by the United States and its allies. In that context, the absolute unscrupulousness of Western donors, who boast of their contributions to support the hosting of Syrian refugees in third countries, is extremely disappointing. Those refugees are essentially being condemned to live forever in tent cities, and their survival is becoming totally dependent on humanitarian assistance. That is instead of providing genuine assistance to Syria in developing and rebuilding its infrastructure so that refugees can return home as soon as possible.

We regret that, despite the Secretariat's timid attempts to address the problem, we have yet to see a recall of the Secretariat's internal guidelines "Parameters and Principles of UN assistance in Syria", which was pushed through by Western States, and which directly prohibits United Nations agencies on the ground from engaging in reconstruction efforts. Consequently, under a completely politicized pretext, Syrians are being denied early restoration of water and electricity supplies, schools and hospitals, in other words, everything that is of crucial importance, including for the return of refugees. By prioritizing political considerations in that situation, Western countries are planting a ticking social time bomb and risk creating a refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe.

The Idlib terrorist enclave remains exceptionally attractive to Western donors. Despite the fact that it is controlled by Security Council-listed thugs Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, humanitarian operations there are consistently funded. Against the background of the situation with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the still unproven involvement of its staff in the Hamas attack, that appears to be yet another inhumane display of double standards. How else could that paradox be explained other than by Western States' blatant disregard for the lives and destinies of ordinary Syrians?

The situation of humanitarian access is also telling. Since last year's earthquake, Damascus has shown goodwill and responsible behaviour and continues to renew permits for the United Nations to use three border crossings on the border with Türkiye — Bab Al-Salamah, Al-Rai and Bab Al-Hawa. It also approves

United Nations requests for missions via a simplified procedure. Nonetheless, cross-line access to Idlib and other areas in northern Syria is still lacking. We understand that the Syrian Government has still not been informed in detail of the activities of the United Nations humanitarian workers in the uncontrolled territories in the north-west of its country. The boiler plate responses given just to check the boxes do not count. It turns out that, despite the fact that resolution 2672 (2023) on the cross-border mechanism was not renewed, the United Nations has not abandoned its attempts to bypass Damascus. We stress that the Syrian Government has every right to receive comprehensive reports on the movements of humanitarian workers, in particular in Idlib. That work must be meticulously coordinated. We call on OCHA not to shirk its responsibilities and to fully implement its mandate, as set out in General Assembly resolution 46/182, to coordinate and ensure humanitarian activities in any part of Syria with the official authorities in Damascus.

The issuance of a special report on the impact of sanctions on humanitarian activities in the Syrian Arab Republic remains necessary. We recall that the preparation of such reports, regardless of whether or not they please Western donors, is now the direct responsibility of the United Nations Resident Coordinator system, which stems directly from the General Assembly resolution entitled "Unilateral economic measures as a means of political and economic coercion against developing countries". That resolution explicitly instructs the Secretary-General, in conjunction with resident coordinators and country teams, to monitor the impact of unilateral measures in sanctioned countries, including the impact on trade and development. We hope such a document will soon be available.

Mr. Žbogar (Slovenia): I would like to thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths for their briefings and their continuous commitment to peace and the people of Syria.

While most of the current international attention is rightfully focused on Gaza, we must not forget the plight of the Syrian people. They have endured 13 years of war, perpetual displacement, terrorism and a deteriorating security, economic, human rights and humanitarian situation without a sign of relief, and today's briefing testifies to their continuous agony.

We remain concerned over the escalation of violence across the region, which only adds to the complexity of the crisis in Syria, as reported by Special Representative of the Secretary-General Pedersen. It underscores once again the immediate urgency for a political solution in Syria.

We support continuous efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen to further the political process towards a path of sustainable peace. We believe him that he left no stone unturned, and therefore, we support his invitation to the parties. Waiting idyll is not an option, as the crisis is increasingly unmanageable.

We strongly urge all to fully and substantively engage and collaborate with the Special Envoy with a view to relaunching a political process, and we welcome the engagement of women in that process. We call on all parties to respect international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law, and to focus on de-escalation across Syria and beyond. That is essential in moving towards a much-needed nationwide ceasefire.

Accountability for gross human rights violations and justice for survivors are vital components of a comprehensive and inclusive political solution. Slovenia continues to support efforts to gather and preserve evidence with a view to future legal action, including by the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 and the Commission of Inquiry on Syria.

Without a prospect of a political solution, the already dire humanitarian conditions are worsening. We recognize the current crisis continues to generate humanitarian needs unparalleled in scale, severity and complexity. A trend of an increasing population depending on international humanitarian assistance is not sustainable. And, of course, humanitarian assistance is and should not be limited to so-called Western donors alone. I think we are open to all countries contributing to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Syria.

On top of that, the disruption of access to education is already having a dramatic impact on children, leaving generations of children without education.

The Syrian Government's decision to extend the use of the three border crossings to deliver humanitarian

assistance is a welcome step. However, considering the scale of humanitarian needs, it is important to ensure sustainable aid flows across the whole of Syria as long as needed. It is urgent to utilize and scale up all modalities of delivery, including cross-border and cross-line.

Given the continued hostilities, insecurity and instability, the conditions for the dignified, safe and voluntary return of internally displaced people and refugees are not yet in place. We are appalled by the findings in the recent report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/54/58) that many returnees to Syria have been subjected to gross human rights violations and abuses. That is unacceptable and must stop.

We welcome the recent report of the Secretary-General on the progress towards the full functioning of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (A/78/627), and we stand ready to support the Independent Institution as it moves to begin substantive work in future.

Mr. Bendjama (Algeria): I am honoured to speak on behalf of Guyana and the three African members of the Council, namely, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and my own country, Algeria (A3+).

We are grateful to Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Griffiths for their insightful briefings and would like to assure them of our continued support.

We are deeply concerned about the fact that despite the more than 13 years that have passed since the start of the crisis in Syria, the Syrian people are still suffering, and millions remain forcibly displaced. We are equally worried about the rising violence and deteriorating humanitarian conditions and security situation in Syria. I would like to emphasize that the A3+ firmly maintains that the only way to achieve a resolution of the Syrian crisis is by political means. We therefore advocate for a Syrian-led and -owned political process that emphasizes the unity, independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria, including the Golan Heights.

We support Mr. Pedersen's efforts and engagement, including those related to building confidence through a step-for-step approach. We also call on all the relevant actors to assist him in facilitating discussion and negotiation between the Syrians, in line with resolution 2254 (2015). The A3+ eagerly anticipates the ninth meeting of the Constitutional Committee and stresses the importance of ensuring that the Committee makes progress on the political track. At this crucial juncture, we emphasize the need for an inclusive process with the full participation of women and civil society, and we hope that all obstacles will be removed and the pending issues resolved so that Syria can soon advance its peacebuilding and national development. We are deeply concerned about the escalating violence, particularly in northern Syria, and we call for a nationwide ceasefire.

Coordination among regional countries to combat terrorism is essential, especially in view of the recent increase in attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. We call for taking decisive action in the fight against terrorism with a view to restoring State authority, security and stability in Syria. Moreover, the risk of regional spillover from the situation in Gaza is also a threat to Syria's stability. We call for respect for Syria's sovereignty and for restraint so as to avoid further escalation.

More than a year after the earthquake in Syria and Türkiye, the humanitarian situation remains dire, worsened by the economic crisis resulting from the conflict and by unilateral sanctions. According to the 2024 humanitarian needs overview, an estimated 16.7 million people — 75 per cent of whom are women and children — still require humanitarian assistance. We stress the urgent need to address the serious shortfall in the humanitarian response plan. In order to ensure the successful delivery of humanitarian aid, we urge donors to fulfil their pledges for relief, livelihood assistance and early recovery, as well as development projects addressing humanitarian needs.

Respect for the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence is crucial where humanitarian action is concerned. We welcome the Syrian Government's decision to extend its authorization for the United Nations and its specialized agencies to operate through the Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai border crossings, providing greater predictability for their operations. Cross-border aid is vital, and we emphasize the need to explore all humanitarian paths, including cross-border and cross-line mechanisms, for full, timely and unhindered humanitarian access. We call on the international community to support the Syrian and United Nations efforts to rehabilitate infrastructure and restore basic services, thereby facilitating the voluntary, dignified and safe return of refugees and internally displaced

persons, and we urge all the parties to fulfil their legal obligations in that regard. We welcome the agreement between Syria and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on returnees, announced during the seventy-fourth session of the Executive Committee of UNHCR.

While the world is focused on the situation in Gaza, let us not forget Syria. The situation there is volatile, and we must move from managing the crisis to resolving it. Let us set aside our political differences and work together for the benefit of Syria. The Syrian people deserve to live in peace, prosperity and stability.

Mr. De La Rivière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Griffiths for their briefings.

Allow me to highlight three points. In two weeks, it will have been 14 years since the Syrian people rose up peacefully to demand freedom and dignity. And for 14 years, the regime in Damascus has remained deaf to their legitimate aspirations. Violence and human rights violations are committed against the population, and it is impossible for millions of refugees to return to their country. All that is still the sad reality. In that context, only a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015), which the Security Council adopted unanimously, can provide Syrians the lasting peace they need. France reiterates its full support for Geir Pedersen and his efforts. All aspects of the resolution must be implemented in order to achieve such a solution within the framework of his mediation efforts. I repeat that as long as no tangible progress has been made on the political front, we have no intention of financing reconstruction efforts to repair the damage caused by the regime and its allies, or of lifting sanctions. But those sanctions are reversible, and their status depends on real progress being achieved in the political process. It is now up to Bashar Al-Assad to take the necessary steps to have them lifted.

The lack of a political solution is compounded by the consequences of the crisis in Gaza. The international focus on Syria must be maintained, as any unresolved crises will prevent a return to lasting stability in the region. The example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows this today: there will be no peace in Syria until the root causes of the conflict are addressed. The Syrian people would be the first victims of a Syria destabilized by regional tensions. France is committed to preventing an escalation. All regional players must demonstrate responsibility and exercise restraint.

Thirdly, the escalation of violence under way is exacerbating an already catastrophic humanitarian situation. Recent strikes have led to the further displacement of civilians and destruction of essential infrastructure. The Syrian people have already suffered enough. We must therefore remain mobilized to meet the needs of more than 15 million people. The regime's responsibility for the current crisis is glaringly evident. The diversion of aid and the restrictions imposed on humanitarian operations are unacceptable. I would also like to say a word about the ongoing military operations in the Al-Hol camp, which are preventing humanitarian actors from carrying out their activities. It is essential for those activities to resume. In Syria, as in Gaza, international humanitarian law must be respected.

Mr. Hwang (Republic of Korea): To begin, I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths for their detailed briefings today.

As explained in the briefings, the current political and humanitarian situation in Syria has shown no improvement at all. At the same time, regional tensions around Syria have been dangerously heightened. The ongoing situation in Gaza poses a constant threat of spillover into Syria. We are witnessing daily exchanges of fire in various parts of Syria and repeated air strikes on major Syrian cities. The escalating conflict along the Blue Line is further compounding the dangerous pressure in the Golan Heights. Attacks by various Syrian and other actors are pushing Syria to the brink of an even deeper conflict. We strongly urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint and to take all necessary measures to protect civilians. In addition, collective counter-terrorism efforts by the global community must also be sustained and solidified in order to avert any re-emergence of Da'esh in Syria, which could further destabilize and terrorize Syria and its neighbours.

This month marks the first anniversary of the devastating earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye. Tragically, the humanitarian reality in Syria, where 70 per cent of the entire population is in need of humanitarian assistance, has not improved, and we see no end in sight. In this light, it is vital for every possible humanitarian access point to remain open. The Republic of Korea welcomes the opening of the Bab

Al-Salamah and Al-Rai border crossings for another three months.

My delegation shares the common view of the international community that the only sustainable solution to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis is a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political process under United Nations auspices and in line with resolution 2254 (2015), with the meaningful participation of women. In that regard, the Republic of Korea would like to express its sincere support and appreciation for the Special Envoy's tireless efforts to advance the political process, including his endeavours for step-by-step confidence-building measures.

Creating the conditions for the safe return of Syrian refugees is important in this context. It is therefore highly concerning that, according to a recent report (A/HRC/54/58) by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Syrian returnees are stigmatized and suffering human rights violations and abuses, including arbitrary detentions.

We also support the Special Envoy's ongoing work to reconvene the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The issue of a venue should not remain a primary stumbling block. All parties must promptly answer the Special Envoy's call for a resumption of the long-overdue political process.

The bleak situation that has continued for the past 13 years in Syria has shown scant movement towards a solution. However, in order to induce any positive momentum forward, dialogue needs to serve as the starting point. The Republic of Korea believes that the Constitutional Committee can and must lay the groundwork for the political transition in Syria and a brighter future for the Syrian people.

Mr. De La Gasca (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I am grateful for the information provided by Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. I welcome the presence of the Permanent Representatives of Syria, Iran and Türkiye in this morning's meeting.

Ecuador recognizes the Special Envoy's efforts to build confidence and renew the political will of all actors involved, with a view to restarting the multi-stakeholder and substantive dialogue processes, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). My delegation hopes that the deadlock in the political negotiations can be overcome and for successful discussions on a new venue for the Constitutional Committee in order for the Committee to be reconvened. A further stalling of those talks would give rise to a sense of hopelessness and abandonment, primarily among the civilian population.

The security situation in Syria is alarming. That is why we join Mr. Pedersen's call for maximum restraint and a de-escalation of violence in order to implement strategies that are based on constructive dialogue, diplomacy for peace and a genuine concern for the effects of this protracted war on the civilian population.

My delegation is concerned about the deterioration of humanitarian and economic indicators for the Syrian people. The collapse of basic services, the increase in cases of cholera and the increase in the number of people suffering from food insecurity, in addition to the destruction of schools, hospitals and other critical infrastructure, are detrimental to international humanitarian law and human rights.

The extremely vulnerable conditions faced by displaced Syrians in neighbouring countries — especially women, children and persons with disabilities — are one of the reasons why the Security Council must continue to closely examine the situation in Syria. We reiterate the need for the Syrian Government to respond to the demands of the families of missing and arbitrarily detained persons and provide reliable information on their whereabouts, in accordance with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015).

In this complex situation, it is essential to counteract the financial and operational difficulties faced by humanitarian agencies on the ground. Ecuador recognizes the Government's decision to keep the Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai border crossings open to facilitate humanitarian access.

Finally, I emphasize the urgency of finding a political solution to the crisis in Syria that is conducive to national reconciliation and development cooperation, in order to help the Syrian people to overcome the gravity of the humanitarian situation they are facing.

Mr. Yamanaka (Japan): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for sharing their valuable updates on the situation.

This month we mark one year since the earthquakes that struck Türkiye and Syria, an event whose tragic consequences still reverberate in local communities. For those on the Syrian side of the border, the disaster

came on top of a conflict that is now approaching its fourteenth year. Today Syria still finds itself in the largest displacement crisis in the world, with approximately 5.1 million refugees and 6.8 million internally displaced persons, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The necessary conditions for the safe, dignified and voluntary return of refugees still do not exist. Cities destroyed by the war remain in ruins, and the humanitarian situation continues to be devastating. It is predicted that the number of Syrians in need of assistance this year will reach a record 16.7 million.

Japan welcomes the Syrian Government's decision to extend its authorization for the use of the Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai crossings for an additional three months, until May. Humanitarian assistance through all modalities, including cross-line, is a lifeline for more than 4 million people in the north-west. Meanwhile, violence and instability persist, and hostilities are on the rise. Just a few days ago there was a missile attack on a residential building in Damascus. Japan calls on all the relevant parties to refrain from taking any escalatory actions and to comply with their obligations under international law.

Syria deserves more attention from the international community. While we recognize the efforts being made in the region to resolve the crisis in the country, we are very much hoping to see renewed momentum. Regrettably, however, there has been little progress on the political track. The Constitutional Committee remains deadlocked and has not convened since June 2022. Japan encourages all the parties concerned to agree on a venue as soon as possible so that we can advance the Syrian-led and -owned political process. In that vein, we hope that Special Envoy Pedersen's next visit to Damascus will be fruitful. His step-for-step approach remains the best way forward for implementing all aspects of resolution 2254 (2015).

Justice and accountability are crucial elements to achieving lasting peace and stability in Syria. We once again highlight the importance of resolving the issue of the country's more than 100,000 missing persons, whose loved ones deserve to know their fate. We look forward to receiving more updates on the work of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic to clarify their whereabouts.

To conclude, this conflict and its devastating humanitarian effects require our undivided attention. The region is already inflamed, but we must keep Syria high on our agenda and work to alleviate its people's pain and suffering. Millions are counting on us. Japan will work with its fellow Security Council members to keep the spirit of a comprehensive political solution alive.

Mrs. Frazier (Malta): I too thank Mr. Pedersen and Mr. Griffiths for their important remarks.

Malta remains deeply concerned about the multitude of protracted and ever-deteriorating political and humanitarian crises across Syria. As the fourteenth year of this conflict approaches, the regional tensions and the danger of outright escalation could not be higher. The United Nations projects that 16.7 million people will require humanitarian assistance in 2024 — the highest number on record. Since our last meeting, dozens of civilians have been killed or wounded by artillery shelling, air strikes and direct clashes in the northern areas. The multitude of military and non-State armed groups in Syria are perpetuating the chronic destabilization that the population has felt for almost a decade and a half.

Malta welcomes Damascus's extension of its authorization for the use of the humanitarian crossings at Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai for an additional three months. We also call for progress on the cross-line operations in the north-west. Humanitarian operations must be free from political considerations, and all the crossings should remain functional as long as humanitarian needs are present. We note the major funding challenges in the United Nations humanitarian response in Syria. Once again, we underscore the need for greater funding for early recovery, resilience and livelihoods in order to ensure the functioning and rehabilitation of essential civilian infrastructure.

It has become clearer than ever that there can be no military solution to this conflict. A political settlement in line with resolution 2254 (2015) is the only way forward. Malta reiterates its support for the tireless efforts of the Special Envoy, and we encourage Damascus to engage constructively and tangibly with his step-for-step initiative. We hope to hear of progress made on that after the Special Envoy's visit to Syria next month. We also hope to hear news of positive developments related to the Syrian Constitutional Committee. Objections regarding the venue have caused unacceptable delays for too long. The Syrian parties must return to the negotiating table and make

immediate headway. Putting peace on hold will be to the detriment of millions.

Malta notes with great concern the findings of the latest report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Syria (A/HRC/54/58) relating to the dire protection concerns that Syrian returnees have been facing. The report details a pattern where Syrian returnees are met with gross human rights violations and abuses on their return to Syria. The absence of the rule of law, an economic crisis of seismic proportions, the lack of functioning basic infrastructure and widespread violence make life in Syria nearly impossible for millions. All of those factors have also had a severe impact on children's access to education. We call on all the parties to safeguard, protect and promote children's right to quality education. We also stress that the return of Syrian refugees and the internally displaced must be safe, voluntary and dignified. We reject any attempts to force Syrians to return, which again puts them in great danger in the areas they previously fled. Moreover, issues related to land and housing rights, access to civil documentation and the serious gendered issues faced by female returnees present a major challenge.

In conclusion, we again call for a nationwide ceasefire in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and for the regional parties to the conflict in Syria to exercise maximum restraint. At a time of grave tensions and hostilities in the region, all diplomatic efforts must be aimed at ensuring that the root causes of the conflict are addressed and that a widespread halt to the fighting can take effect.

Dame Barbara Woodward (United Kingdom): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings today. Like others, we recall the devastating effects of the earthquakes one year ago and offer our condolences to those affected.

For 13 years, this conflict has ground on. To make meaningful progress on Syria we must see three changes.

First, we want Syria to stop its destabilizing activity. Its readmission to the League of Arab States last year was an opportunity for the regime to play a more constructive role in the region. But we have not seen that change. In particular, the regime continues to generate vast profits producing and selling Captagon. With the support of Iranian-affiliated groups, that trade is becoming ever more organized, violent and destabilizing. That dangerous activity, which puts our partners in the region at risk, must stop.

Secondly, we must act to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Around 72 per cent of the population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. In the north-east, more than a million people have been cut off from electricity. We continue to call for sustained, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access to people in need across Syria, including in the north-west, and we call on all parties to stop escalating activities.

For our part, the United Kingdom is investing in early-recovery interventions so that ordinary Syrians have the means to build a better future. In 2023 we dedicated over 40 per cent of our aid budget to early-recovery and livelihoods projects. For example, rather than handing out food parcels, we are fixing irrigation and drainage systems so that Syrian farmers can produce more food themselves.

Thirdly, we call on all authorities in Syria to protect fundamental human rights. We are concerned about reports of the proposed "public morality law" of the de facto authorities in Idlib. If implemented, this law could significantly affect women's rights and freedom of expression. We are monitoring the situation closely and urge partners to use their influence to uphold human rights.

In conclusion, we underline our continued support for the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen and welcome his extensive efforts to organize a meeting of the Constitutional Committee. It is welcome news that he is today issuing invitations for a meeting in Geneva in April, and we call on the Al-Assad regime to engage in this process. Syrians deserve sustainable peace and stability and a solution to this long-running conflict. Resolution 2254 (2015) is the only route out of this conflict.

Mr. Dai Bing (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings. In the light of their briefings, I would like to make the following three points.

First, we must contain the spillover effects of the escalation of the Gaza conflict on Syria. China is deeply concerned about the fact that over the past four months, Israel has continued to launch air strikes on various locations in Syria, through the occupied Golan Heights. We call on all parties to exercise restraint and

to refrain from exacerbating tensions. Major countries outside the region should play a constructive role in de-escalating the situation and preventing the conflict from spreading and expanding.

Secondly, we must promote a political solution to the Syrian issue. China welcomes the successful convening of the twenty-first meeting under the Astana format on Syria and Special Envoy Pedersen's extensive engagement with all parties on the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015). The international community should uphold the principle of "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned", encourage dialogue and consultations and find a solution that is acceptable to all parties. We believe that assistance from countries in the region will help to inject new momentum into the political settlement of the Syrian issue. We support the Syrian Government in taking the necessary measures to combat terrorism, maintain security and stability and eliminate long-term threats to the political process in Syria. The international community must combat all terrorism in Syria, with a zero-tolerance approach.

Thirdly, we must work together to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Over the past year, the United Nations and the Syrian Government have maintained effective and smooth communication, and the authorization for cross-border relief points has been extended several times. We urge the parties concerned to show sincerity and make positive progress in cross-line relief operations. As humanitarian funding for Syria has long been insufficient, the international community should increase its input in humanitarian assistance to Syria and support humanitarian operations and early-recovery projects throughout the country.

Unilateral sanctions and the plundering of resources have long impeded Syria's economic recovery, social development and improvement in people's livelihoods, thereby exacerbating the humanitarian disaster in the country. We urge the countries concerned to put an immediate end to their unlawful acts, and foreign forces to put an immediate end to their illegal military presence in Syria.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Aldahhak (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): For more than 140 days, the entire world has borne witness to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide being committed by the Israeli occupation authorities against the Palestinian people. Regrettably, the Security Council is paralysed, because one Council member has prevented it from carrying out its responsibility to maintain peace and security in our region. The United States has used the veto four times to prevent the condemnation of Israeli acts of aggression, in order not to stop them, in flagrant disregard of the will of Council members in particular and the wider United Nations membership in general.

In a vicious endeavour to broaden and escalate tensions in our region, the Israeli occupation authorities persist in their attacks on Syrian territories, targeting residential buildings and civilian homes. The most recent of those attacks was an air strike on 21 February targeting a residential building in the Kafr Sousa neighbourhood of Damascus, the capital. As a result, martyrs have fallen, many civilians have been injured, and significant damage has been done to private property.

I listened to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen's briefing and reiterate that the Syrian Government will continue its cooperation with him, in his capacity as a facilitator of the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process. It is a process that must continue without any foreign interference. We look forward to his visit to Damascus next month. In that connection, I note that we have submitted a constructive proposal to him, in relation to convening the ninth session of the Constitutional Committee. We wish him every success in his efforts.

The Syrian Government also continues its counter-terrorism efforts to end the threat caused by terrorism to Syrians. At the same time, the Government is making every effort to address the living challenges faced by its citizens, which are essentially the result of the illegitimate unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States and other Western States against the Syrian people.

The Astana format has recently convened its twenty-first meeting. At the end of that meeting, the guarantor States underscored respect for the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and unity of Syria. They also condemned the Israeli attacks, the unilateral sanctions and the coercive measures. The guarantor States also stressed the need to combat terrorism, to create conditions that are conducive to the return of refugees and to reject separatist agendas and the exploitation and the illicit transfer of Syrian oil.

In that context, my country's delegation would like to thank both Russia and Iran for their contributions

in ensuring success for that meeting. It calls upon Türkiye to fulfil its commitments under the Astana and Sochi agreements and to withdraw its troops that are unlawfully present in Syria.

I listened attentively to Mr. Martin Griffiths' briefing on the humanitarian situation. I assure him that Syria continues to seriously and constructively cooperate with the United Nations, its specialized agencies and other humanitarian partners in order to improve Syrians' humanitarian situation and promote their resilience and livelihoods, including by focusing on early-recovery projects, and to provide support to those affected by the earthquake, which marks its first anniversary this month.

In order to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Syrian civilians in need of it in the areas of north-west Syria that remain under the control of terrorist groups and the illegal administrative structures affiliated with them, the Government has extended its authorization for the United Nations to use three border crossings to deliver humanitarian assistance to those areas. We have also extended the authorization of the use of the Saraqib and Sarmada crossings to deliver aid to those areas from inside Syria. In that context, my delegation once again calls on the United Nations to urgently put in place an effective monitoring mechanism to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches civilians in need rather than terrorist groups. We condemn those who ignore the terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's plundering and diversion of humanitarian aid, thereby denying civilians access to it. We also stress the need to review the structure of humanitarian aid throughout Syria so that no further resources are wasted on funding unnecessary offices. And we emphasize the importance of restoring the full role and mandate of the United Nations in Syria.

The constructive dialogue and cooperation between the Syrian Government and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) led to a shared understanding, announced during the seventy-fourth session of the UNHCR Executive Committee, highlighting the measures taken by the Syrian Government to create an environment conducive to the return of Syrian refugees and migrants to their homes. Those measures include issuing pardons, ensuring that conciliatory and reconciliatory approaches are taken, establishing regulatory and legislative infrastructure, facilitating the issuance of documents and more.

Any progress in the rate of refugees' voluntary return and in carrying out the United Nations humanitarian and development mandate in Syria has been limited or obstructed by the continued imposition of unilateral coercive measures by Western countries, the United States' systematic looting of Syria's wealth and economic resources, the continued unlawful military presence of United States and Turkish forces on Syrian territory, Türkiye's targeting of the Allouk water station and refusal to allow the United Nations to repair power installations, which has denied Syrians in Hasakah province access to water, as well as repeated attacks by Israel. The same Western States continue to tie humanitarian aid to political conditions and have failed to fulfil their commitments, leaving humanitarian efforts severely underfunded. That has been disturbingly reflected in a decline in funding for the World Food Programme.

The Syrian Arab Republic believes that constructive dialogue is the foundation of international relations, and that building friendly relations among States depends on full respect for their sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and on refraining from interference in their internal affairs. Syria therefore extends its hand to those who want the best for Syria and the Syrian people. We will spare no effort to restore security and stability throughout our land, end the suffering of our people and restore our development achievements.

While I do not want to dwell on the matter, I would like to respond to the statement by the representative of the United States and his false and groundless allegations and accusations.

First, in order to address the situation of the people who remain in Rukban camp, the United States must end its occupation of the Al-Tanf region, as well as the training and sponsorship that the occupation forces provide to the terrorist groups that are active there.

Secondly, drug trafficking, like other illicit forms of trafficking, systematic looting and the smuggling of oil, monuments and other Syrian resources, are all crimes perpetrated by the United States occupation forces, the terrorist groups affiliated with them and the militias that are their agents. For its part, the Syrian Government spares no effort to cooperate with its neighbours to address and combat drug trafficking and has made major achievements in that area.

Thirdly, as to the call by the representative of the United States for a so-called ceasefire, I would

suggest he call on his Administration — or rather his regime, to use his term — and its affiliate, Israel, to cease their attacks on Syria and end their occupation of Syrian territories and their sponsorship of terrorist organizations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Iravani (Islamic Republic of Iran): We thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Under-Secretary-General Griffiths for their briefings.

Despite a calm security atmosphere, Syria continues to face serious challenges, the most serious being the foreign forces occupying parts of the country, the groups that the Security Council has designated as terrorist that control certain areas, and the Israeli regime's ongoing aggression against Syria, in flagrant violation of international law. Israel's continued missile attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure have further complicated the situation in Syria, disrupting humanitarian activities and humanitarian access. We strongly condemn the Israeli regime for those blatant violations.

We have always said that the crisis in Syria must be resolved peacefully, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and international law, as well as with full respect for the independence, national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. Within that context, we believe that all the foreign forces illegally present in Syria should be forced to leave without preconditions or delay. Terrorist groups must not be allowed to continue using millions of civilians as human shields to carry out their heinous activities, and the Israeli regime must be forced to end its aggression against Syria. The Security Council must live up to its responsibilities and ensure Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria remains dire, and the Syrian people are suffering from profound economic challenges. The United Nations estimates that 15.3 million of Syria's 23.2 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance this year. Despite the efforts of the United Nations and its humanitarian partners to deliver essential aid to those in need, the continuing impact of illegal unilateral sanctions, as well as the politicization of humanitarian aid, places a disproportionate burden on the Syrian people, including women and children. Imposing unilateral sanctions on the people while claiming concern for their humanitarian plight is simply hypocritical. Such illegal and disruptive measures must end immediately. Nor should humanitarian assistance and reconstruction initiatives in Syria be used as tools to put political pressure on the Syrian Government.

We appreciate and recognize the efforts by the Syrian Arab Republic to support and facilitate humanitarian access throughout Syria. Iran welcomes the sovereign decision of the Syrian Government to renew the permission granted to the United Nations and its specialized agencies to use the Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai crossings for another six and three months, respectively. We emphasize the need for unhindered humanitarian access, especially through cross-line and in full coordination with the Government of Syria.

Likewise, we emphasize the importance of the early-recovery projects, which are critical to strengthening Syrians' resilience and allowing displaced people to return home. Unfortunately, those projects are not being funded or implemented due to the detrimental effects of unilateral coercive measures. We once again condemn the robbery of Syrian people's natural resources in areas occupied by the United States forces.

To ensure a more effective political solution to the Syrian crisis, we continue to emphasize that a Syrian-led and -owned political process, facilitated by the United Nations, is the only viable approach to ending the crisis. We support the resumption of the meetings of the Constitutional Committee as an effective mechanism for advancing the political process. The continued functioning of the Committee is vital, with its venue being of lesser importance.

The Iraqi Government has shown its willingness to host the upcoming round of meetings in Baghdad, which was positively welcomed by both the Syrian Government and the Astana guarantors. We urge all other parties involved to seize this opportunity and prioritize substantive discussions over procedural matters.

Along with its Astana format partners, Iran is committed to working towards long-term and sustainable normalization in and around Syria. That commitment was renewed once more during the recent meeting of the Astana format, which took place on 24 and 25 January. We express our support for the continuation of the Syrian-Turkish dialogue as part of that effort.

Iran also supports efforts and cooperation within the Astana format to reveal the fate of missing persons. It is also of the utmost importance to make every possible effort to facilitate the safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees to their homeland and to meet their humanitarian needs.

Lastly, we are maintaining contact with the Syrian Government, the Special Envoy and our partners in the Astana format in order to end the crisis and alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people as soon as possible.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Türkiye.

Mrs. Özgür (Türkiye): In this critical period, as we approach the thirteenth year of the Syrian conflict, we need realism, above all, in order to put this conflict on a path to settlement. It is high time for all relevant actors to do a realistic fact check of the situation.

First, the Syrian conflict is not over. On the contrary, it is in dire need of a political solution that is in line with the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. We continue to see examples of how problems can flare up and get out of control if the root causes are not duly addressed. In the Syrian context, to overcome the current impasse and to revitalize the political process, two critical steps are urgently needed — one, a Syrian regime must adopt substantive and verifiable confidence-building measures in coordination with the international community, and two, the Constitutional Committee should be convened, under the auspices of the United Nations, without any further delay.

The Syrian opposition has once again displayed its commitment to the political process by accepting Special Envoy Pedersen's proposal to hold the Committee's meetings at the United Nations Office in Nairobi for an interim period until the Committee goes back to Geneva, its authentic venue. That positive step by the Syrian opposition must be reciprocated. We should all join forces so that the Constitutional Committee is not further blocked over the venue issue.

Secondly, if we cannot put the Syrian conflict on track for a solution by revitalizing the political process, the severe problems facing the country, especially the deteriorating humanitarian and deep economic crises, will not disappear on their own. The multiple challenges facing Syria in the political, security, humanitarian and economic arenas are interconnected and growing exponentially as the conflict lingers. Moreover, developments in Gaza and the wider region run the risk of dragging Syria into a very dangerous course. It is therefore more important than ever to keep the situation in Syria under control.

Thirdly, a Syria at peace with itself and in its region will be possible only through national reconciliation, where the opposition is a building block of the political process and refugees are able to return to their country and contribute to its rebuilding. With around 6 million refugees and a further 7 million internally displaced people, Syria continues to be the world's largest displacement crisis. That has serious repercussions for the host countries of the region, including my own. Therefore creating conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrians must be part and parcel of the settlement process.

Fourthly, ongoing attacks in north-west Syria have caused civilian casualties, increased tensions and further deteriorated the humanitarian situation in the area. Those attacks must stop and calm must be restored on the ground. In accordance with relevant memorandums, Türkiye will continue its efforts to de-escalate the situation, protect civilians, prevent new waves of forced displacement, facilitate the unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid and, overall, ensure that a ceasefire is observed in the Idlib de-escalation area.

Fifthly, resolution 2254 (2015) begins by reaffirming our strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria. Yet today Syria's territorial integrity and unity is under an unprecedented threat due to the separatist agenda of the Kurdistan Workers' Party/Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat/People's Protection Units (PKK/PYD/YPG) terrorist organization and its offshoot, the so-called "Syrian Democratic Forces". The presence of PKK/YPG in Syria, right across our borders, also constitutes a vital threat to Türkiye's national security. That terrorist organization has been using its presence in Syria to attack Türkiye. Our fight against terrorism is resolute. We also underline once again that further empowering terrorist organizations in Syria through capacity-building will only lead to an escalating cycle of violence in the country and threaten its territorial integrity.

We need a holistic, international approach to Syria through which various aspects of those problems are addressed simultaneously. It is clear that, thus far, conditional or sequential approaches between different dimensions of the Syrian crisis have not brought the

desired results and are indeed doomed to fail. Piecemeal policies also run counter to resolution 2254 (2015) and can do more harm than good to long-term stability in the region.

We see that the humanitarian situation in Syria has moved down on the international agenda, as attention has recently turned to other crises, primarily Gaza. It is, however, crucial to stress that this shift does not derive from an improvement in the humanitarian situation on the ground in Syria. On the contrary, humanitarian needs continue unabated, given the overall situation in the country, with close to 17 million Syrians assessed to be in need of humanitarian assistance and protection this year. Earlier this month marked the anniversary of the 6 February earthquakes, which caused great destruction in north-west Syria, further increasing humanitarian needs. The extension of the use of Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salamah and Al-Rai border crossings for United Nations aid deliveries has provided temporary relief for the humanitarian community. However, the negative impacts of major cuts in funding for cross-border operations are easily discernible through a sharp decrease in the number of trucks passing through those crossings. Those cuts could soon lead to significant additional challenges, not only for Syria but also for Europe and the international community as a whole.

United Nations cross-border humanitarian assistance remains a lifeline for the Syrians in the north-west. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to preserve all modalities of that unique and vital operation. That would also ensure that the diminished and restricted available resources are used more efficiently.

With regard to the reference to the Allouk water station, the reasons for the problem are well known. The Allouk station operates on electrical power coming from the Al-Darbasiyah transformer. The electrical power disruptions from Al-Darbasiyah, which is under the control of the PKK/YPG terrorist organization, impede the proper functioning of the Allouk water station.

Last year in late August, a United Nations Children's Fund team and representatives from the Al-Hasakah water directorate conducted various technical work on Allouk station.

We continue to stress the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach in addressing the water and electricity problems in northern Syria.

In conclusion, Türkiye stands ready to support initiatives towards finding a lasting political solution in Syria and addressing the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people.

The President: The representative of the United States has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I apologize for taking the floor, but I need to respond to some remarks made by the representative of the Al-Assad regime. He asserted that the United States is looting Syria's oil and other resources. That is utter nonsense. That is clearly a tactic that comes from the Russian playbook wherein one tells a lie and says it as often as possible and maybe people will begin to believe it.

As everyone in this Chamber knows, United States forces are in the region to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham. However, we have been very clear that, if our forces are attacked, we will take the necessary response to defend ourselves.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.50 a.m.