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High Commissioner Türk on Syria: The transition needs to be fair, inclusive and responsive to people's needs

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First of all, thank you very much, and it's a great pleasure to join you remotely from Geneva.

Excellencies,

Dear co-sponsors,

Distinguished participants,

I want to acknowledge in particular and honour those who are present in the room: those who have lost their loved ones and who are looking for their loved ones. Your fate is extremely important for all of us in the United Nations.

For much too long, Syria has been associated with conflict, with suffering, and the displacement of millions of its people.

The country's deeper story is one of ancient civilisations, rich diversity, and resilience. This history and legacy are inseparable from its present and its future.

Nineteen months after the fall of the former regime, following decades of repression, killings, torture and enforced disappearances, Syrians are feeling a mix of exhaustion, relief and hope.

Their expectations are high on many fronts. They are also clamouring for justice, for accountability, and transparency.

The fractured social contract of the past needs to be rebuilt through trust in State institutions, dealing with the past, healing, and cohesion between communities. This requires meaningful reforms that deliver tangible improvements to people's daily lives.

We know from history that transitions are never easy, and they don't happen overnight. They require patience and perseverance.

And it is clear – and the Ambassador of Syria has just mentioned it – that the international community has an important role to play. Experience from other countries shows that when transitions fail, it is often because of either inadequate or excessive engagement by international players, and insufficient national ownership.

ready, there is an opportunity to get it right.

To do so, we need to focus on Syria's future – and it's clear that human rights are the foundation. They were very much the foundation for all those who struggle for freedom in Syria.

The security situation in the country remains fragile, with episodic outbreaks of inter-communal violence in parts of the country, and ongoing Israeli incursions in the south.

Economic hardship and delays in restoring basic services are heightening tensions, especially among internally displaced people and those who are returning from abroad.

Despite the lifting of some sanctions, the economy is still suffering from their impact over many years, combined with war and displacement. Some 90 per cent of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line. Up to 12 million Syrians have limited access to water and sanitation services.

Hate speech is fuelling communal tensions and fear, and frustrations are being directed at minority communities.

Against this complex background, I am encouraged by positive steps taken by the authorities, which can help lay the foundation for a more peaceful future.

The Government has started to reform institutions and to pursue accountability, including by addressing the fate of missing people.

The establishment of the Peoples' Assembly, the Constitutional Declaration, and security sector reform are important developments.

The prosecution of the former president and other officials – while at this stage largely in absentia – is an important step. These proceedings need to respect international standards; and more must follow.

Efforts to investigate and prosecute people allegedly responsible for attacks that took place in the coastal areas in March 2025 and in Suwayda in July 2025 are also welcome.

The fate of missing people is a crucial issue for Syria's future. And we have just heard it from all of you.

During my visit to the country in January last year – the first time ever that the High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Syria – I heard again and again from people seeking answers about the fate of their loved ones.

Their right to truth is essential for reconciliation and building trust in the State.

The National Commission for Transitional Justice and the National Commission for Missing Persons have a crucial role to play, and they will require sustained political, technical and financial support. And I look forward to hearing from them and from Karla Quintana who leads the UN's support to Syria on missing people.

I also welcome greater space for public debate, which is essential to counter hate speech and incitement to violence, and to rebuild social cohesion.

The Government's efforts to grant citizenship to stateless Kurds, to recognise linguistic diversity, and enable the return of displaced people to their homes are encouraging.

The return of some 1.7 million refugees and nearly two million internally displaced people to their homes is a welcome sign of growing confidence.

Excellencies,

It is absolutely key that the transition is fair, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all Syrians.

I see four areas for action where international support can make a difference.

First, national ownership, which is a prerequisite for successful transitions.

This requires a process centred on victims and survivors, including families of the missing, that listens to them, supports them to claim their rights, and addresses their needs. It is crucial to recognise the specific impact of the conflict on women and girls, including sexual violence, discrimination, trauma and more.

It is also important to ensure the meaningful participation of a broad cross-section of society working alongside public institutions, including women, civil society, young people, and affected communities. Not outside powers or donor governments, however well-intentioned.

Women-led groups have been the beacon of hope during the horrific years of war and remain so today. I have met many Syrian women in exile during my years with UNHCR. These women have not only documented violations and demanded justice – they have also offered ideas and solutions for rebuilding society. And their voices need to be heeded.

Second, accountability for violations before, during and since the war is essential – regardless of the perpetrator.

Steps towards justice need to fully respect international human rights standards, including due process and fair trial guarantees.

These efforts need to be part of a comprehensive process that includes effective remedies for victims.

The draft transitional justice law is an opportunity to ensure that victims are not left behind and that all crimes are addressed, regardless of when they occurred.

I urge all those with influence to support Syrian efforts towards accountability, which is how institutions earn legitimacy for the future.

Third, a successful transition requires meaningful attempts at non-judicial forms of truth-seeking, memorialization and national reconciliation.

Over more than five decades of repression, pain and loss, Syrians have learned better than most what justice, truth, and healing require.

That knowledge needs to inform the path ahead.

For families of missing people, establishing the truth about what happened to their loved ones is a crucial part of healing.

People need spaces where they can speak openly, listen to one another, acknowledge trauma and suffering, and imagine a shared vision for their country.

Fourth, people need institutions they can have confidence in.

This means strengthening the judicial system, law enforcement, public administration through institutional reform, due process and fair trial guarantees, and torture prevention, all based on international human rights standards.

The United Nations are there to provide support, and the United Nations need to offer a coherent, lean and effective architecture to back Syria's transitional justice process.

We need to approach this work with humility and patience, guided by the ingenuity and dynamism of the Syrian people.

During my visit in January 2025, the Syrian leadership assured me of the importance of respecting the human rights of all Syrians, as well as pursuing healing, trust-building and social cohesion.

My Office now has a team in Damascus that continues to engage with the authorities. We are providing legal and policy advice on the transitional justice framework, encouraging meaningful consultations with survivors and their families, and supporting economic policies that advance people's rights and improve their lives.

For victims, justice is not a nice-to-have. It is fundamental and deeply personal.

It is a recognition of their suffering.

It is the promise that what happened to them, and to their loved ones, will not happen again.

We all have a responsibility to uphold that promise and to help build a more peaceful and inclusive future for all Syrians.

Thank you very much.

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