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Provisional

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New York

President:	Mr. De La Gasca/Mr. Montalvo Sosa	(Ecuador)
Members:	Albania	Ms. Dautllari
	Brazil	Mr. França Danese
	China	Mr. Sun Zhiqiang
	France	Mrs. Broadhurst Estival
	Gabon	Mr. Biang
	Ghana	Mr. Agyeman
	Japan	Mr. Yamazaki
	Malta	Ms. Gatt
	Mozambique	Mr. Afonso
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Switzerland	Mrs. Baeriswyl
	United Arab Emirates	Mr. Abushahab
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Phipps
	United States of America	Mr. Wood

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): 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 Ms. Lisa Doughten, Director of the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

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

I give the floor to Mr. Pedersen.

Mr. Pedersen: The year 2023 has been another very difficult year for Syria, one that saw devastating earthquakes, humanitarian needs reaching new highs, the economy plummeting to new lows and the worst violence in three years. The year also saw new diplomatic openings, but they did not lead to tangible changes on the ground for the lives of Syrians. In short, this has been another tragic year for Syrian civilians, who were killed, injured, displaced, detained and abducted in alarming numbers and who saw no tangible moves towards a better future. Instead, on top of everything else, Syrians now face the danger of regional spillover, adding further fuel to the fire.

These past weeks have seen a reintensification of spillover effects from the developments in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. We have seen multiple air strikes, attributed to Israel, across Syria. The Syrian Government reported that Israeli air strikes rendered Damascus and Aleppo airports non-operational. Currently, only Latakia airport is functional, affecting both civilian air traffic and United Nations humanitarian operations. We have seen multiple reports of missiles launched from southern Syria over the occupied Syrian Golan towards Israel, and of Israel Defence Forces fire, and near-daily attacks on United States positions in north-east Syria.

And in parallel, violence in all theatres of Syria continues and is even escalating once again in some respects, with alarming reports of civilian casualties. In just the past few weeks, we have seen escalating violence in north-west Syria. Pro-government air strikes intensified, as did front-line clashes, with very serious incidents of shelling by government forces on Idlib. Intensified shelling was also carried out by listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and armed opposition forces, including on Nubl and Al-Zahraa in Aleppo. There were further drone attacks on government areas attributed to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham or other actors based in Idlib, which the Government says it intercepted. Turkish drone strikes took place amid intense artillery exchanges between Turkish and armed opposition forces on one side and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on the other. There has been a continued trend of attacks by some Arab tribes on SDF positions in Deir ez-Zor and now reports of government shelling on SDF positions as well. There have been continuing attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in the north-east and central desert region. The intensification of clashes between the Jordanian army and smugglers on the Syrian-Jordanian border involved several official announcements by Jordan about incidents on the border that led to several casualties among members of the Jordanian border guard forces. Ongoing assassinations and other security incidents also occurred as part of continued instability in the south-west.

There is an urgent need for maximum restraint by all actors, both Syrian and non-Syrian. No one should delude themselves that the worrisome new normal of ongoing escalation is in any way sustainable. Any major escalation would have devastating consequences for a deeply fragile situation, where de facto authorities and the presence and actions of foreign armies are key features of the landscape. We need to see sustained de-escalation in and on Syria towards a nationwide ceasefire and a cooperative approach to countering Security Council-listed terrorist groups. We need all actors to operate in full compliance with international humanitarian law to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

The socioeconomic conditions in Syria are also unsustainable and on the brink. Funding is dwindling, while humanitarian needs are higher than ever — even threatening food security. We will hear more from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on that. Let me issue here a strong appeal to donors to fund

all pillars of the United Nations response. Following the expiry of the Council's cross-border resolution (resolution 2672 (2023)), we must continue also to seek solutions to ensure the continued delivery of cross-border and cross-line humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, the economy is in increasingly dire straits owing to a wide range of factors that I have outlined many times before to the Council. We are now seeing critical infrastructure, including electricity, under major strain. It is vital to ensure that any adverse effects of sanctions on ordinary Syrians be avoided and mitigated, including through continuous and active efforts by sanctioning States to counter overcompliance.

Likewise, the core concerns that displaced persons continue to cite — namely, livelihoods on the one hand and protection issues on the other — mean that refugees and internally displaced persons have not yet seen forthcoming conditions for their safe, dignified and voluntary return. Nevertheless, channels of dialogue continue, as we and our humanitarian colleagues continue to assess the Syrian Government's announcements.

The challenges on the ground are symptoms of a conflict that no one actor or existing group of actors can solve alone. Those challenges cannot be sustainably addressed without a political process that makes genuine progress towards a political solution addressing the issues contained in resolution 2254 (2015).

I had occasion to review the state of the political process and to stress the importance of moving the process forward when I met with the Syrian Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs in Geneva, and with the President of the Syrian Negotiation Commission in Doha. I carried similar messages to key stakeholders this month, meeting with senior Russian, American, Iranian, Arab, European and Japanese officials. I reminded all that international cooperation is essential to get the Syrian political process back on track.

The blockage of the Constitutional Committee for a year and a half — largely over what should be a secondary issue, namely, the venue — has sent the wrong signal and has been a setback. Despite the non-Syrian nature of the issue, I have exerted every effort to facilitate a solution, and I have appreciated the efforts of others, too. However, I can confirm from my wide consultations that there is no venue in the region that is both on offer and attracts consensus. Indeed, there is no sign that that will change anytime soon.

In these circumstances, I have been appealing to all that we should find a pragmatic way forward. Let us all respect the Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, United Nations-facilitated nature of the Constitutional Committee. The commitments made by the Syrian parties when they agreed to launch the Committee — namely, to a continuous process in Geneva — should guide the way forward. Yes, we can continue to explore alternative consensus locations. But in the meantime, we should come together to enable the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva.

Let me also remind the Council that proposals for step-for-step confidence-building measures are on the table. Such measures would benefit all Syrians and give important political impetus to the political process. Engagement, coordination and information-sharing is needed to move from ambiguous signalling to real confidence-building via coordinated, reciprocal and verifiable actions. There are concrete moves that could be made if we work in that way. My good offices are ongoing with the Syrian parties, regional players and international stakeholders in that regard.

A credible political process equally depends on the participation of the widest spectrum of Syrians. In the eight years since the establishment of the Civil Society Support Room, significant progress has been made in Syrian civil society of many kinds and perspectives increasingly working together. They are acting as a source of advice and inspiration and supporting grass-roots peacebuilding and humanitarian relief and advocacy. I was extremely pleased to have an extensive exchange in a virtual town hall format with over 130 Civil Society Support Room participants from all parts of Syria, whether currently based inside Syria, in neighbouring countries or in the wider diaspora.

I was equally pleased to engage with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board this month. They remain very concerned by the potential for violence spiralling in the region and the relative lack of focus on Syria. Women's Advisory Board members also engaged with members of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network and examined ways to reinforce women's political role across various contexts in Syria and the region.

As 2023 draws to a close, it seems no coincidence that renewed violence and popular frustrations, including protests, peaked later in the year. That took place at the same time as raised political hopes on different sides were unmet following various diplomatic moves, and

momentum began to fade. That should remind us that the status quo is unsustainable, and it is unacceptable and that this conflict cannot be left unattended. It also shows that partial approaches are unlikely to address the depths of Syrians' despair or contain the conflict sustainably. In 2024 there is therefore a clear need to refocus on the political process called for eight years ago in resolution 2254 (2015).

The year ahead must see a new momentum injected into the search for compromise for a political path forward. I appeal for all to act in a manner that enables the Constitutional Committee to resume, at least initially in Geneva, and for reciprocal, verifiable and parallel confidence-building measures to be agreed and implemented. Equally, I remind all members that these entry points cannot in themselves resolve the conflict. We must look to engage across a comprehensive set of issues of concern to relevant parties with new energy and new thinking and lay the ground for a realistic and comprehensive multilateral approach that is inclusive of all actors and all the issues at the heart of the conflict. That is the way to stem the tide of violence and fast-deteriorating socioeconomic and humanitarian situations and move towards a negotiated political settlement that could enable the Syrians to realize their legitimate aspirations and, indeed, restore Syria's sovereignty, unity, independence and territorial integrity in line with resolution 2254 (2015).

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Pedersen for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Doughten.

Ms. Doughten: The year 2023 has proven to be yet another challenging year for the people of Syria. It started with devastating earthquakes that struck Türkiye and northern and western Syria, killing tens of thousands of people and causing widespread damage in both countries. In Syria, the earthquakes hit when needs were already at the highest level since the start of the conflict. They affected close to 9 million people across the country and killed at least 5,900. Millions were displaced, and countless essential service facilities were damaged or destroyed. The United Nations and our humanitarian partners responded immediately following the earthquakes. We provided first aid and trauma care, food assistance and shelter support. We provided psychosocial support and protection programming. We supported the removal of rubble and worked to urgently restore basic services. However, devastating and widespread damage to infrastructure caused by the earthquakes is still being acutely felt 10 months later — even more so amid the current economic crisis. Some 60,000 families lost their homes, while hundreds of thousands of homes, thousands of schools and hundreds of health facilities were damaged.

Working with our partners, we have supported the rehabilitation of hospitals, schools, markets, roads, water lines and other civilian infrastructure, including through projects financed by the pooled funds managed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. I must acknowledge the generosity of our donors, who mobilized swiftly and completely funded the Syria earthquake appeal. However, there is much work to be done. Survivors are enduring terrible trauma while grappling with the material aftermath of the destruction, and our ability to address the lasting and increasing needs across the country is now being severely constrained by a lack of resources. That includes funding for early-recovery initiatives, which could address the suffering caused by the earthquakes while reducing dependence on external aid.

The year 2023 sadly saw hostilities in northern Syria return to levels not seen since 2019. Since August, the fighting in north-west and north-east Syria has killed, or injured, hundreds of civilians. It has forced tens of thousands of people to endure — and many of them, in fact, to relive — the trauma of displacement. The hostilities have caused yet further damage to civilian facilities, including critical infrastructure, depriving millions of people of access to electricity, safe water, education and essential health services. I remind all parties to the conflict that all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid and minimize civilian harm. The uptick in fighting reminds us that the conflict in Syria is far from over. For humanitarians, it demonstrates once again that, without progress towards an end to the conflict, it will be impossible to effectively address the extensive humanitarian needs in the country on any sustainable basis.

Against that backdrop, cross-border relief operations remain an indispensable lifeline for more than 4 million people in need in north-west Syria. Agreement by the Government of Syria for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Hawa crossing for the delivery of humanitarian assistance currently runs until 13 January 2024. Consent to use the Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai crossings, initially granted following the earthquakes

in February, was further extended in November for an additional three months, until 13 February 2024.

As we have repeatedly said, the sheer scale of needs across the country underscores the urgency of scaling up the delivery of aid via all modalities. The United Nations is committed to continued engagement to ensure all three border crossings remain open. In the coming days, we will formally request that the Government of Syria extend its consent for the use of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing for as long as humanitarian needs persist. The United Nations will also continue to advocate for sustained and predictable humanitarian access across Syria through all possible means, whether cross-border or cross-line.

The huge benefits of increased access were amply demonstrated following the emergency measures introduced by the Government of Syria after the earthquakes. Those measures allowed United Nations agencies to conduct more than 300 missions into north-west Syria. Our colleagues were able to directly engage with affected populations there, conduct needs assessments and improve the monitoring of projects and programmes. Through those missions, we are also able to work closely with women and girls and their community advocates to strengthen our interventions in response to existing gender barriers that impede women and girls' access to vital life-saving services. Those missions have been a net gain, resulting in the enhanced overall efficiency of the humanitarian response in north-west Syria, and we look forward to seeing them continue. Unfortunately, while access reaps benefits in one place, setbacks challenge us elsewhere. United Nations Humanitarian Air Service flights, essential for the transportation of United Nations personnel and vital temperature-controlled medical cargo, have been suspended since 12 October owing to repeated attacks on Damascus and Aleppo airports.

As I already mentioned in relation to the ongoing earthquake response, a lack of funding is severely constraining our ability to respond to increasing needs across Syria. Two weeks from the end of the year, the 2023 humanitarian response plan for Syria is only 33 per cent funded — just $1.8 billion has been received out of the required $5.4 billion. By comparison, last year's response plan was 52 per cent funded.

As we have repeatedly warned, the lack of resources is severely constraining our ability to provide critical life-saving assistance to millions of people in need. Following the reductions announced by World Food Programme in July, which cut food assistance to some 40 per cent of those receiving it, we saw families increasingly resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as drastic reductions in daily food intake, increased child labour and growing malnutrition among children. Since we last briefed the Council (see S/PV.9487), the World Food Programme has been forced to announce additional reductions, completely cutting its main food assistance programme, which has sustained millions of families in Syria for over a decade.

Starting in January, 5.5 million people who benefited from general food distributions at the beginning of 2023 will no longer receive them. These new cuts, coming as they do amid a deepening economic crisis, will have an even more devastating impact. With deep sadness, our preliminary assessments forecast further declines in food security in 2024, including a 29 per cent increase in severe food insecurity rates among displaced people living in camps and informal sites. In this context, the consequences of funding shortfalls for food assistance will be devastating.

The situation is unsustainable and insupportable. As the Special Envoy has reminded us yet again today, urgent progress must be made towards peace if the people of Syria are to have any hope for a better future. Let 2024 be the year in which genuine progress is made.

In the meantime, we must all redouble our efforts to keep the people of Syria and their hopes alive. Our ask has been consistent. We need civilians and civilian infrastructure to be protected. We need sustained humanitarian access throughout the country, through all modalities. And we need urgent and adequate funding to sustain the life-saving humanitarian response.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Ms. Doughten for her briefing.

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

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Geir Pedersen, and the Director for the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Ms. Doughten, for their briefings on the political and humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The unprecedented escalation and number of casualties in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict zone is causing additional tensions in the friendly country of Syria. Against the backdrop of Israel's brutal military operation in the Gaza Strip and ongoing armed raids in the West Bank, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of forces and formations in the region. The increasing number of raids by the Israeli Air Force on Syrian targets, in particular at the airports in Damascus and Aleppo, which serve as the main gateways for the entry of United Nations humanitarian aid into Syria, as well as the increasing exchanges of strikes on the Blue Line between Lebanon and Israel, have the potential to drag Syria into a full-scale regional confrontation. That cannot be allowed to happen.

At the same time, existing challenges in the country persist and are worsening — the terrorist hotbed in Idlib, clashes between Kurds and pro-Turkish formations and instability in the south, including the United States-controlled area near Al-Tanf. We note that in the context of the situation on the Gaza Strip, our American colleagues are actively exploiting the premise of self-defence and combating the terrorist threat, asserting without justification that that right is enjoyed not only by Israel, the occupying Power, but also by Washington and its allies, which are illegally occupying parts of Syrian territory, allegedly under the pretext of combating the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and Al-Qaida.

At the same time, the United States continues to deny Damascus both the right to fight the Security Council-listed terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib and the right to self-defence against arbitrary Israeli attacks. Given the circumstances, the silence of our Western colleagues is deafening. They must understand the risks that directly emanate from such reckless actions.

We strongly condemn the ongoing strikes on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic as a flagrant violation of Syrian sovereignty and the basic provisions of international law, including international humanitarian law. In the context of advancing a Syrian political settlement through resolution 2254 (2015), we consistently and unwaveringly support the resumption of the work of the Constitutional Committee, under the mediation of the United Nations. Support for that has also been voiced in the joint declaration of the sixth session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, which completed its work in Marrakech, Morocco. The declaration mentions the desire to resume work on the Syrian constitutional track, with assistance from the United Nations. In that regard, we trust that Mr. Pedersen will provide assistance to the Syrian parties to find a new, mutually acceptable platform for the Constitutional Committee, without, at the same time, dispersing efforts in other areas that are not supported by the Syrians themselves.

We remain convinced of the need to ensure the fundamental right of return for Syrian refugees, as stipulated in resolution 2254 (2015), with strict coordination of those efforts with Damascus. In that connection, we should like to note President Bashar Al-Assad's decree of 16 November on a general amnesty for the country's citizens. That decision by the leadership of the Syrian Arab Republic, in addition to the 2022 amnesty, is intended to facilitate the return of Syrian citizens to their homeland. Furthermore, the Syrian Government has demonstrated its readiness to facilitate civil reconciliation through concrete measures and to work on the detained and missing persons track, thereby contributing to the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

The joint declaration of the sixth session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, held at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, also mentions the importance of surmounting the refugee crisis and its consequences, which are being faced by the Syrians themselves and host countries. It also mentions the need to strengthen cooperation between the Syrian Government and host States in order to facilitate the process of the voluntary, dignified and safe return to their homes and an end to their plight, in coordination with the relevant United Nations agencies.

The same document notes the importance of ensuring the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all Syrian regions, without politicization. However, with regard to the humanitarian situation in Syria, the reasons for alarm are only growing. Humanitarians working in the country also perceive the situation in the same way. The lack of adequate funding, political conditions for donor contributions, sanctions pressure from Western countries and, indeed, the overall prohibitively politicized approach to humanitarian operations in that Arab country are all causing the situation on the ground to rapidly deteriorate. We call on the United Nations country team in Damascus to develop a more effective

approach to assisting Syrians in need in all regions of the country, without discrimination.

The United Nations Resident Coordinator is now required to demonstrate political will and submit a report on the negative impact of unilateral sanctions on the situation in that country. That is the mandate of a Second Committee draft resolution, which the General Assembly adopted the day before yesterday, on 19 December. The mandate to monitor the negative impact of sanctions applies to the entire country team, including OCHA. The Secretariat's internal guidance note, entitled "Parameters and principles of United Nations assistance in Syria", which explicitly links reconstruction work in that country to progress on the political track, should have been withdrawn long ago. It is nothing but the Secretariat directly catering to Western anti-Syrian attitudes, which casts a shadow on the impartiality of all United Nations staff, as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

On 10 November, the Syrian Government extended the authorization for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai crossings for another three months — that is, until 13 February 2024. On 13 January 2024, the temporary authorization for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Hawa crossing will expire. Its further fate is a sovereign decision of Damascus, as part of bilateral dialogue between the Syrian Government and the United Nations.

In any event, it is our understanding that the humanitarian potential of the Bab Al-Hawa crossing should not be used by United Nations personnel from the Office in Gaziantep for spontaneous visits to Idlib that are not coordinated with Damascus. OCHA should report strictly to the authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic on the matter. We know that the United Nations is planning to finally send a cross-line humanitarian convoy to the north-western regions of Syria by the end of the year — the first since the non-renewal of resolution 2672 (2023). We are counting on the success of the operation. After all, as they keep telling us, the humanitarian needs in areas outside Damascus' control in that part of the country remain high. In general, we are compelled to note that our Western and Secretariat colleagues do not dispute the need for such convoys, but they are still not working. We see no particular zeal on their part to work with those whom they cowardly call "the authorities on the ground" to rectify what is an absolutely unacceptable situation, which undermines the premise that aid to Syrians in Idlib must be delivered by all means possible. The conclusion to be drawn from all that is that our Western colleagues do not care about the suffering of the Syrians, just as they do not care about the suffering of the Gazans. All they care about is geopolitical games and supporting their clients in the region, regardless of their crimes.

Mr. Wood (United States of America): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Director Doughten for their sobering briefings.

As the year 2023 comes to a close, the Syrian political process remains frustratingly blocked, and the Syrian people are suffering greatly. The Security Council continues to rightly discuss the political and humanitarian files each month. Yet we have few results to show for our work. For more than 12 years, the Al-Assad regime has waged a brutal war against the Syrian people. On top of that, Syrians are still reeling from the devastating impacts of February's earthquakes. Yet, rather than engage in a political process, in the past few months, the Al-Assad regime has stepped up its attacks on its own people in the north-west of Syria. We all know the responsibility for this war lies at the feet of the Al-Assad regime. The searing images and accounts of the regime's chemical-weapon attacks on opposition-led suburbs of Damascus will never fade from our conscience. Neither will we forget the widespread shelling in Homs, the massacres in Aleppo and the present-day bombardment that is killing civilians in Idlib.

Just two days ago, the General Assembly voted on a United States co-facilitated draft resolution (A/C.3/78/L.43) on the human rights situation in Syria that reminded the world of the abuses the regime wants us to forget: the use of chemical weapons, extrajudicial killings, torture, other ill-treatment, unjust detentions, enforced disappearances and gender-based violence. We join the majority of United Nations States Members in reiterating the call on the Syrian regime to immediately release all those arbitrarily held and to provide information about the tens of thousands who are missing. We are alarmed by the reports that violence has reached its worst level since 2019. The hundreds of civilian deaths caused by the regime and the Russian offensive in Idlib are deeply concerning. The destruction that they have caused to infrastructure and the threats they pose to humanitarian operations put hundreds of thousands of people at risk during the cold winter months.

While we welcome the three-month extension of the United Nations arrangement with the regime for access through the Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai crossings to access areas in need in north-west Syria, we also underscore that such a piecemeal approach does not fully meet the urgent humanitarian need. We continue to underscore the importance of predictable, sustainable access, particularly to improve efficiencies and allow for sufficient staffing and planning. We note that discussions between the United Nations and the regime regarding renewed cross-border access through the crucial crossing at Bab Al-Hawa continue. We support Under-Secretary-General Griffiths' efforts in that regard and remain hopeful for a positive outcome.

As Brazil prepares to conclude its Council term, we want to acknowledge the close collaboration of the humanitarian co-penholders, Brazil and Switzerland, to focus the Council's work on the needs of the Syrian people, and we look forward to continued reporting to the Council and close attention to this file. As we appeal for calm in Syria, we also reiterate our condemnation of attacks by Iranian-aligned militia groups on United States personnel and facilities in Iraq and Syria. The United States has responded in self-defence, and we reiterate that those attacks by Iranian-aligned groups must stop. We share the concerns of Special Envoy Pedersen about regional spillover. It is in these moments that we must persevere and remain committed to achieving a Syrian-focused and Syrian-led solution to the conflict in line with resolution 2254 (2015), the only viable road map for a lasting solution to the conflict. More than eight years have passed since the Council unanimously adopted that resolution. It is incumbent on all countries seated at this table to do their part and help implement all aspects of the resolution.

The Syrian people have been waiting far too long. We support the Special Envoy's efforts to advance the political process and reconvene the Constitutional Committee as soon as possible. The United States is closely following the popular protests in Al-Suwayda, just as we did when pro-democracy demonstrations first sprung up in the nearby city of Dara'a in 2011. The Syrian people deserve the future for which they have fought so hard, including respect for their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Mrs. Baeriswyl (Switzerland): I speak on behalf of Switzerland and Brazil, co-penholders on the Syrian humanitarian file. We thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and the Director of the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Lisa Doughten, for their briefings. We also acknowledge the presence of the representatives of Syria, Türkiye and Iran at this meeting. This is the last joint statement, together with Brazil, before our esteemed co-penholder partner concludes its term on the Security Council. We would like to thank them for their excellent cooperation throughout their term. We will miss them and use this opportunity to both look back at this year and towards future developments.

As we are all aware, in 2023, the people of Syria have experienced severe hardship. The earthquake, with its epicentre in Türkiye, has heavily affected northern Syria. People lost their homes, families and community members in a matter of minutes. At least 6,000 people were killed, with many more injured, and thousands of buildings were destroyed. That has led to the further deterioration of the already-dire humanitarian situation. The number of out of school children grew by at least 25 per cent. Inadequate sanitary infrastructure in makeshift camps for internally displaced persons and continued extreme drought and water scarcity led to the spread of the cholera outbreak across most of Syria. The large-scale vaccination campaign by the United Nations has been helpful in transforming cholera cases into milder, more manageable infections. However, it still remains a concern.

At the same time, food insecurity keeps rising, and cases of severe malnutrition are being increasingly reported, especially with children, as we just heard. Yet, due to the lack of funds, the World Food Programme has had to drastically reduce rations since the summer, while in 2024, the number of beneficiaries will be significantly reduced. Those reductions risk having consequences for access to other basic services, as people will have to prioritize needs, and leading to increased negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour and early marriage. The worrisome increase in violence and attacks in the north-east and north-west of the country since October has led to internal displacement, has cost lives and has significantly damaged civilian infrastructure.

Furthermore, repeated air strikes on the two main airports of the country have disrupted United Nations humanitarian aid flights, severely hampering the transport of humanitarian goods and personnel. We recall that international humanitarian law must be respected by all parties and that the protection of

civilians must be ensured at all times. Moreover, the cross-border mechanism for aid delivery went through a major shift this year. Following the devastation of the earthquakes, Syria agreed to open the Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai border-crossings in order to facilitate the emergency response. The time-bound authorization has been renewed until 13 February 2024. In July, the authorization for the United Nations to operate the Bab Al-Hawa cross-border aid mechanism from Türkiye to north-west Syria transitioned from a Security Council mandate to a consent-based arrangement, which is set to expire on 13 January 2024.

In the middle of harsh winter conditions, we trust that all of the authorizations will be renewed without conditions or time limit, as the lifeline for millions of people depend on those. The parties must allow and facilitate humanitarian access to all people in need. That is an obligation under international humanitarian law.

All access modalities are necessary — including cross-border and cross-line — to support people in need across Syria. We further hope that sufficient funding of the humanitarian response will be ensured so that life-saving assistance and early-recovery projects can be ensured.

In order to prevent this grim regression from transforming into an even bleaker outlook for 2024, the international community has a responsibility to act. A political solution in line with resolution 2254 (2015) is urgently needed. In the midst of the turmoil in Gaza, with its regional implications, the Council must not forget the plight of the Syrian people.

Let me conclude by expressing our appreciation to the United Nations and its partner organizations for their tireless work and efforts in serving the people in need in Syria. Through cholera vaccination campaigns, the delivery of humanitarian items and the provision of food rations, water, sanitation, health and protection services, cash and voucher assistance and so much more, those humanitarian actors help to prevent the humanitarian crisis from deepening even more and provide much-needed hope to the people. We need to ensure a context for the safe and efficient implementation of their work. Building on our role on the Council with Brazil thus far, Switzerland is committed to maintaining the continued attention of the Council on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

(*spoke in French*)

I would now like to make a statement in my national capacity on the political situation in Syria.

As 2023 draws to a close, Switzerland notes that it has been a year of crossroads for Syria. The earthquakes of 6 February, which shook a country already devastated by war, led to renewed and welcome regional diplomatic efforts under the aegis of the League of Arab States. Those diplomatic efforts seem to have stalled, which we can only regret. The current political status quo, coupled with the renewed intensity of the conflict, is deeply concerning to us. We are also concerned about the serious risk of a major regional escalation into which Syria could be drawn. We must avoid that situation at all costs.

We wish to point out that the means for resolving the conflict in Syria are known. They are contained in resolution 2254 (2015), which the Security Council adopted precisely eight years ago. During this time of significant regional tensions, it is especially urgent to ensure its implementation. What is needed, in addition to a national ceasefire, is a multifaceted commitment that includes a resumption of the work of the Constitutional Committee. In that regard, we regret the lack of significant progress and urge all the parties concerned to work to that end in good faith and to cooperate with the Special Envoy, whom we thank for his efforts to relaunch the process. Switzerland remains ready to make Geneva available to host the meetings of the Committee and other type of talks or initiatives aimed at promoting a lasting peace in Syria.

In view of the tragic human toll of the past year, we once again call on all the parties to establish a nationwide ceasefire and to ensure the protection of civilians. It is essential that all the parties respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution in the conduct of hostilities. It is imperative for the civilian population and civilian objects, including infrastructure indispensable to the survival of the population, to be protected, and the Council must make that a priority. The people of Syria desperately need that. For its part, Switzerland will spare no effort in that regard.

Switzerland would like to commend the remarkable efforts of Syrian civil society. Those organizations play a crucial role in easing tensions and facilitating national reconciliation. Their work, like that of the

International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, plays an important role in documenting international crimes, which is key in the fight against impunity. Their work is therefore crucial for achieving a lasting peace. We would like to reaffirm our full support for them and stress the need to provide them with the resources they need to carry out their work.

Mrs. Broadhurst Estival (France) (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Ms. Lisa Doughten for their briefings.

Allow me to underscore two points.

Without a political horizon, there can be no lasting and just peace in Syria, nor stability in the region. Eight years ago, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015), calling for a credible and inclusive political process in Syria. However, we are still a long way from achieving that, owing to the regime's obstinacy and refusal to make the slightest concession. Human rights violations remain rife, often in full impunity, and political demands continue to be made. Violence continues to be committed against Syrians. The bombings by the regime and its supporters in north-western Syria are a sad example of that. This permanent instability, of which the trafficking of captagon is another result, is a threat to the entire region.

The conditions have not been created to ensure the voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees to their homeland. Damascus has yet to make any concrete commitments in that regard. We reiterate our support for those countries hosting millions of Syrian refugees. In this context, Mr. Pedersen's mediation efforts are essential, because almost everything remains to be done, and I would like to reiterate France's support for his efforts. It is essential to sustain our collective attention and efforts towards achieving a political resolution of the crisis in Syria, because, as the war in Gaza shows us, a crisis that is considered frozen will eventually explode if its root causes are not addressed.

The humanitarian situation continues to worsen. The resumption of hostilities in the north-west and the north-east has added to the already immense suffering of the civilian population, which has not been spared this year. France is also particularly concerned about food insecurity as we enter winter. It is essential for more donors to mobilize to help Syria, as the Director of the Humanitarian Financing and Resource Mobilization Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reminded us.

In this significantly deteriorated context, international humanitarian law must be respected by all parties in Syria. It is especially essential to guarantee access for humanitarian assistance, with certainty, predictability and transparency, and to ensure the safety of humanitarian personnel. Given the fact that the authorization for the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Hawa crossing expires on 13 January 2024, we urge the Syrian regime to renew that authorization with no limit on its duration. The use of additional crossing points must also continue.

It is essential for the Council to remain seized of this issue and for the Secretariat to provide the Council with written reports on the humanitarian response in Syria.

Mr. Agyeman (Ghana): I have the honour to deliver this joint statement on behalf of the three African members of the Security Council (A3).

We thank Special Envoy Geir Pederson and Director Lisa Doughten for their briefings and welcome the participation of the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Türkiye in this meeting.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria has continued to maintain its downward trajectory, with an overwhelming number of Syrians requiring various forms of assistance. As we heard again today, unfortunately, children and displaced people are bearing the brunt of the country's acute and rising food security crisis. At the same time, necessities such as water and electricity are in short supply, with millions having to live without them. Added to the economic challenges, cuts to humanitarian support due to funding shortfalls and the wanton destruction of agricultural infrastructure resulting from the prolonged conflict have created a crisis within a crisis.

The upsurge in violence in parts of the country has worsened the protection concerns, as thousands of civilians remain displaced and are unable to safely and voluntarily return to their homes. Women and girls have been particularly vulnerable under such circumstances, as they are exposed to gender-based violence in displacement camps. Consequently, the daily lives of Syrian women and girls are marred by gender-based violence and early and forced marriage and characterized by limited opportunities and resources.

Amid this unending crisis, funding shortages persist, with this year's humanitarian response plan funded to only 33 per cent, the lowest contributions on record in the past three years. The low funding has constrained aid agencies' ability to provide the needed support to vulnerable populations. We reiterate our appeal to the international community to support the humanitarian cause in the country in order to ease human suffering in the country.

In view of the dire nature of the humanitarian situation, the A3 pledges its full support for any mode of aid delivery that helps the most vulnerable people. We urge the parties to collaborate closely with the United Nations to create a safe and secure environment for unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid through all modalities.

Given the substantial number of beneficiaries of the cross-border aid delivery mechanism, the A3 urge the Syrian national Government to renew the authorization for the use of the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing before its expiration in January 2024. That is vital to maintain an uninterrupted supply of life-saving assistance in the area. Despite the broader scope of that delivery system, the A3 is of the view that aid distribution across the front lines is equally important and should be expanded to complement the cross-border supplies.

It is regrettable that the political situation in Syria continues to deteriorate notwithstanding international and regional efforts to find a lasting solution to the conflict. The Arab Spring, which renewed hope of a new dawn of democracy in Syria, has failed to deliver on the aspirations of the youth. Instead, Syria is still marked by political instability and violence, with devastating consequences for civilians' lives and well-being.

Rising military hostilities in the country in recent times, without regard to safeguarding civilian lives, is deepening the crisis. We remind the parties of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. All parties must exercise maximum restraint and take proactive steps towards de-escalation.

The parties involved must remember that no group can win in the midst of such constant bloodshed. A nationwide ceasefire remains a sine qua non for the start of the political process in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). The most workable solution to the conflict remains a Syrian-led and-owned inclusive political process undertaken with the support of the international community, under the auspices of the United Nations.

In that regard, the role of the Special Envoy Geir Pedersen remains critical if the political process is to crystallize into a tangible outcome that brings respite and restore the hopes of all Syrians. Genuine commitment to the peace process and the parties' support for the Special Envoy's efforts, including the step-for-step confidence-building measures, will go a long way to ensure a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Reconvening the small body of the Constitutional Committee, with the active participation of all parties, will give impetus to the political process. We therefore call for broad consensus behind the proposals of the Special Envoy for prompt resumption of the meetings of the Committee, without further delay.

The A3 welcomes the report (A/78/627) of the Secretary-General on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 77/301, on the establishment of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. We call for the full cooperation of all stakeholders to help address the plight of the detained and missing. The families of the victims deserve to know the fate of their loved ones.

In conclusion, the A3 reiterate its collective call for a nationwide ceasefire and the immediate resumption of negotiations among the parties towards a political settlement that brings comprehensive and lasting peace and stability to Syria in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Even as the term of Ghana and Gabon on the Council ends, we assure the people of Syria of our continuing solidarity with them in their quest for peace and security.

Mr. Sun Zhiqiang (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Director Doughten for their briefings.

Syria's neighbouring environment continues to deteriorate, and the spillover risks of the Palestinian-Israeli situation continue to accumulate. That has had a complex impact on the situation in Syria. Recently, several locations in Syria, including the Damascus airport, suffered frequent air strikes. China is deeply concerned about this.

We call upon all relevant parties to stay calm and exercise restraint, refrain from any actions that could escalate tensions and spare no effort to reduce regional security risks. The international community, and in

particular major countries, should play a constructive role in preventing the spread of the conflict. The urgent priority is to stop all illegal military operations in Syria and end the illegal military presence of all forces in the country.

Political settlement is the fundamental way out for the Syrian issue. China supports the Syrian -led and -owned political process and calls upon all Syrian parties to enhance dialogue and work for substantive progress in the work of the Constitutional Committee. We welcome the Special Envoy's extensive engagement with all parties on the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) and expect Arab countries to step up coordination and facilitate the political settlement of the Syrian issue.

The counter-terrorism situation in Syria remains complex and dire. We support the Syrian Government in taking all necessary measures to combat terrorism and safeguard the country's security and stability and in strengthening counter-terrorism capacity-building. The international community should fight all terrorism, with zero tolerance.

China has always supported the United Nations maintaining positive interactions with the Syrian Government and effectively implementing the new arrangement for cross-border humanitarian assistance on the basis of fully respecting Syria's sovereignty and ownership of the Syrian Government. In recent years, United Nations humanitarian funding for Syria has continued to decline. We have expressed our concerns in that regard on multiple occasions. The relevant donors should earnestly fulfil their commitments and effectively meet the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. It needs to be pointed out that unilateral sanctions and resource-plundering have long hindered the recovery and development of Syria's economy and society and aggravated the humanitarian challenges facing the country. We urge the relevant parties to immediately and unconditionally end those illegal actions.

Mr. Phipps (United Kingdom): I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Director Doughten for their briefings.

Today in our final meeting of the year on this item, we should reflect on the situation in Syria over the past 12 months, in which there has been no progress on the political process, no improvement in civil or political rights for Syrians or in arbitrary detentions and no improvement in the conditions to enable the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees. The humanitarian crisis has deepened, and the Captagon trade has only grown.

As we enter the new year, we believe that there are three areas where the Council can meaningfully focus.

First, the threat posed to the region from actors within Syria remains of grave concern. We are particularly concerned by the continuing attacks against the Global Coalition against Da'esh, in north-east Syria, the increasing tensions along the Jordanian-Syrian border and the reported strikes in Israeli territory by the Al-Assad regime and Iranian-affiliated forces. Regional escalation serves nobody's interest.

Secondly, United Nations humanitarian access at Bab Al-Hawa remains vital. Over three-quarters of all United Nations aid transits via that crossing, and it remains a critical lifeline for 4.1 million Syrians. The Syrian regime's current permissions expire on 13 January; we fully expect them to be renewed. Cross-line operations can complement, but not replace, the essential support that cross-border mechanisms provide.

Finally, we need to continue to support the Special Envoy in his efforts to convene a meeting of the Constitutional Committee, as soon as possible, in the new year.

On 18 December, eight years ago, the Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015). As we have said many times, the implementation of this resolution remains the only way to end this conflict and provide sustainable peace and stability to the Syrian people.

Mr. França Danese (Brazil): Brazil aligns itself with the statement made by the representative of Switzerland in our capacity as co-penholders on the Syrian humanitarian file. We also thank Special Envoy Geir Pedersen and Director Lisa Doughten for their briefings.

I will now speak in my national capacity on the political aspects of the conflict, but first I would like to express our sincere appreciation for the very constructive partnership we have had with Switzerland in facilitating the Council's discussions on this file during a challenging year for Syria and the region — as it has been for the Council as well.

The year 2023 marks a year of change in the dossier, notably, being the first in many years without a resolution on cross-border assistance, despite the intensive negotiating process led by the co-penholders, Brazil and Switzerland. Currently, three crossing points are being used to deliver aid to those in need, with the consent of the Syrian Government. We welcome this important moment of cooperation between Syria and the humanitarian community, coordinated by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and we hope that it will continue to move in the right direction for the benefit of the Syrian people and the future of the country. The role of the United Nations in aid delivery remains vital, especially as a growing number of Syrians depend on humanitarian assistance.

In recent months, we have witnessed an escalation of violence in Syria and the region. The situation in northern Syria has worsened. In the north-west, there have been reports of air strikes resulting in civilian casualties and significant damage to civilian infrastructure. Those include attacks by the Security Council-designated terrorist group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. There have been disturbing reports of violence in the north-east, including attacks on civilian infrastructure. Humanitarian law must be respected. Civilians and civilian property must be protected during hostilities.

Syria has been repeatedly affected by the current escalation of the conflict in Israel and Palestine. Strikes on Aleppo and Damascus airports have disrupted United Nations Humanitarian Air Service flights on more than one occasion. The risk of regional escalation is real and deeply worrisome. In the midst of that growing instability, we urge all parties to exercise maximum restraint. We emphasize the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, in accordance with international law and the resolutions adopted by the Council.

Brazil has consistently maintained that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Given the escalating humanitarian crisis and deteriorating security conditions in Syria, an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire is urgently needed. We are grateful to Special Envoy Geir Pedersen for his continuous efforts to re-engage key stakeholders in the search for a solution to the current stalemate in the political process.

Being so legitimately proud of its vast community of Syrian descent, Brazil is closely following the situation in the country and fully shares the Secretary-General's assessment that

> "Nothing would do more to alleviate suffering in the Syrian Arab Republic and stem the tide of humanitarian needs than an inclusive, comprehensive and sustainable political solution to end the conflict in line with Security Council resolution 2254 (2015)." (S/2023/419*, para. 81*)

Diplomacy and genuine political will must be given every opportunity to succeed. Let us not only hope, but also work diligently towards a political outcome for Syria that will ultimately bring about the peace, stability and reconciliation so desired by the Syrian people.

Mr. Yamazaki (Japan): First, I thank Special Envoy Pedersen and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Director Doughten for their valuable briefings.

We remain deeply concerned about the risk that the conflict in Gaza could escalate and expand across the region. The security situation in Syria is already fragile, with sporadic clashes between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights, Israeli air strikes, including on Syria's international airports, ongoing hostilities in the north and various military clashes involving the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and other Islamic resistance groups.

OCHA notes that the humanitarian impact of recent hostilities in the north-west is at its most severe since 2019. Any misjudgement could lead to a new large-scale military conflict. All the parties concerned must exercise maximum restraint to avoid that. Clearly, there is a need to refocus the political process to address the root causes of the Syrian crisis, which have long been ignored. In that vein, we highly appreciate Special Envoy Pedersen's active diplomacy based on a step-for-step approach, but unfortunately the prospects for reconvening the Constitutional Committee, which remains an important aspect of the political process based on resolution 2254 (2015), remain dim. Even as the international community focuses on the Gaza conflict, the importance of supporting a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned dialogue should not diminish. All parties must overcome their differences as soon as possible, including on the issue of the venue of the Committee.

The humanitarian situation remains alarming and is worsening. Based on the Syrian Government's decision, cross-border aid delivered through three

border crossings has become a lifeline for more than 4 million people in the north-west. In particular, the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing is vital and must remain open. We also note that the twelfth round of cross-line assistance is being planned by the end of the year. Yet OCHA warns that the low level of funding is unprecedented for a humanitarian crisis of this scale. With that in mind, Japan recently decided to provide approximately $32.6 million in additional humanitarian assistance to Syria, which includes aid for neighbouring countries, and we call on other donors to do the same.

Regarding refugees and internally displaced persons in Syria, we are deeply concerned that the conditions for safe, dignified and voluntary returns do not currently exist. Furthermore, it is urgent to address the issue of missing persons. In that regard, we welcome the recent report (A/78/627) of the Secretary-General on progress towards the full functioning of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons authorized by the General Assembly in June. Japan will support that institution as it moves to begin substantive work in the near future.

As the end of the year is approaching, we express our sincere gratitude to Brazil for its role as the co-penholder, together with Switzerland, on the Syria humanitarian file. We would like to stress Japan's commitment to continue addressing the Syrian crisis together with the Council, including its five new members.

Mr. Abushahab (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank Mr. Geir Pedersen and Ms. Lisa Doughten for their briefings today.

As this is our last meeting on the Syrian political and humanitarian file during the term of the United Arab Emirates at the Security Council, I would like to share with the Council few of our thoughts on this file.

Since 2014, the main focus of the Council has been on meeting the needs of the Syrian people by establishing the Syria cross-border aid mechanism and renewing its mandate on regular basis. While that has contributed to providing relief aid to millions of Syrians, we have noticed that, throughout our two year-term on the Security Council, the political track has not received similar attention by the Council. That is despite the fact that reaching a peaceful solution is necessary to address the humanitarian crisis in a sustainable manner.

While aid continues to flow through the three crossings — Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai — with the approval of the Syrian Government and the efforts of the United Nations and humanitarian workers on the ground, the Security Council should simultaneously intensify its work on the political track and support the efforts of the Special Envoy for Syria to reach a peaceful solution. That is the only way to end the suffering of the Syrian people and to restore security and stability in Syria and the region.

Over the past several years, the political track has not seen any concrete progress towards ending the Syrian crisis. Meanwhile, the humanitarian and economic conditions have continued to deteriorate to unprecedented levels. Today there are more than 15 million Syrians in need of humanitarian aid and that requires the Security Council to allocate the same level of attention to the Syrian crisis as it does to other crises on its agenda.

There is no doubt that ending the Syrian crisis will contribute to resolving one of its most serious consequences, namely, the displacement crisis. Today there are nearly 7 million displaced Syrians, and that requires the provision of appropriate living conditions for the voluntary, dignified and safe return of refugees and displaced persons, including through the implementation of early recovery projects.

While we stress the importance of the Constitutional Committee in enhancing dialogue among the Syrian parties to end the crisis through a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process without any foreign interference, we believe that merely holding meetings is not sufficient. The political track extends beyond that, and demands that all diplomatic efforts be focused on resolving the Syrian crisis rather than only managing it.

Those efforts are also necessary to address the security conditions in Syria, which will worsen if there is no political solution on the horizon. We are closely monitoring with concern the violent escalations in north-western Syria, along Syrian borders and across other regions in Syria. That reaffirms the need to continue working towards de-escalation and a ceasefire throughout all Syrian regions.

That issue has become particularly urgent in the light of the escalating tensions in our region. The situation in Syria cannot afford further escalations.

In conclusion, we look forward to the day when Syria turns the page on conflict and regains its security and stability. The Syrian people have an ancient civilization, and they deserve to have a better future with dignity on their homeland, as has long been the case. The United Arab Emirates will continue to support regional and international efforts aimed at realizing those objectives.

Ms. Gatt (Malta): Let me begin by thanking Special Envoy Pedersen and Director Doughten for their briefings today. In 2023, Syrians faced the greatest level of humanitarian need since the beginning of the 13-year-old conflict. As we come to the end of the year, the briefers' sombre reflections remind us that next year must be better.

Over the past 12 months, Syrians have had to contend with the impact of multiple devastating earthquakes and aftershocks, a humanitarian crisis, climate shocks and now, major conflict on their border, which threatens to bring even greater violence and turmoil to the region. Despite those compounding political and humanitarian crises, Syrians remain dignified and resilient, losing neither hope nor their voice in demanding a just end to the brutal conflict. We commend the staff of the United Nations, especially of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for their diligent work throughout this year. We thank them for their efforts in engaging with the parties to ensure the free flow and the facilitation of humanitarian assistance, both within Syria and across borders at a time when it was needed most.

The continued functioning of the crossings at Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai has greatly supported the aid delivery mechanism at Bab Al-Hawa — a crossing which remains a lifeline to millions in the north-west today. We expect that once again the agreement for the use of Bab Al-Hawa by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners will be extended before its expiration in mid-January and that all aid delivery modalities will remain in place as long as they are needed.

Violence has continued unabated in the north of the country; protests have erupted in the south and Syrian airports remain subject to routine air strikes. Grave violations of children's rights remain a major concern for Malta, especially with a record number of children internally displaced. As we have heard throughout this year, the root causes of the humanitarian needs in Syria are political. Without adequate, even modest, progress on the political front, we will be unable to progress towards a just, lasting and deserved peace. The stalling of the precious political momentum — seen in the weeks directly after the earthquakes — is deeply regrettable.

In such a context of deadly fragility, the burden of political inaction is borne by the people of Syria, those who continue to suffer and face daily indignities. Their burden is ever increasing, with the cost of basic commodities at an all-time high and humanitarian assistance at an all-time low. As we have heard on many occasions here in the Chamber, shortages of those essentials make women and girls more vulnerable to poverty, violence and exploitation.

We regret that despite extensive efforts by the Special Envoy, we have been unable to see the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee, and steps for steps has yet to deliver the much-needed confidence required to tackle the many pressing issues facing Syria. We once again call for a nationwide ceasefire to help create the conditions for progress in line with resolution 2254 (2015). Thirteen years of fighting should indicate that there is no military solution to the conflict. An inclusive political process is the only way forward.

As we enter 2024, we must become neither complacent nor numb to the challenges and suffering of those in Syria. We must again redouble our political and humanitarian efforts to make sure Syria's future does not mirror its present.

Ms. Dautllari (Albania): At the outset, allow me to thank Special Envoy Peterson and the representative of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Director Doughten, for their insights. Also, I would like to extend Albania's full support for the good offices of Special Envoy Pedersen.

The magnitude of the destruction, as described once more today by many, has turned Syria into wreckage. The rate of violence in the north-west, due to the governmental attacks and air strikes in Idlib, is the highest it has been in three years, and the humanitarian needs are greater than ever.

Considering the situation in the region, we echo the call of the Special Envoy for maximum restraint and de-escalation in respect of the nationwide ceasefire and in full compliance with international humanitarian law, as well as step-for-step measures to revitalize the political process based on resolution 2254 (2015).

Without breaking the political impasse imposed by the Syrian regime, envisioning a brighter future for the Syrian people becomes more difficult. We urge the regime to use the momentum and not to delay the convening of the Constitutional Committee, a practical, necessary step to put back on track the Syrian-led, United Nations-facilitated political process. And we support the efforts of Special Envoy Pedersen in that regard.

The humanitarian situation is an extension of the political stalemate. The economic devastation, including inflation, unemployment and the collapse of essential services, has compounded the already dire humanitarian situation, leading communities to further desperation. The international community should stand in solidarity with the Syrian people and deepen its support for the humanitarian response plan. Aid delivery should remain predictable, sustainable and transparent. In that vein, we urge for the extension of the authorization of the Bab Al-Hawa cross border beyond the January deadline.

Silence is no longer an option. The Council should be united in supporting the people of Syria. We owe it to the millions of refugees who cannot return safely to their homes; we owe it to the children stripped of their childhoods and to the victims of sexual and gender-based violence. We believe that the pursuit of justice is fundamental to provide some relief for the victims of torture and gross human rights violations, to restore human dignity and to provide closure for the families of missing persons and detainees. The decision last month by the International Court of Justice that Syria must take all measures to prevent acts of torture and other cruel treatment is a landmark for accountability.

Another potential positive development is the upcoming launch of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic. That mechanism, which Albania supported when it was put to the vote in the General Assembly in June (see A/77/PV.85), would provide answers with regard to the hundreds of thousands of lives interrupted and for all those whose fates remain unknown and whose voices are silenced. Above all, it would bring an end to the suffering of the families who saw their loved ones forcibly separated in the shadows of the conflict. It is important for that process to be transparent and coordinated with the United Nations.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that Albania will remain a strong advocate of the Syrian people in their pursuit for justice and a better future in dignity.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Ecuador.

We note and appreciate the information provided by Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and by Ms. Lisa Doughten, from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We welcome the presence of the representatives of Syria, Türkiye and Iran.

For Ecuador, it is essential to intensify diplomatic actions that allow dialogue to be redirected and move towards a political solution to the situation in Syria, in accordance with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015). We encourage the Special Envoy to continue conversations with members of the Astana group, neighbouring countries, regional partners and other actors within and outside Syria with a view to finalizing the installation of the Constitutional Committee and the discussion of substantive issues regarding its operation.

We agree with Special Envoy Pedersen when he states that there is a direct relationship between the lack of progress in the political sphere and the risk of an escalation of violence. The effects of such a scenario will further complicate the humanitarian and security situation in Syria and the region. We regret that the current conflict landscape in the region has produced an upsurge in violence in Syria and multiplied threats against the civilian population. The escalation of hostilities in Damascus, Idlib and western Aleppo show that Syria is undergoing its most violent period since 2019.

It is unacceptable that 45,000 people in the city of Ebreha remain without access to drinking water sources due to the militarization of the sector's water plant, which increases the risks of the spread of diseases such as cholera. We call for respect for international humanitarian law and, in that context, for the protection of the civilian population and the infrastructure essential for their survival, as well as of humanitarian assistance providers. The prevalence of poverty, malnutrition and displacement among the number of people who require humanitarian assistance to survive is a warning that the Council must continue to consider the situation in Syria.

On the other hand, we urge the Syrian Government to provide answers on the status and fate of missing persons and those arbitrarily detained, as well as to re-establish transparent accountability systems.

We hope that all political and social segments, particularly women, are meaningfully integrated into the processes aimed at building a peaceful and prosperous future in Syria, with the aim of restoring civic space and the rule of law.

I conclude by expressing our appreciation to Brazil and Switzerland for their commitment and work as co-penholders. Ecuador will also continue to support the efforts deployed to facilitate the work of United Nations teams on the ground and to alleviate the humanitarian situation of the Syrian people.

I resume my functions as President of the Council.

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

Mr. Dandy (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. I also thank your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of the People's Republic of China, for successfully conducting the work of the Council last month.

Today's briefing on the political and humanitarian issues in my country, Syria, is the final one for this year. It is held amid ongoing threats and challenges that my country has been facing for years as a result of terrorism, the illegal military presence of the United States and Turkish forces in parts of Syrian territory, the escalation of repeated Israeli attacks on Syria's vital facilities, the exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis owing to the failure of donors to fund the humanitarian response plan and the disastrous repercussions of the illegal unilateral coercive measures imposed by Western countries on my country. Therefore, the condemnation by the Council of all those violations of Syria's sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, international law and the Charter of the United Nations is both a legal responsibility and a humanitarian necessity.

We listened to the briefing by Mr. Geir Pedersen, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, and we continue to engage in dialogue and coordinate with him on issues related to his work. The Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates met with Mr. Pedersen last week in Geneva and stressed Syria's commitment to a Syrian-led, Syrian-owned political process without any external interference on the basis of respect for Syria's independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.

It is regrettable that, 75 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are witnessing some Western countries continuing to act in contempt of the Declaration through their complicity, and even their participation, in the brutal crimes and genocide committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip, as well as through its repeated aggression against Syrian and Lebanese infrastructure, the latest of which was a rocket attack that targeted the suburbs of Damascus on 17 December. Syria warns Israel of the implications of continuing to persist with those attacks, which could push the region towards a full-blown escalation that could not be contained and whose consequences for the region and the world could not be tolerated.

The United States and the European Union continue to impose unilateral, inhumane sanctions that have a significant impact on the enjoyment of the most basic human rights by Syrians, including children, women and elderly persons, who are being denied food, medical care, electricity, housing and essential services. The report of Ms. Alena Douhan, Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, is proof thereof:

> "The comprehensiveness of existing unilateral sanctions regimes against the Syrian Arab Republic and the growing over compliance, in particular following the imposition in 2019 of the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act by the United States of America, have placed the country in a straitjacket with serious adverse effects on a broad spectrum of human rights." (A/HRC/54/23/Add.1*, summary*)

In that context, my delegation commends the recent adoption by the General Assembly of the resolution entitled "Unilateral economic measures as a means of political and economic coercion against developing countries" (General Assembly resolution 78/135), which requests the Secretary-General to monitor and study the impact of such measures on affected States. My delegation looks forward to the United Nations and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia to conduct a study on the impact of those unilateral coercive measures on United Nations activities and the humanitarian situation in Syria.

The United States of America has not only directly engaged in the aggression against the Gaza Strip alongside the Israeli war criminals and turned a blind eye to the repeated Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure in Syria, but it has also continued its destructive policies by insisting on its illegal military presence on Syrian territory, its support for separatist militias, its theft of Syrian resources, namely, oil, wheat and gas, and its support for, and training of, terrorist groups in the Al-Hol and Rukban camps. In the same context, the Turkish forces continue their illegal presence on Syrian territory, providing logistical, military and financial support to armed terrorist organizations present in north-western Syria that feature on the Security Council's lists of terrorist groups.

The Syrian Arab Republic affirms that the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland constitutes a primary objective and that Syrian refugees returning to their homeland enjoy, like other Syrian citizens, all the rights and duties guaranteed by the Constitution and laws. In that context, my country has taken measures and put in place facilities to provide for the dignified return of refugees. We continue to take a positive approach to overcome the repercussions of the terrorist war against Syria. Following the amnesty decree issued by the President of the Republic last month, the Syrian Government opened the door at the beginning of this month to settling the security situation for everyone who entered or left the Syrian Arab Republic illegally, and also announced further measures related to recruitment and military service laws.

The Syrian Government continues to coordinate and cooperate continuously with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) with a view to improving the humanitarian situation in Syria. My country recently renewed for an additional three months the authorization granted to the United Nations to use the Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai crossings out of our concern for ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches beneficiaries throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, including in the north-west. However, those joint efforts face the real problem of the low funding rate of the humanitarian response plan, which did not exceed 33 per cent, and we are just days away from the end of the year. Owing to the lack of funding, the World Food Programme has announced the end of its food assistance programme, starting next month, across Syria. My delegation is surprised that some United Nations teams have communicated with terrorist organizations listed by the Council and stresses the need for them to stop doing so immediately. We also stress that OCHA's continued presence in Gaziantep is a wasted resource at the expense of those who really need and deserve help.

My country calls for an end to the politicization of humanitarian action, an end to linking early-recovery projects and their funding to political conditionality and for providing sustainable solutions and an immediate and unconditional lifting of unilateral coercive measures. It also stresses the need to stop the repeated Israeli attacks on civilian airports in Syria, which led to the cancellation of a total of 27 United Nations Humanitarian Air Service flights between 12 October and 1 December.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Iravani (Islamic Republic of Iran): We thank Mr. Pedersen, the Special Envoy, and Ms. Doughten, from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, for their briefings.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains extremely challenging. People are grappling with economic hardship, which is worsened by the United States' imposition of unlawful sanctions. Adding to that challenge is the significant underfunding of the humanitarian response plan, with only 32 per cent of the needed funds secured. The significant shortfall is seriously hindering the capacity of the United Nations. A commitment to impartial assistance is crucial to ensuring that humanitarian efforts serve the needs of the affected people without being influenced by political considerations. Donors must refrain from using aid to exert political pressure on the Syrian Government.

On the political track, we support the resumption of meetings of the Constitutional Committee as an effective mechanism for advancing the political process. We support the Special Envoy's efforts and his diplomatic engagement with the parties to facilitate the resumption of Committee meetings and to advance the political process. The role of the United Nations should remain supportive, ensuring that the entire process is guided by Syrian leadership and ownership. Iran stands in favour of the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland. The United Nations, especially the High Commissioner for Refugees, plays a central role in that undertaking. We appreciate and support the engagement and constructive dialogue between Syrian

officials and the United Nations in addressing this pressing issue.

The security situation in areas controlled by illegal foreign forces and under occupation is a matter of serious concern. The primary source of insecurity is the unlawful presence and continued occupation of United States military forces, creating an environment conducive to the growth of terrorist activities within Syria and the broader region. At the same time, the Israeli regime persists in its acts of aggression against Syrian territory. In parallel with the atrocities in the Gaza Strip, the regime engages in terrorism and aggression within Syrian borders, intentionally targeting civilians and critical infrastructure. We strongly condemn the terrorist attack on military advisers in Syria on 2 December, when two Iranian advisers were martyred during their mission to support the Syrian army against terrorism. We reaffirm the inherent right of the Syrian Arab Republic under international law to take all necessary measures in response to terrorist attacks and acts of aggression by the Israeli regime. We warn against any provocative actions by the Israeli regime that could seriously affect peace and security in the region. Iran calls on the Council to condemn the destabilizing activities of the Israeli regime and its severe violation of Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity, which pose a threat to peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion, the groundless allegation made against my country by the representative of the United States in this Chamber, which was repeated by the representative of the United Kingdom, is categorically rejected. Contrary to the unfounded claim, Iran has consistently demonstrated its commitment to promoting peace and security in the region. The United States is fully responsible for its decades-long aggressions, along with other crimes and unlawful measures in our region. Obstructing the Council from fulfilling its Charter-based duties to establish a ceasefire and to stop the Israeli war machine against the people of Gaza for more than two months has called into doubt the United States' real concerns about the spillover of the tension and peace and security in the region.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to the representative of Türkiye.

Mr. Önal (Türkiye): This week marks the eighth anniversary of the adoption of resolution 2254 (2015). The resolution reflects the contours of a consensual road map for the achievement of a lasting solution to the Syrian conflict. It remains the most reliable framework for a sustainable way out of the Syrian crisis, which is through an inclusive, Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people. It mandates the United Nations to convene representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process, and most importantly, it stresses the undeniable fact that it is the Syrian people who will decide the future of their country — all Syrians, including the opposition, the diaspora and refugees.

Eight years after its adoption in the Chamber, the vision, goals and road map set forth in resolution 2254 (2015) continue to constitute the international consensus on the resolution of the Syrian conflict. Nonetheless, Syria has recently fallen off many radars. The current fragility of the situation in the country and the wider region should not hold us back from addressing the root causes of the problem.

Syria is not a post-conflict country. It cannot be, without its territorial integrity and political unity being guaranteed. Neither can it be, without a reinvigorated political process, in line with resolution 2254 (2015), or without putting an end to the separatist agenda of terrorist organizations and creating the conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees. Our overall efforts towards the settlement of the conflict must be aimed at genuine national reconciliation. However, that is not possible by playing against time, with half-hearted efforts that do not contribute to those objectives. It is imperative to overcome the current inertia on the political track and to convene the ninth round of the Constitutional Committee, without further delay.

The status quo in Syria has become unsustainable, not only politically but also in terms of its humanitarian and security dimensions. In the thirteenth year of the conflict, the living conditions of the Syrian people are getting harder every day. It is becoming more difficult to access basic needs. The economic crisis is worsening. Deprivation is an everyday reality for millions.

In the face of exacerbating domestic problems, as well as the risk of a regional conflagration of the conflict in Gaza, the preservation of calm in Syria is of critical importance. That is why we call on all relevant parties, both in the region and beyond, to de-escalate tensions.

Regrettably, today we once again heard a reference by the Special Envoy to the Syrian Democratic Forces — an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party/People's Protection Units (PKK/YPG) terrorist organization, as if it were a legitimate actor. Türkiye's counter-terrorism operations in the country are an exercise of its inherent right of self-defence in response to the acts of terrorism perpetrated by this organization. The PKK/YPG terrorist organization continues its attempts to advance its separatist agenda in Syria. Those attempts include oppressing local populations, forcibly recruiting children and the military use and exploitation of civilian infrastructure. I would like to underline once again that empowering that terrorist organization serves no purpose other than that of sowing the seeds of further instability in Syria and beyond. We will certainly not allow this criminal entity to realize its insidious designs.

As regards the humanitarian situation, we observe that serious shortcomings have emerged in the past few months. We would like to emphasize the importance of the uninterrupted delivery of cross-border humanitarian assistance, which helps 4.1 million people to hold on to life in north-west Syria. In that connection, we once again underline the significance of the United Nations monitoring mechanism, which guarantees the transparency of aid deliveries. Planned budget cuts to humanitarian assistance for Syria are also a serious source of concern. Under those circumstances, all stakeholders and donors have important responsibilities to help eliminate the risks facing the United Nations humanitarian response in Syria. We expect the continued use of the Bab Al-Hawa, Bab Al-Salam and Bab Al-Rai border crossings for United Nations aid deliveries. The continued engagement of the Security Council is essential in that regard.

Türkiye will continue to support the people of Syria and all initiatives towards a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): 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 noon.