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Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, **

Summary

On 8 December 2024, President Bashar al-Assad and his Government were ousted from power in the Syrian Arab Republic by a coalition of armed groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham at the conclusion of a military offensive launched on 27 November 2024. During the offensive, thousands of detainees were released in former government-held areas, some after decades in detention.

Caretaker authorities were put in place by the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Ahmed al-Sharaa, for a transitional period until March 2025, with the promise of a national dialogue leading to a more inclusive Government, to be followed by constitutional reform and elections. On 29 January 2025, the Military Operations Command announced the repeal of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic of 2012, the dissolution of the previous parliament and the Baath Party and the disbandment of the former Government's military and security forces. Mr. Al-Sharaa was appointed the interim President for the transitional period.

In December 2024 and January 2025, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic was granted access to the Syrian Arab Republic for the first time since it began its work in September 2011. The Commission engaged with the new authorities and with civil society and conducted on-site visits to several emptied prisons and detention facilities and to mass grave sites.

The present report is focused on providing an update to the Human Rights Council on developments relating to respect for human rights and humanitarian law since the fall of the previous Government. It includes a discussion of some of the key challenges that the Syrian Arab Republic may face and the actions that may be required to meet the justice-based needs of the Syrian people and to restore stability to the country. A forthcoming document will cover the period from 1 July to 31 December 2024 to ensure that the recording of violations committed during that period is maintained.

* The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline as a result of consultations with the Member State.

** Annexes to the present document are reproduced as received, in the language of submission only.



I. Introduction

1. The present report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic¹ is focused on developments in the Syrian Arab Republic that took place between 8 December 2024 and late January 2025, when the report was drafted.² Identified in the report are key challenges that the Syrian Arab Republic may face in the immediate future and actions that may be required to meet the justice-based needs of the Syrian people and restore stability to the country.

II. Overthrow of the Government

2. On 8 December 2024, more than 13 years after it was challenged by peaceful protests, the Government of President Bashar al-Assad fell. President Al-Assad had led the country from July 2000, after succeeding his father, Hafez al-Assad. The departure of President Bashar al-Assad ended a rule of more than 50 years by the Assad family. The President fled the country and opposition forces entered and took over Damascus. Over the course of the preceding 12 days, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham,³ together with a coalition of opposition forces, had captured Aleppo, Hama and Homs in an offensive entitled "Operation Deterrence of Aggression", which had been launched on 27 November 2024 amid intensified air strikes, first-person view and "suicide" drone attacks and shelling on southern Idlib by pro-government forces, which killed and injured large numbers of civilians.

3. The removal of President Assad raised hopes of an end to an armed conflict that grew out of the brutal government crackdown on peaceful protests that had begun in 2011. Various States Members of the United Nations intervened, further fuelling and prolonging the violence, with more than 15 million Syrians (over two thirds of the pre-war population) forced to flee their homes since the start of the conflict and hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.⁴ Communities have been deeply damaged by the ongoing conflict, the humanitarian and economic catastrophes and the extensive destruction of the country's cities, civilian infrastructure, medical and education facilities and heritage sites, among others. The Commission has compiled confidential lists of alleged perpetrators of violations and crimes committed in the Syrian Arab Republic by all parties to the conflict.⁵

4. Many of the violations and crimes occurred in the context of detention. The Commission has found that the previous Government committed crimes against humanity, including extermination, murder, rape and sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearance and imprisonment. Throughout the conflict, with regard to different State and non-State parties, the Commission has also documented patterns of summary executions, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearance and torture, including sexual violence, and has found such violations to be a hallmark of the conflict.⁶

¹ The Commissioners are Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro (Chair), Hanny Megally and Lynn Welchman.

² See annex III for the Commission's press releases during that period.

³ Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham was listed as a terrorist entity in accordance with Security Council resolution 2170 (2014). See also [A/HRC/46/54](#), para. 7, footnote 13.

⁴ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has estimated that 306,887 direct civilian deaths occurred in the conflict between 1 March 2011 and 31 March 2021 (see [A/HRC/50/68](#)). In addition, since 2011, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 6 million Syrian refugees have been registered and, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 7.2 million internally displaced persons have been registered. Millions of refugees have been registered by host States in Europe and the Middle East. See also <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/31169-unhcrs-grandi-calls-for-global-action-to-support-syrians-returning-home.html>.

⁵ [A/HRC/46/54](#), para. 70.

⁶ See [A/HRC/46/55](#); <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2013/12/un-panel-concludes-enforced-disappearances-syria-widespread-and-being-used?sub-site=HRC>; <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/no-end-in-sight>; and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/web-agony-un-commissions-report-unveils-depths-former-governments-detention>.

5. While thousands of detainees were released from detention facilities, the fate of the many who disappeared while in State custody, estimated at over 100,000 persons, remained unclear, with fears that they were executed or died in custody.

6. Documents and evidence located in core State institutions, such as military judiciary and military police facilities, detention centres run by the former Government's intelligence agencies and prisons, will be vital for clarifying the fate of disappeared persons and pursuing accountability for crimes and violations. In mid-December 2024, during its first mission⁷ to the Syrian Arab Republic, the Commission was concerned to find that, in some places, evidence may deliberately have been removed, burned or otherwise destroyed. It called upon the new authorities to protect evidence and possible mass grave sites as a matter of priority.⁸ By the time of its second mission, in early January 2025, the Commission observed that a number of steps had been taken to secure many sites, although more efforts, including to raise awareness about the importance of preserving evidence, were needed. The Commission also visited a number of mass grave sites and received information about the existence of several more.⁹

7. Given that the former Government repeatedly denied the Commission access and any form of dialogue,¹⁰ the willingness of the new authorities to engage with the Commission on human rights issues is a welcome change. The issues and challenges discussed during the Commission's January 2025 mission to the Syrian Arab Republic included the importance of not repeating the mistakes and abuses of the past and of taking the steps necessary to achieve justice and accountability. The Commission was informed about the challenges of ensuring security for all citizens and the need to reform and strengthen the judicial system to enable all Syrians to have access to justice and thereby to avoid a resort to acts of revenge and vigilante justice. The importance of protecting evidence and of treating all detainees humanely, including former government forces and officials suspected of crimes, was highlighted, with a particular focus on ensuring access to all those in detention and guarantees of fair trial.

8. Since the fall of President Al-Assad, an orderly handover by former Prime Minister Mohammad al-Jalali to the newly appointed caretaker, Prime Minister Mohammed al-Bashir, was facilitated by the then Head of the Military Operations Command, Mr. Al-Sharaa. Most government employees were asked to resume their functions in an effort to ensure continuity. The new authorities also announced a general amnesty¹¹ for those who had been conscripted into the Syrian Arab Army and vowed to hold accountable security and army officers who had been involved in crimes.¹² Women were appointed to the roles of Central Bank Governor and Governor of Suwayda.

9. The caretaker authorities under Prime Minister Al-Bashir, who previously served as Prime Minister in the Salvation Government,¹³ are, at the time of writing, tasked with overseeing a brief transitional period until 1 March 2025. The caretaker authorities have indicated that efforts are under way to organize a national dialogue within the next three months, to be followed by the drafting of a new constitution and the convening of national elections within four years.

10. Many Member States welcomed the fall of President Al-Assad, expressing a mix of cautious optimism and concern over the stability of the country and its future. Multiple high-level delegations visited Damascus to meet with the new authorities. Member States,

⁷ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/12/un-commission-inquiry-team-visits-syria-welcomes-encouraging-signs-new>.

⁸ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/12/un-syria-commission-calls-protection-civilians-humane-treatment-ex>.

⁹ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/un-syria-commissioner-underscores-solidarity-syrian-people-first-mission>.

¹⁰ See [A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1](#).

¹¹ Syrian Arab News Agency, Telegram post, 9 December 2024, available at <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/119101> (in Arabic).

¹² Syrian Arab News Agency, Telegram post, 10 January 2025, available at <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/120891> (in Arabic).

¹³ [A/HRC/39/65](#), para. 60.

including in meetings held in Aqaba, Jordan, on 14 December 2024, and Riyadh on 12 January 2025, reiterated the international community's support for a peaceful and inclusive political transition and an immediate cessation of hostilities.

11. At the time of writing, discussions were ongoing regarding, inter alia, the suspension or lifting of sanctions and the delisting of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham from the United Nations list of terrorist entities. On 6 January 2025, the Department of the Treasury of the United States of America issued a general licence for six months aimed at ensuring that United States sanctions did not impede essential services, including the provision of electricity, energy, water and sanitation.¹⁴ On 27 January 2025, the European Union announced that it had agreed on a road map to ease sanctions against the Syrian Arab Republic.¹⁵ The Commission has urged Member States to suspend all unilateral sectoral sanctions to allow Syrians to begin to rebuild their country.¹⁶

12. In January 2025, the caretaker authorities invited the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to visit the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition to considering the referral of the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court and ratifying the Rome Statute of the Court, the caretaker authorities may wish to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to emphasize that such violations have no place in a new Syrian Arab Republic.

13. After meeting with the military faction leaders on 29 January, the Military Operations Command announced the repeal of the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, the dissolution of the parliament, the disbandment of the former Government's military and security forces and the dissolution of the Baath Party. In addition, all military factions would be integrated under a unified command, with Mr. Al-Sharaa appointed as the interim de facto leader of the caretaker authorities during the transitional period. Mr. Al-Sharaa was also tasked with establishing an interim legislative council.

III. Dynamics leading up to the fall of the previous Government

14. In the months preceding President Al-Assad's departure, violence and human rights violations continued unabated across the Syrian Arab Republic.¹⁷ Political and social fragmentation, coupled with economic and humanitarian deterioration, deepened while the former Government refused to engage in substantive talks to find a just resolution to the conflict.

15. To the contrary, attacks by former pro-government forces¹⁸ on densely populated civilian areas with airstrikes, artillery and first-person view and suicide drones continued until the very last days of President Al-Assad's rule. Such attacks killed and maimed scores of civilians, including women and children.

16. Until 8 December 2024, political freedoms remained severely curtailed. Candidates from the Baath Party and their allies won the majority of seats in the parliamentary elections amid widely shared expectations that the newly elected parliament would pass a

¹⁴ See <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2770>.

¹⁵ Kaja Kallas (@kajakallas), "EU Foreign Ministers just agreed on a roadmap to ease the EU sanctions on Syria. While we aim to move fast, the lifting of sanctions can be reversed if wrong steps are taken.", 27 January 2025, available at <https://x.com/kajakallas/status/1883902899174154643>; and Asaad al-Shaibani (@Asaad_Shaibani), "We welcome the positive step taken by the European Union to suspend sanctions on Syria for one year, and look forward to seeing them lifted completely. We hope that this decision will have a constructive impact on all aspects of life for the Syrian people and ensure sustainable development.", 27 January 2025, available at https://x.com/Asaad_Shaibani/status/1883920806520238150.

¹⁶ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/12/un-syria-commission-calls-protection-civilians-humane-treatment-ex>.

¹⁷ A forthcoming document will cover the period from 1 July to 31 December 2024 to ensure that the recording of violations committed during that period is maintained.

¹⁸ A/HRC/46/54, para. 19.

constitutional amendment to extend President Al-Assad's term, which was due to end in 2028.

17. Despite the curtailed civic space, Syrians continued to demonstrate against the Government. In Suwayda Governorate, protests continued throughout 2024, reflecting growing frustration with the Government's inability to improve the political and economic conditions. Farther north, the prospect of the reopening of the Abu al-Zandayn crossing, which connected areas controlled by the Government and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army in Aleppo Governorate, triggered demonstrations due to fears that it was a prelude to the normalization of relations between the Governments of the Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye. In southern Syrian Arab Republic, reconciliation agreements imposed by the Government continued to falter, escalating tensions there.

18. Meanwhile, some countries sought to normalize relations with the Syrian Arab Republic in an attempt to address their national and regional interests. Normalization with neighbouring States through the League of Arab States moved slowly, with the Arab Liaison Committee meeting for the second time on 10 September 2024, a year after its first meeting. President Al-Assad appeared reluctant to provide concessions. Relations with Türkiye did not advance either, with President Al-Assad insisting on a framework agreement for the withdrawal of the Turkish Armed Forces from the Syrian Arab Republic prior to any talks.

19. At the same time, increased regional hostilities linked to the wars in Gaza and Lebanon continued to have a profound impact on the Syrian Arab Republic. The Israel Defense Forces were increasingly targeting sites allegedly linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hizbullah inside the Syrian Arab Republic as well as Syrian military sites, reportedly seeking to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hizbullah and other groups affiliated with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, military bases of the United States in the Syrian Arab Republic were repeatedly attacked by Iran-backed militias.¹⁹ The United States conducted numerous strikes on militias backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran in November 2024, which were reportedly intended to degrade the militias' ability to plan and launch future attacks on United States forces and United States-led coalition forces in the region.²⁰

20. Regional dynamics, including attacks by Israel on first- and second-tier Hizbullah leaders, such as the killing of the secretary-general of Hizbullah, Hassan Nasrallah, led to a reduced presence in the Syrian Arab Republic of Hizbullah and other armed groups affiliated with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Simultaneously, the Russian Federation had decreased the number of its forces in the Syrian Arab Republic as a result of changing dynamics following its invasion of Ukraine. Against the background of the weakening of pro-government forces, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham launched its offensive on Aleppo on 27 November 2024, immediately after a ceasefire had been reached between Israel and Lebanon. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation did not provide significant support to the Government to resist the advances of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham on Damascus.

21. The Southern Operations Room coalition, which had emerged out of the opposition armed groups present in the southern governorates, coordinated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to capture Damascus and was the first opposition group to enter the capital.

IV. Developments since late November 2024

22. The fall of President Al-Assad's Government in the Syrian Arab Republic has not entailed the end of conflict in Syria. In the north and north-east of the country, advances by the Syrian National Army into areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces and other armed groups risked furthering conflict that would impact civilians who had been displaced since

¹⁹ See <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3961583/centcom-forces-strike-iranian-aligned-targets-in-syria-in-response-to-attacks-o>; and <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3963055/us-central-command-forces-strike-iranian-aligned-targets-in-syria-in-response-t>.

²⁰ Ibid.

30 November 2024. Long-standing grievances held by Arab tribes in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces also threatened security and stability in the east of the country. Air strikes suspected of being carried out by Türkiye persisted in the north and north-east. Da'esh continued to increase its operational pace.²¹ Air strikes by Israel and insecurity continued to plague central, eastern and southern Syrian Arab Republic, while the Israel Defense Forces made repeated incursions into south-western Syrian Arab Republic, pushing beyond the occupied Golan Heights farther into Syrian territory. The security situation in southern Syrian Arab Republic remained complex and volatile, shaped by ongoing tensions between rival armed groups.

23. During the first weeks of the caretaker authorities' rule, security operations aimed at pursuing remnants of the previous Government, who had not laid down their arms, sparked clashes and led to growing unrest and insecurity in the coastal region.²² The Commission received allegations of killings, looting, abductions and kidnappings in Latakia, Tartus, Homs and Hama Governorates.

24. As the previous Government and its forces withdrew from western Syrian Arab Republic, several attacks were reported that appeared to constitute retaliation against persons and property. The Commission received allegations of physical violence, looting and damage to property in areas previously controlled by the former Government. For instance, a video, filmed in December 2024 and circulating on social media, appeared to show the execution by members of an armed group of two hors de combat former Syrian Arab Army soldiers at a farm in Al Rabia in the Hama countryside.

25. In late January 2025, the Commission received additional reports of executions carried out by armed individuals against former pro-government security force members and individuals perceived to be affiliated with the former Government in rural Damascus and Homs Governorates. Investigations into those and similar incidents are ongoing.

26. The Commission took note of public statements made in December 2024 by the caretaker authorities that earlier incidents of abuse in prisons run by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib "were not done under our orders or directions" and that Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had already held those involved accountable.²³ The caretaker authorities also committed to holding accountable those who had committed crimes against the Syrian people.²⁴ The Commission looks forward to continued engagement with the new authorities to ensure that such violations are brought to an end and that families obtain justice and accountability.²⁵

27. As the former Government was collapsing, the Israel Defense Forces carried out an unprecedented military campaign across the Syrian Arab Republic between 8 and 17 December 2024, which included more than 350 strikes on military facilities, equipment and supplies.²⁶ For the first time since 1973, the Israel Defense Forces crossed over the demilitarized buffer zone to occupy several strategic locations, including Mount Hermon and parts of Quneitra Governorate and the Jazirah region. Israel declared that the 1974 United Nations-monitored Agreement on Disengagement between Israeli and Syrian Forces

²¹ S/2024/583, paras. 5 and 43; and A/HRC/57/86, para. 9.

²² See *حمص في المخلوع النظام عناصر من موقفاً 275 سراح يطلق العام الأمن* (in Arabic).

²³ See <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/06/middleeast/syria-rebel-forces-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-al-jolani-intl-latam/index.html>.

²⁴ Syrian Arab News Agency, Telegram post, 10 January 2025, <https://t.me/SyrianArabNewsAgency/120891> (in Arabic); and Levant24 (@Levant_24), "Syrian Minister of Justice, Shadi Al-Waisi: 'Special courts will be established to prosecute those who committed crimes against the Syrian people.'", 14 January 2025, available at https://x.com/Levant_24/status/1879147960778596675?mx=2.

²⁵ Commission meetings with caretaker authorities in Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, on 6 and 8 January 2025.

²⁶ See "The IDF Struck Strategic Weapons Stockpiles in Syria", 12 December 2024, available at <https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/idf-press-releases-israel-at-war/december24-pr/the-idf-struck-strategic-weapons-stockpiles-in-syria>; and https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2024-12-17_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o.pedersen_briefing_as_delivered_13_0.pdf.

had collapsed following the fall of the Government of President Al-Assad.²⁷ The Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations submitted identical letters to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council on 9 December 2024 condemning “Israeli aggression in the strongest terms”, deeming it a grave violation of the Disengagement Agreement and of the country’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity.²⁸ Likewise, the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force stated that it had informed its Israeli counterparts that the Israeli actions constituted a violation of the Disengagement Agreement²⁹ and the Secretary-General condemned those acts as violations of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.³⁰ The presence of Israeli forces located within and to the east of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force area of operations is depicted on the map in annex II. The Israel Defense Forces’ evacuation orders triggered displacement in southern Syrian Arab Republic, further heightening tensions between Israel and the Syrian Arab Republic.³¹ Civilians protesting against the incursion by Israel in Dara’a and Quneitra Governorates were reportedly met with live ammunition as Israeli soldiers opened fire on protesters.

28. In other areas of southern Syrian Arab Republic, the security situation remained unstable, with reported incidents of killings, kidnappings and looting by unidentified perpetrators in Dara’a Governorate and southern rural Damascus. In Suwayda Governorate, sporadic protests continued. Mr. Al-Sharaa met with the leader of the Druze community to address their concerns.

29. Separately, the fall of the former Government resulted in the opening of routes out of the Rukban camp for internally displaced persons, and the remaining population was reportedly able to depart.

30. Three days after the Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham-led offensive started, on 30 November 2024, the Syrian National Army³² launched an offensive entitled “Operation Dawn of Freedom” against government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Aleppo Governorate. The operation sparked a massive displacement of civilians, many of them Kurds displaced from Afrin during Operation Olive Branch in 2018, towards territory held by the Syrian Democratic Forces in the north-east.³³ The Syrian National Army captured Manbij from the Syrian Democratic Forces on 11 December 2024. At the time of writing, intense clashes, aerial attacks and shelling, including in residential areas, affecting civilian objects and causing civilian casualties and power outages, continued to be reported in front-line areas. The looting of public and private facilities, including homes, schools and medical facilities, was widely reported. Civilians were reportedly subjected to threats and robberies by fighters and forced to pay bribes and hand over valuables to pass checkpoints. Videos of ill-treatment and the execution of wounded Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Arab Army fighters have circulated on pro-Syrian National Army social media.

31. Da’esh cells remained in the desert of the Syrian Arab Republic and Dayr al-Zawr Governorate. The United States Central Command forces claimed that it had struck more than 75 Da’esh targets in the Syrian Arab Republic on the day that former President Al-Assad fled the country. Since then, United States Central Command forces continued to target alleged Da’esh camps and operatives. The Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by forces of

²⁷ Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu), “This is a historic day for the Middle East. The collapse of the Assad regime, the tyranny in Damascus, offers great opportunity but also is fraught with significant dangers ... We send a hand of peace to all those beyond our border in Syria: to the Druze, to the Kurds, to the Christians and to the Muslims who want to live in peace with Israel”, 8 December 2024, available at <https://x.com/netanyahu/status/1865757924594786810>.

²⁸ [A/79/687-S/2024/888](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2024-12-19/secretary-generals-press-encounter-syria).

²⁹ See <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/undof-press-statement>.

³⁰ See <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/press-encounter/2024-12-19/secretary-generals-press-encounter-syria>.

³¹ See <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2024-12-19.html-0>.

³² [A/HRC/42/51](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2024-12-19.html-0), para. 16; and [A/HRC/46/54](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2024-12-19.html-0), para. 18.

³³ See <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-flash-update-no-4-recent-developments-syria-10-december-2024>.

the United States, also conducted an operation against Da'esh near Dayr al-Zawr in early January 2025, resulting in the capture of alleged Da'esh operatives.³⁴

32. Over the past nine years, the Syrian Democratic Forces have continued to detain approximately 9,000 Syrian and foreign men and boys³⁵ suspected of former membership or association with Da'esh, holding them without adequate review or judicial guarantees and often incommunicado.³⁶ The Syrian Democratic Forces also have continued to hold over 40,000 people, including more than 25,000 children,³⁷ allegedly affiliated with Da'esh fighters in internment camps in the north-east.³⁸

33. On 23 January 2025, the self-administration in the north-east announced that it would allow Syrian residents of the Hawl camp in Hasakah to return voluntarily to their original homes in the Syrian Arab Republic.³⁹ When a similar decision was made in 2020, many families who were from government-controlled areas refused due to fears of the former Government. The self-administration stated there was no longer any reason to remain in the camp and pledged to provide transportation and the support necessary for those wishing to leave.⁴⁰

34. Since the fall of the former Government on 8 December 2024, more than 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned, many for the first time in over a decade.⁴¹ Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons who had finally been able to visit their homes described to the Commission how entire towns and infrastructure had been destroyed: homes were no longer standing and had been looted and damaged and were without any basic services.⁴²

V. Challenges ahead

35. The fall of the previous Government marks a new beginning for the Syrian people, who have suffered unspeakable violence and atrocities over the past 14 years. At the same time, the Syrian Arab Republic remains deeply fragmented, with non-State armed groups and

³⁴ See <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/4022514/centcom-and-partner-forces-conduct-operations-in-iraq-and-syria-to-defeat-isis>.

³⁵ See https://media.defense.gov/2024/May/02/2003455786/-1/-1/1/OIR_Q2_MAR2024_FINAL_508.PDF.

³⁶ A/HRC/46/55, para. 95; A/HRC/51/45, paras. 94 and 101; A/HRC/52/69, para. 120; and A/HRC/54/58, para. 97. See also the conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic on torture and ill-treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic, 2020–2023, para. 111, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session53/A-HRC-53-CRP5.docx>.

³⁷ As at 31 December 2024, 42,249 persons, including 25,588 children and 13,719 women.

³⁸ See Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, “Punishing the innocent: ending violations against children in north-east Syria”, Policy Paper, 20 March 2024, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyr/policypapersieges29aywar/2024-03-18-punishing-innocent.pdf>; and A/HRC/49/77, para. 112. See also, for example, International Committee of the Red Cross, *Detention by Non-State Armed Groups: Obligations under International Humanitarian Law and Examples of How to Implement Them* (Geneva, 2023), pp. 37, 38 and 55–57.

³⁹ (@aanes_official), “As Syria enters a new phase with the fall of the Assad regime, we open the door for the voluntary return of Syrians in Al-Hol camp to their areas with full support. We urge the UN to ensure the safe return of the displaced from Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad”, 23 January 2025, available at https://x.com/aanes_official/status/1882349857601732789.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-11>.

⁴² See the conference room paper of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic on pillage and plunder: unlawful appropriation and destruction of properties of refugees and internally displaced persons in the Syrian Arab Republic, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyr/a-hrc-58-crp2-coi-syria-20250206.pdf>.

regional powers continuing to vie for control or influence over different parts of the country. It is now time to prioritize the needs of Syrians and set the country on a course towards a stable, prosperous and just future, one that ensures the human rights and dignity that have long been denied to its people.

36. The caretaker authorities face many challenges in a country torn apart by one of the deadliest conflicts of the century and with a massive displacement crisis. Communities have been deeply damaged by the ongoing conflict and the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, causing sectarian and ethnic divisions and challenges to a safe, stable, rights-respecting Syrian Arab Republic.

37. The caretaker authorities have made welcome statements about their commitment to protecting the human rights of all Syrian citizens irrespective of their ethnic or religious background. They have also provided assurances to former officials and soldiers who have laid down their arms.⁴³

38. Looking ahead, Syrians have articulated several issues that they need and expect the new authorities to address, including seeking justice and accountability for the atrocities committed during the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and ensuring that such abuses are never repeated in the country. Legislative, judicial and institutional reforms are required to ensure that laws and State bodies that previously violated fundamental rights will, in the future, respect and protect those rights. Such reforms are essential for equipping a judiciary capable of pursuing justice and accountability for past crimes. Reforming the domestic law of the Syrian Arab Republic, including criminal laws, the counter-terrorism framework and the judicial system, are crucial steps in ensuring access to justice.

39. Syrians have also expressed the vital need to protect and preserve evidence of crimes and human rights violations or abuses, which will serve future justice-related processes and the search for the truth. That includes, but is not limited to, clarifying the fate and whereabouts of the thousands of missing and disappeared persons. The search for the truth might optimally encompass an effort to understand the root causes of the grievances that led to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Syrians have further identified the requirement for the new authorities to address the justice-based needs of the victims and survivors, such as through reparations programmes and the provision of other remedies, including tackling the challenges around housing, land and property rights and missing civil documentation and the provision of mental health and psychosocial support.

40. The widespread destruction and looting of cities, towns and villages perpetrated by former government forces and non-State armed groups during the conflict constitute significant obstacles to Syrians returning to their original homes and lands. A rapid improvement in access to services, including electricity, and an overall improvement in the economic situation would assist people as they begin to rebuild.

41. Civil society will have much to contribute to building a new Syrian Arab Republic. There is a need to remove the former Government's restrictions that impeded Syrian civil society organizations from operating in the country.

42. Those priorities for the Syrian people will require a large-scale effort, in which the new authorities could engage with the national and international human rights and humanitarian entities that have offered to aid in the endeavour, including Syrian civil society organizations and family associations, the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. It is essential that Syrians take the lead in shaping justice and accountability efforts with the full support of the international community.

⁴³ Deterring aggression (Syria) (@Deterring aggression (Syria)), "To our heroic revolutionaries, and to the soldiers and officers of the Assad regime", Telegram post, 7 December 2024, available at https://t.me/radea_edoan/6651 (in Arabic).

43. Member States should assist the new authorities, Syrian civil society organizations and family associations and international entities in their efforts dedicated to that cause.

44. As the new Syrian Arab Republic is being shaped, Member States can play a key role by urgently lifting sectoral sanctions and reviewing or suspending other sanctions in force to ensure that they are not impeding opportunities to rebuild the country.

45. Improving the economy of the Syrian Arab Republic, which was decimated because of the war, mismanagement and corruption on the part of the former Government and unilateral coercive measures, is a priority for sustainable recovery. The caretaker authorities have begun to initiate steps to reinvigorate local industries, which the international community should fully support.

46. Despite a cessation of hostilities in parts of the country, humanitarian needs remain extremely high. Before 27 November 2024, 16.7 million people in the Syrian Arab Republic were already in need of humanitarian assistance, with 3.1 million of them severely food insecure.⁴⁴ Food shortages have been reported in major cities and the price of bread in Idlib and Aleppo Governates increased by 900 per cent between 27 November and 9 December 2024.⁴⁵ In December 2024, 664,000 persons were newly displaced inside the Syrian Arab Republic, 75 per cent of whom were women and children.⁴⁶ It is imperative that Member States increase their funding now for humanitarian assistance to Syrians, including to internally displaced persons and refugees and for urgently needed reconstruction efforts.

47. Donors and the international community should coordinate their activities to ensure complementarity, inclusion and transparency. The United Nations, Member States and donors must ensure that the Syrian people as a whole lead the process of identifying where international support is required. It is time for the Syrian people to be placed at the centre of all processes and planning. Although conflict continues in parts of the country, after decades of colonialism followed by decades of repression, Syrians at last must be free to forge and implement their collective vision, independent of outside interference but benefiting from international solidarity.

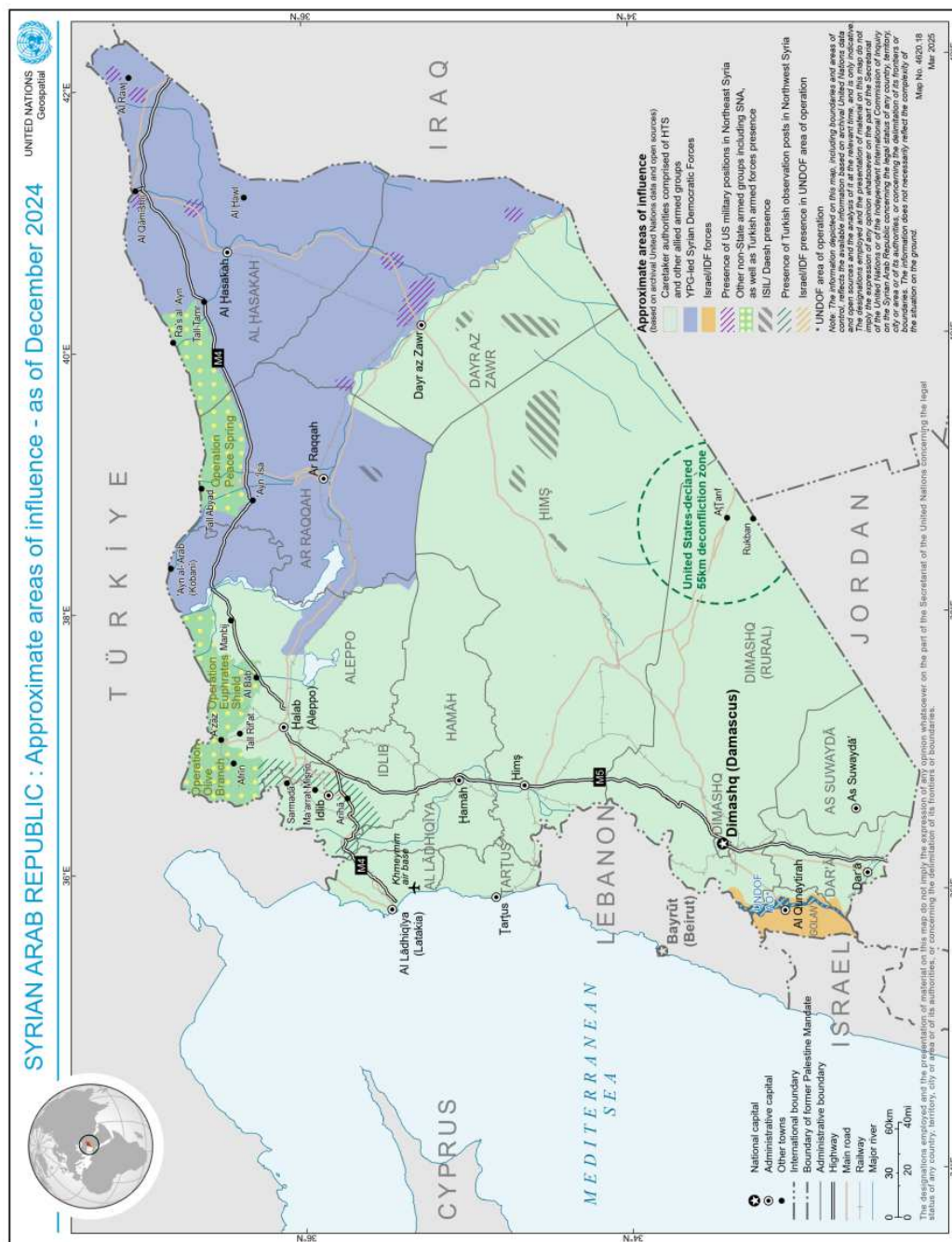
⁴⁴ See <https://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/WFP%20Syria%20Emergency%20Response%20External%20Situation%20Report%232%2027%20December%202024.pdf>.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/whole-syria-flash-update-no-4-recent-developments-syria-10-december-2024>.

⁴⁶ See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-8>.

Annex II

Map of approximate Areas of Influence, December 2024



Annex III

Press releases by the Commission since late November 2024

1. The Commission has issued several press releases since December, calling on the new authorities to break the cycle of violence and serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law that has affected Syria for over 14 years, and to usher in a new rights-respecting era. To ensure truth and justice for victims of such violations and to ascertain the fate of missing relatives, it has called for safeguarding and preserving documentation and evidence, including in former detention facilities and in mass graves. Syrian civil society, supported by the international community, can and must play a central role in these efforts, for which a continued expansion of Syria's civic space is key. As hostilities continue in the north and north-east of the country, the Commission has also called on all parties in the conflict to protect civilians and comply with international law, and to break the destructive cycle of pillage and plunder that the Commission has previously and frequently documented in the wake of shifts in territorial control and mass displacement. It has also called on the international community to support Syrians to rebuild Syria, including by suspending sectoral sanctions imposed on the former authorities, facilitating rebuilding efforts and ensuring increased levels of humanitarian aid.

2. Links to the press releases, in reverse chronological order, are included in the below list:

‘Web of Agony’: UN Commission’s report unveils depths of former government’s detention crimes during first decade of Syrian war

27 January 2025

English

UN Syria Commissioner underscores solidarity with the Syrian people in a first mission to Syria since the Commission’s establishment

9 January 2025

English

UN Commission of Inquiry team visits Syria, welcomes encouraging signs by new authorities to engage on human rights issues, and urges protection of mass graves and evidence

20 December 2024

English

UN Syria Commission calls for protection of civilians, humane treatment of ex-combatants and the safeguarding of evidence of crimes

16 December 2024

English

Never again: UN Syria Commission urges incoming authorities to break the cycle of violence and usher in new rights-respecting era

08 December 2024

English

Brutality of past years must not be repeated, or Syria will be driven onto a new trajectory of atrocities, warns UN Commission

03 December 2024

English