

**United Nations**

International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism
الآلية الدولية المستقلة والمحيدة
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

Briefing Remarks as Delivered:**ASG Robert Petit, Head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) – Syria*****65th plenary meeting of the United Nations General Assembly******Prevention of armed conflict [item 32 (a)]; Note by the Secretary-General (A/79/799)******29 April 2025 – 10 a.m. – General Assembly***

Distinguished President of the General Assembly,**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is an honor to brief the General Assembly for the first time under the agenda item “Prevention of Armed Conflict” since I took over my role as Head of 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. I particularly welcome the presence of Foreign Minister Mr. Asaad Al-Shaibani to this debate.

Mr. President,

The events of 8 December 2024 mark a pivotal moment in Syria's history. As the United Nations Secretary-General said, it is a "flame of hope" that must not be extinguished.

The end of more than 13 years of conflict and 50 years of authoritarian rule constitute an opportunity to build a future Syria on justice and the rule of law. These are the founding principles enshrined in the 2016 resolution that created the Mechanism in this very Assembly. Member States of this Assembly called for ensuring credible and comprehensive accountability for international crimes committed in Syria in order to bring about reconciliation and sustainable peace. The changes we witnessed in December constitute not only a pivotal moment for Syria and Syrians but one for the world – at a time when impunity prevails in many situations where atrocities are committed, and when the international legal order is under threat.



The mass atrocities and human rights violations committed in Syria dominated headlines for years, until they were overshadowed by other events – until it seemed that impunity had prevailed and justice had lost.

For 14 years, despite the selfless and dedicated commitment of Syrians to document their suffering and demand accountability, hope for justice waned.

One bright light was the will of Member States to create the Mechanism and another was provided by those among you who, through universal jurisdiction, doggedly pursued accountability. Now, a new reality can give rise to the fulfilment of that hope.

For these reasons, I am eager to hear from Excellency, Mr. Al-Shaibani and from all of you in today's debate how we can address the situation in Syria together. At the Mechanism, we are ready to play our part as a partner going forward.

Mr. President,

On 21st December 2014, exactly eight years to the day the Mechanism was created, my team and I conducted for the very first time a visit to Syria. This initial diplomatic engagement started a constructive dialogue in exchange with the Syrian authorities, in particular with his excellency, Mr. Al-Shaibani and his team which continues to this day. We are grateful for the warm and welcoming reception, for the expressed commitment to work with us, for the designation of a focal point, and for the ongoing dialogue.

The Mechanism requires permission from the authorities to operate in Syria. Our mandate is unique. To support criminal accountability efforts, our work must withstand the scrutiny of a criminal judicial process. This is the same approach we follow with all Member States of the United Nations, in full respect of their sovereignty, whether regarding the collection and preservation of evidence or the conduct of witness interviews.

During my visits, we observed massive volumes of documentation urgently in need of preservation, including the original Caesar files. They constitute evidence of the industrial scale of the use of torture – of individual whose abuse and ultimate death were documented to give them a veneer of legitimacy.

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We welcome the measures taken by the authorities to protect such data and to restrict and regulate access to sites that are holding valuable information and evidence, which could help demonstrate the criminal liability of those individuals most responsible. We also welcome the plan to appoint a transitional justice commission and a missing persons commission to facilitate Syrian-led dialogue on existing and future justice opportunities. In this context, I would like to stress that the Mechanism is coordinating closely with the Commission of Inquiry and the Independent Institution on Missing Persons, and I am particularly pleased that my colleagues Commissioner Hanny Megally and Assistant Secretary-General Karla Quintana are present here today. Well, we have separate mandates, they are mutually reinforcing and complementary. I am personally grateful for the Commission's documentation and public reporting under difficult circumstances over the years. I strongly welcome the creation of the Institution on Missing Persons, and we remain committed to assisting them in their work going forward.

Mr. President,

The Mechanism was established to advance justice and accountability for the most serious crimes under international law. We are well placed to assess and preserve evidence, interview witnesses, and conduct analyses of the data as well as other investigative activities that would directly support existing and future justice efforts. If of interest to the authorities and the international community, the Mechanism could also offer recommendations, expertise and best practices to support a review of the legal framework and the applicable criminal law standards. We would like to learn more from the Syrian authorities how we could best contribute and add value in accordance with our mandate and terms of reference.

Subject to agreeing on a way forward consistent with those requirements and ensuring the necessary resources can be secured, the authorities and the Mechanism could explore how to support and coordinate with all stakeholders the process of transitional justice. This could include considerations related to digitizing of evidence, creating databases, advancing international judicial cooperation, facilitating the trainings of the judiciary, aligning Syria's criminal code and other procedures with international standards, and developing systems for witness and victim support.

Mr President,



For many years comprehensive justice for Syria has been blocked. But the General Assembly did not give up on justice and created the Mechanism to ensure readiness for accountability opportunities, whenever and wherever they arose. We have been diligently carrying out this important mandate over the past seven years – painstakingly constructing our central repository and conducting our structural investigation to create essential building blocks for justice. We developed an agile framework that allowed us to support many already existing opportunities, while still building foundations for the day when comprehensive justice would be a meaningful prospect.

Despite serious resource constraints, the Mechanism has made substantial progress across multiple fronts. In 2024 alone, we conducted 154 collection activities, expanding our central repository to 280 terabytes of data. This evidence has directly supported successful prosecutions and investigations in multiple jurisdictions and led to the arrest warrants for number of perpetrators.

To date, the Mechanism has received a total of 466 requests for assistance from 16 jurisdictions, related to 321 distinct investigations into crimes committed in Syria by a wide range of perpetrators.

Notably, we supported the French investigations that led to arrest warrants for Bashar Al Assad and his brother Maher, along with eight other senior officials, for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Still, in France, we also assisted the investigation that led to France's first convictions for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Syria. Ali Mamlouk, Jamil Hassan and Abdul Salam Mahmoud were convicted in absentia to life imprisonment last May. In November, with the Mechanism's support to the investigation, a US court charged Jamil Hassan and Abdul Salam Mahmoud for conspiracy to commit war crimes. The Mechanism also contributed an analytical brief to a case against Syria for torture, which started in December before another US Court. The German judiciary has benefited from the Mechanism's contributions to cases which led to new convictions pronounced in December 2024 and is currently conducting five trials into crimes against humanity or war crimes committed in Syria with the active support of the Mechanism.

The Mechanism also contributed to the judicial proceedings that led to the very first convictions for genocide committed in Syria by a Dutch court in December 2024, and a Swedish court in February 2025. We continue to support other trials scheduled for this year in France, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands and in additional countries that we cannot disclose at present.



We continue to progress our structural investigation through the work we are doing on crimes by the Assad regime and by investigating crimes committed by ISIL/Dae'sh. Last summer, we finalized our comprehensive report on the recruitment and use of child soldiers by Da'esh, a report that was shared with jurisdictions. We also continue our investigations into the unlawful attacks on the civilian population, including by the use of chemical weapons.

In December 2024 for the first time, we publicly released a report, a redacted version of an analytical report on the former regime's detention system. The report – based on over 300 witness interviews, forensic medical evidence, government documentation, and expert reports and other evidence – demonstrates patterns of torture, ill-treatment, and related violations across more than 100 government facilities of the former regime. Completion of an Arabic version of the report is underway. The unredacted version of the report has also been made available to the proceedings before the International Court of Justice in proceedings initiated by the Netherlands and Canada concerning Syria's obligations under the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

At the heart of each document, of each testimony, each analysis are people — many lost, many who have survived, each with a right to justice. We remain committed to our victim/survivor-centered approach. And recent efforts including review of our gender strategy to further address the specific challenges faced by women detainees, highlighted in our detention report; to implement our strategy on children and youth, and to initiate further external consultations on the strategy with experts from across the UN system and NGOs; and to the tagging of information related to the missing persons in our systems, helping to clarify the fate of those thousands who disappeared during the conflict.

Mr. President,

Our resource situation was already challenging before the events of December 2024 and the additional constraints faced by the United Nations today. Our regular budget has not increased since 2020, despite our growing workload and the changed realities in Syria. We are facing a funding gap of \$7.5 million for 2025, which may increase once we better understand the situation in Syria and have clarity on the extent to which we can conduct operations there in furtherance of the mandate.



In 2024, we had to cut 13 positions, affecting our work. Investigations slowed down, assistance was delayed, and some justice opportunities were missed. We call on States to support our work by ensuring that we have a sustainable budget that duly responds to the demands we face. We encourage States to consider making voluntary contributions, ideally multi-year commitments, so we can maintain our level of support and react expeditiously when new opportunities arise, including operations in Syria in accordance with permission by the authorities.

Mr. President,

The Mechanism has been mandated to work with existing and future jurisdictions that operate in accordance with international criminal law standards and best practices and policies of the United Nations. The transitional justice process must be an inclusive one, led and owned by Syrians. They must define what justice means for them, whether at the national, regional or the international level, and the mechanism is committed to cooperate.

While Syrian-led and Syrian owned, such efforts could and should be supported by the international community. We have learnt how to address situations of mass atrocities– from Rwanda to Former Yugoslavia, from Cambodia to Liberia. None of these processes were perfect, each a response to their own unique and complex challenges. They cannot and must not be seen as blueprint for Syria but can help pave the way forward.

We must all recognize the enormity of the challenges now facing the authorities in Syria and the stark reality that the needs of the living must be addressed as a priority. It would be futile, and indeed self-defeating, not to recognize that accountability can only occur if it is part of a holistic response to these concrete challenges. The support of the international community must therefore be comprehensive and responsive to Syria's needs and priorities.

However, as his Excellency Mr. Al-Shaibani himself told me, victims must believe that there is hope for justice otherwise violence may appear to be the only remedy. In turn such violence may well threaten the fragile state of the country, directly affecting those in Syria and those who may consider returning.

The Mechanism stands by to contribute. Justice in Syria is no longer an abstract aspiration and a distant political goal – it is a concrete opportunity. Let us not lose this momentum but seize it fully.

I thank you, Mr. President.