

Speech by Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, on behalf of HR/VP Mogherini, at the plenary session of the European Parliament on the situation in Syria

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Vielen Dank Frau Vorsitzende.

The war in Syria has entered yet another new phase, particularly after the US announcement of troop withdrawal. But a political solution to the crisis is still not in sight. It should be clear that the only sustainable way out is a negotiated solution, under the UN auspices. We will not tire of repeating this. Carving out spheres of influence in a partitioned Syria will not bring to peace, security and stability in the country and in the region.

The North-East of Syria is now the subject of negotiations between the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, the US, Russia, Turkey and the Syrian regime. Da'esh is not defeated yet, and it is essential to prevent terrorists making a come-back in the future.

We fully understand the security concerns of Turkey, but we also believe that they can only truly be addressed if the sovereignty and integrity of the Syrian state is preserved.

We hope that any security arrangement for the North will ensure protection for people of all ethnicities and religions, and that it will prevent new suffering and clashes on the ground.

In the meantime, the al-Qaeda wing in Syria, formerly known as Al-Nusra or HTS, is consolidating its control over the Idlib area in the North-West of Syria. This development has forced us to put on hold all resilience programs in the Idlib province as a precautionary measure. The same happened in the South of Syria, where it was not possible to continue our work.

Unfortunately, the needs are dire. The sole positive note is the recent humanitarian delivery in the Ruqban camp on the Jordan border – where 60.000 Syrians are stranded, including many women and children.

Humanitarian organisations need access to the whole country: all the crossing points towards Syria must stay open, in particular those located in the North West and the North East of the country. This is even more urgent during winter and especially for the

hundreds of thousands of displaced people in camps, many of whom are children struggling to survive. We will continue to protect civilians in the event of any offensive, and to advocate for protection of humanitarian workers.

In areas controlled by the regime, we hear reports of arbitrary arrests and forced conscription. There has been no progress on the liberation of political detainees. Corruption is mounting and the war economy is the main source of subsistence for some people.

There can be no European contribution to the reconstruction of Syria, as long as there is not a political transition firmly underway. While the Syrian regime does not engage in the UN-led process and as long as human rights continue to be violated this will not change.

As to the return of Syrian refugees to their land, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] continues to tell us that the conditions for a safe, voluntary, sustainable and dignified return are not yet in place. We also need a system to monitor what happens to returnees, to ensure their protection and to influence conditions for return. We will not ask Syrians to go back to a place where they risk arbitrary detention, forced conscription and torture.

For all these reasons, we continue to support the political process in Geneva as the only just and realistic way to end the war. We cannot afford to simply freeze the conflict: it would be the perfect recipe for more suffering, more radicalisation, more regional instability and more violence.

The High Representative Federica Mogherini is in close touch with the new UN Syria Envoy Geir Pedersen, on how best support him in his efforts. He is currently meeting all stakeholders in order to restart the Geneva process.

And precisely to support the Geneva process, in mid-March we will co-host the third Brussels conference on [Supporting the future of] Syria [and the region] with the UN. The conference will focus on three pillars: support for the political process, humanitarian aid and the regional development component. Our aim will be to ensure pledges to meet the continuing needs of Syrians, and of the countries that have welcomed so many refugees.

This year, we will also host – at the European Parliament in Brussels – a Day of Dialogue with ministers, international NGOs and civil society representatives from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. The people of Syria are asking for a sustainable solution to the war. They demand a country where every Syrian can find their place – beyond all differences of faith, ethnicity, politics and social background.

The people of Syria need a negotiated political solution, that can lead to reconciliation, to reconstruction, and to an inclusive and democratic Syria.

This continues to be our goal, as Europeans, and I thank the European Parliament for your support in the preparations of the envisaged Syria conference.

Thank you very much.

Link to the opening remarks: <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I167420>

Closing remarks

Vielen Dank Frau Präsidentin,

I would like to thank the Honourable Members of this House for these very valuable interventions and I think it was a very useful exchange.

From this debate I conclude that we are all on the same line of support for Syrians and the need to find solutions to the conflict to allow refugees to return to their homes. I also conclude that the European Union engagement needs to be maintained at the same level and under the same conditions. We will not grant legitimacy to the current regime or its return into the international arena without progress in Geneva and without changes on the ground in relation to respect to basic human rights and humanitarian laws.

The Brussels III Conference [on Supporting the future of Syria and the region] will be even more than before about people: more Syrian people will be present, more civil society representatives will come to talk to the ministers and the international organisations about their dreams, their concerns and their future. This Conference will last three days altogether and it will have two days of opportunities, exactly to meet politicians, and to give politicians but also ordinary citizens, civil society organisations, the opportunity to talk to each other and to exchange on what could be done in order to improve the humanitarian situation and to help people on the ground. In particular, we will look even more into the women empowerment and the ways to alleviate the pain of the most vulnerable Syrians while continuing our long term investment in accountability and to provide the necessary support inside but also outside Syria, in particular to the host communities which still have a lot of burden, dealing with Syrian refugees.

On the other hand, I think that we have to face the reality that some – if not to say many – of the Syrian refugees will not return very soon to Syria – if you like it or not. In that respect we also have to see how we can support host communities, host countries in all their efforts to deal with these ongoing challenges.

Thank you very much.

Link to the closing remarks: <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I167427>

Languages:

