

Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the ministerial meeting on Syria crisis

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Dear friends, colleagues,

Thank you all for being here. Let me welcome not just the Ministers and representatives of Syria's neighbouring countries and some further away, but also, and especially, the Syrian civil society representatives who have joined us today.

We gathered all together once again for a reason. First of all, because we are quite stubborn. We have always believed in the need to keep focused on the Syrian crisis, even when the headlines have moved away. And we see that Syria still needs the international community, the region and the different players to come together and support a political solution for the country.

This war will never be ended by weapons. This war can only really be ended by mediation and by a true reconciliation within the Syrian society. This conflict can only be ended through a broad political agreement under the UN auspices.

This is the reason why we have gathered you all today again to reconfirm this common commitment that we share and give all our support to the UN mediation and also to the UN work for the Syrian refugees.

I am glad that yesterday an agreement was found on the formation of the long-awaited Constitutional Committee. This is the first agreement between Syrians since the start of the crisis in 2011. The first such agreement that has not been imposed by outside parties. This is a real step forward for the whole country and for all of us who have been working so much and in particular you, Geir Pedersen, and your predecessors to reach this objective.

This should be seen first and foremost as an opportunity for further steps forward on the ground and with a real impact on the life of the Syrian people.

Syria can only be reborn and can only move forward with a negotiated political solution. A political solution that opens the way towards a united, independent, democratic and inclusive Syria. A political solution that provides the foundation for sustainable peace. We know that peace can be reached on paper with an agreement that is signed but it can then easily collapse after a few weeks or months if its not owned and felt as a real one by the people of the country.

As the Secretary-General said, the establishment of a Constitutional Committee is a very important step in creating the conditions for a political solution, although it is not the political solution itself. We can celebrate and welcome today a good result, while being aware that there are further steps to be taken.

A political solution can and must emerge under the auspices of the United Nations and you, Geir Pedersen, have our full support in this very difficult job. This is the only way to achieve a just and long-lasting solution, one that has the support of the international community, of regional actors, and of all parts of the Syrian society.

It was with this objective in mind that we hosted three consecutive Brussels conferences on the future of Syria and the region, the most recent one last March.

These were not just donors' conferences – even though they have created the opportunity to raise billions of euros in support of Syrians and also in support of their host communities in the neighbouring countries.

At Brussels III alone we collectively mobilised €8.3 billion. This was an excellent result. I am pleased to announce that we have already delivered on over 90% of the pledges made. We have kept our collective promise to the Syrian people and to Syria's neighbours.

But the 3rd Brussels Conference was much more than that. I am proud that we brought to the table not only the decision-makers but also the voice of Syrian civil society and, most importantly, the voice of Syrian women in particular.

On a personal level, I have to say that the determination and resolve of Syrian women has given me hope, because if they, coming from very different backgrounds, managed to find some common ground in very hard times, I believe that the entire society of Syria will be able to reconcile and to find a peaceful future that it deserves.

Most importantly, your presence here and in Brussels is a reminder for all of us. It is a reminder that a political solution has to be grounded in the Syrian reality and in Syria's society. It has to take into account the aspiration of Syria to a new Syria – strong, peaceful and inclusive.

Millions of Syrians are still displaced because of the conflict, both inside and outside of Syria. Let me thank once again those countries and communities that continue so generously to host millions of Syrian refugees, and in particular Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, but also Egypt and Iraq.

We know that every Syrian refugee dreams about going back home. And we all want to support their dream. They have a right to return; and in fact we know that some refugees are already doing so.

Yet these people cannot be forced to go back. The conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return must be there. No one can be forced to go back. Too many Syrians are facing arbitrary arrest and forced conscription when they go home. Many others have seen their properties confiscated.

A way will need to be found - and I believe today we could discuss about this, no doubt with UNHCR playing a leading role and I thank you Filippo [Grandi] for your presence here and the constant work you have done in this respect - to ensure that those returning to Syria are doing so in a safe, voluntary and dignified manner.

A political solution can emerge from the work that can be carried on in these coming weeks and months.

I am glad that we will afterwards hear a first-hand assessment of the situation of refugees from UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi. For us, the UNHCR remains our constant point of reference in this regard.

Hopefully, a “normal” country that needs buildings and infrastructure, but crucially also needs that its citizens can live free from fear, with the guarantee that their full rights and freedoms are respected, can finally be the substance of our common work.

I believe that today we have, maybe for the first time after so many conferences that we have organised on Syria, some encouraging news on the political track. Today is not a day of just acknowledging the good work done but also of recommitting collectively on what needs to be done next. I hope this commitment will allow the UN to fulfil this important task in the weeks ahead.

The EU as usual will be there with its full support.

Thank you.

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