

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary session on the situation in northern Syria

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Thank you Madam President,

The Turkish operation into north-east Syria can open a new dramatic chapter in the already very dark history of the Syrian war.

The potential consequences of such military action are clear to everyone – at least are very clear to us. The repercussions can be extremely serious in humanitarian, military, political and strategic terms. For all these reasons, we call upon Turkey to immediately stop its unilateral military action.

New armed hostilities in the north-east would first of all exacerbate civilian suffering and provoke further displacements. This new escalation adds yet another obstacle to the UN-led political process, after the positive news just a fortnight ago of an intra-Syrian agreement on a Constitutional Committee.

Turkey's unilateral action also threatens the progress achieved by the Global Coalition to defeat Da'esh, of which Turkey is a member. Military action will undermine the security of the Coalition's local partners, namely the Kurdish forces, and risk protracted instability in north-east Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence of Da'esh.

Let us not forget that Da'esh still remains a significant threat to regional, international and European security.

We are also aware of Turkey's intention, in the medium-term, of settling Syrian refugees along the border. It is highly unlikely that a so-called 'safe zone' in north-east Syria, as envisaged by Turkey, would satisfy international criteria for refugee return as laid down by the UNHCR [UN High Commission for Refugees].

It is difficult to imagine how such returns could be either safe, voluntary or in any way dignified. Mass resettlement on a scale suggested by Turkey would also profoundly destabilise an already fragile area. Any attempt at demographic change would be unacceptable for us.

We have always supported Turkey for hosting three million Syrian refugees, providing them with a shelter, assistance and services.

But as President [of the European Commission, Jean-Claude] Juncker made very clear a few hours ago in this hemicycle, there can be no question of the European Union financing the infrastructure to receive hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in north-east Syria. The European Union will not provide stabilisation or development assistance in areas where the rights of local populations are ignored, or even worse, violated.

Beyond the serious humanitarian and security implications, the Turkish incursion might also prevent the Constitutional Committee from beginning its work.

Just two weeks ago we were in New York at the United Nations General Assembly, where we received the encouraging announcement that the regime and the opposition in Syria had reached their first agreement since the beginning of the war, thanks to the UN mediation that we have supported all over these years.

We made it clear back then and all over these days, that this is just the first step but a very important one, a real first step to allow the whole country a potential political resolution of the conflict. Now, we were looking forward to the first meeting of the committee in Geneva – and I would like to say that we are looking forward – possibly even before the end of October.

We hope that the Turkish attack will not delay the first meeting of the Constitutional Committee. Yet we cannot exclude this eventuality.

We ask Turkey to execute an immediate cessation of hostilities. A destabilised north-east Syria, with new ethnic tensions and a resurgent terrorist threat, is certainly not in Turkey's interest.

We have always shared the goal of ending violence, defeating Da'esh and promoting stability in Syria and in the wider region. Turkey has always been in this a key partner for the European Union and a critically important actor in the Syrian crisis and in the region.

But Turkey's legitimate security concerns should be addressed through political and diplomatic means, not military action, in accordance with international humanitarian law. We urge all to always ensure the protection of civilians and unhindered, safe and sustainable humanitarian access throughout Syria.

Our goal remains to help the Syrian people build a united, sovereign, democratic and inclusive Syria.

A sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis will not come through military means. I think that this is very clear to all, at least this is very clear to us Europeans. The only way to achieve peace and security in Syria is the full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 under UN auspices.

Our immediate goal is now to avoid renewed armed hostilities in the north-east of Syria, to stop them, and to do everything in our power to support the UN-led political process. This is why I invited the UN Special Envoy for Syria [Geir] Pedersen to join us at the next

Foreign Affairs Council next Monday in Luxembourg to discuss together the way forward in this critical moment.

The Syria conflict will not be ended by weapons. This war can only be ended by mediation and a true reconciliation within the Syrian society. The conflict can only be ended through a genuine political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties under the UN auspices.

The whole European Union is united behind this goal, and today I have issued a clear declaration on behalf of all 28 Member States to confirm and make extremely our common position. The five coordinating EU Member States of the UN Security Council have now officially asked to bring the issue in front of the UN Security Council, and I understand that this will happen tomorrow.

We will also continue to be in touch with our partners, to obviously update the European Parliament on any relevant developments, and to discuss together – I am looking forward to our exchanges tonight – the way forward in this moment. I think that our position has been very clear from the very beginning of these developments, just a few days ago, to see how we can make this call effective and to have some impact on the ground.

Thank you.

Closing remarks

First of all, I am glad to see that - beyond some nuances or differences in tones - the same kind of analysis across this hemicycle on the fact that this military intervention that Turkey has started in the north-east of Syria has to be stopped. I see this unites this hemicycle as it has united the European Union Member States. I am often asked here to make sure that the European Union speaks with one voice and a clear voice and on time. In this case, I believe we have been speaking clearly and early. As I said, the first reactions we had were immediately after the news of the telephone call that President [of the United States, Donald] Trump and President [of Turkey, Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan held came out during my visit in Jordan. And today again we have a very clear and official position of the 28 Member States that I have made just a few hours ago.

So first, expressing a clear position in time for it to be effective, at least as a call. Second, coordinating with partners - partners in the region, beyond the region, other international organisations - obviously the UN and I am glad that we managed, on the initiative of the EU Member States sitting in the Security Council, to have this point on the agenda there because it is there that it should be addressed. Also - something that has not been raised here so far and I am surprised about that - you might have seen that the NATO Secretary General [Jens] Stoltenberg has the intention to have contacts with one of the NATO allies, Turkey, on this issue. I believe that we need to exchange news and opinions with them as

well to try and avoid that this military intervention goes on. That is, I believe, the urgency in this moment. And I feel the same sense of frustration, urgency, and sorrow that many of you have expressed for what is happening today.

Not only for the civilians that are once again victims, not only for the already internally displaced people that are in that area that are suffering again, but also for the Kurdish forces that have been fighting Daesh in the coalition against Daesh. I very much agree with what some of you have mentioned today, the priority is to focus on the UN listed terrorists organisations and that is Daesh first and foremost and definitely it is not the Kurdish forces. Turkey has a different reading on this. We have been discussing about this several times in a very open manner with Ankara. For the European Union, these forces are definitely not to be defined as terrorist organisations.

The other point that we will put in place is a discussion with the Foreign Ministers on Monday that is being prepared already now. Today we have preparatory meetings and in the coming days this will continue to see what other actions or reactions we can take from now to then and obviously to prepare the European Council that is going to take place only a couple of days later. Some of you have raised other issues and elements on which you have asked me to act. Members of the Parliament know very well that it is not in the hand of the High Representative to take decisions that lie in the hands of sometimes the European Parliament itself - like in the allocation of funding – or sometimes in the hands of Member States individually - like the export of arms - or the Council - such as the possibility of introducing targeted measures, sanctions, or stopping financial flows.

I want to say one thing though. I believe that we have to be careful of not mixing things in a way that can be dangerous. Some of you referred to the controversial but ongoing support that we are giving to Turkey – not only to Turkey, but also to other countries that are hosting Syrian refugees in the region, such as Jordan and Lebanon, but also others such as Iraq and Egypt. We are not giving financial support to those countries, but to the international organisations, starting with the UN agencies, that are helping Syrians in those countries.

I believe that the Syrians would be two, three or four times the victims if we had to think and reflect on stopping that financial support. Because it is thanks to the European Union financial support to those international organisations in those hosting countries, of which one is also Turkey – yes. But the money does not go to Turkey – I think I have said this in this hemicycle many times, but it was a different mandate of the Parliament so I will repeat it today. The money that supports Syrian refugees in Turkey as well as in other countries of the region is not going to Turkish authorities and is not going to Turkey, it is

going to international agencies, it is going to international NGOs, it going to the UN agencies for the Syrian people. I believe it would be a mistake to let them suffer on top of what they are suffering already.

Having said that, you can count on my full determination not only to do everything we can to protect civilians in this moment and to join forces with those with whom we can join forces to protect civilians, but most importantly, and even beyond that, to stop this military intervention that is a mistake under so many points of view. Most of you have said it: from a humanitarian perspective, for the achievements we have had against Daesh, and for – I am surprised that nobody of you mentioned this – the possibility of ISIS undermining seriously the relaunch of the political process under the UN auspices.

Two weeks ago, we were hosting as every year at the UN General Assembly the event on Syria, where together with [Geir] Pedersen [UN Special Envoy for Syria], we were saying that maybe this is beginning of a new possibility of a new political process to start. And it is the first time since years that there is one little, tiny step forward in the possibility of achieving a political solution. And two weeks after this, we have this development that puts at risk also that limited possibility – but a sign of hope – of starting a political process. And obviously, for all the other reasons that have been mentioned here, including the regional balances.

So I really hope that we will manage to join forces with others, I really hope that in the UN Security Council this issue will be addressed tomorrow. You can count on me personally, on the European Union for what we can do in different institutions - Council and Commission. And I count obviously on you, for what concerns the Parliament, to try and use these hours to make the maximum pressure to try and stop this intervention that is definitely not going to bring anything good.

Thank you.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-179002>