European Commission - Speech

Opening remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the afternoon plenary session of the Brussels IV Conference on the future of Syria and the region

30 June 2020

Welcome back to the forth Brussels Conference!

Let me first recall that the European Union's overall objective in Syria remains unchanged: we support the emergence of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned lasting political solution, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This is the only sustainable response to the conflict and the only way to ensure stability for the region.

The Syrian conflict has had a far-reaching impact on the region – in human, political, socio-economic and security terms. The massive displacement of people from Syria continues to pose a challenge for the host countries, in particular Syria's direct neighbours.

The European Union stands by these countries. I would like to express our appreciation for their extraordinary efforts and generosity for hosting millions Syrian refugees. This is especially noteworthy at this time, when our economies across the world, including in Europe and the Middle East, have been battered by the impact of COVID-19 crisis.

As you know, the EU and its Member States have contributed €20 billion to the response to the Syria crisis since 2011, reaching nearly 7 million refugees and vulnerable people in host communities. Our support will continue: you have heard this morning the High Representative/Vice-President announcing the EU pledge for this and next year.

Across the region, the European Union has helped to build schools, provide education, create social safety nets for those without access to livelihoods, help entrepreneurs and exporters, provide jobs, and ensure macro-economic stability.

A lasting and inclusive solution has been central to this work. Our assistance has increasingly focused on strengthening the national systems of service delivery and access to livelihoods. The objective has been to help those currently depending on assistance, first to provide for themselves and their families, and second, to allow them to contribute to the societies in which they live.

We have deliberately supported both hosting communities and the refugees themselves. For instance, we are not only financing school attendance, but also working to improve public education as such.

In Syria, our primary focus is on ensuring that civilians are able to access basic services. Education, livelihoods and healthcare have been at the core of our support. We do this to avoid a lost generation of children and youth.

We also recognise the need for an economic reboot for the region. This will require considerable and systemic efforts to tackle the weaknesses that existed even before the crisis in Syria. The European Union remains ready to support these efforts, together with our partner governments, the private sector and civil society.

I am pleased to co-chair this panel with the UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner and UNHCR Head Filippo Grandi. Before I pass on the floor to them, let me quickly flag to you that the European Commission launched an online consultation to listen to the voices from the ground, from Syria and across the region. We have in fact received over 1400 replies. I encourage you and everybody to read the report on our website.

Thank you very much – Achim, Filippo, I pass the floor to you.

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