Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

The first step in moving towards peace in Syria

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I wanted to start by thanking the Special Envoy and thanking Ms Sabah al-Hallak for their briefing. And as others have said, what you've achieved with the Constitutional Committee is extremely welcome. It's a very positive tone. It could be a very important first step towards stability in Syria. Of course, we all know the amount of effort now required, but we would use today's debate to urge all the parties to seize the opportunity and make full use of the help that you and your team are ready to provide.

We're also incredibly grateful to Ms al-Hallak for joining us today and her reminder that the political process goes a long way beyond the Constitution. It's critical that all elements of Resolution 2254 make progress in tandem, and others have referred to the release of detainees, refugee returns and preparations for free, fair and transparent elections open to all Syrians and that includes the diaspora. And I just want to take this opportunity to add the British voice to that of the US, France and Germany. There will be no reconstruction assistance for Syria without that critical political process, and it goes beyond the Constitution.

It was very welcome to hear Ms al-Hallak's views on the situation of women. It's not just about percentages. It's not just about how many women are formally involved. It's about how genuinely their voices and those voices of civil society are included in the political process. But we recognise your tireless efforts and those of other women to overcome the barriers to being heard. I was in Geneva in 2012 and saw the efforts there of the women of Syria to have a seat at the table, so it's incredibly good news that the Special Envoy and you and your colleagues have been able to achieve that. If there are reports of intimidation of the Constitutional Committee, we hope the UN will deal with those is an urgent priority.

And turning to the situation on the ground, as I said, the German ambassador made many of the points I wanted to make, but I didn't really like the confusion between International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian issues. International Humanitarian Law is not solely about humanitarian assistance. It's about things like attacking civilians. It's about things like bombing hospitals. It's about things like using weapons of mass destruction against civilians. And it's about being able to protect civilians on the ground.

And I think, looked at in that light, it's not the track record of the West that's lacking, it's the track record of the Syrian Arab Republic and its ally, the Russian Federation. And I want to say again in this chamber that attacks on the West and attempts to portray is as harbouring

terrorists or somehow on the side of terrorists. This really does need to cease. We are trying hard to assist the UN in bringing peace to Syria. We are giving money on the humanitarian side.

To that end, we do not deserve nor are the attacks in the Chamber warranted to say, and I quote, that we are “fighting on the side of terrorists.” And if this were repeated outside this chamber as individuals, there would be legal action taken on that statement. So I hope we will hear no more about it. It’s a calumny and it’s untrue, like so many of the other things that have been said about the situation in Syria from the two countries represented to my right.

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