

Syrian crisis: Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Brussels IV Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region

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Ministers, colleagues, I would like to extend to you my warm thanks for having accepted this invitation to the fourth Brussels Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region.

I am pleased to co-host this Conference with United Nations Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock, who is representing Secretary General [of the United Nations, António] Guterres today.

Syria remains, tragically, in the grip of conflict. Half a million people have perished over the last nine years. Six million Syrians remain refugees in the region and beyond. Millions more find themselves displaced within their own country. Our thoughts must go in particular to those displaced by the recent wave of violence in Idlib.

I would also like to pay tribute to the extraordinary efforts of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, that host the bulk of Syrian refugees.

What are the reasons for this Conference? We have not and we will not forget Syria and the Syrian people: that is the first message of today's Conference, it is its main purpose. But we need to go further than thinking about or not forgetting them.

The Syrian people expect all of us to recommit to solving the Syrian conflict. It is not right that they remain the victims of forces beyond their control, condemned to a seeming eternity of neither peace nor war. Today's Conference must result in our common unambiguous support for the full implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254. It is our duty today to take a decisive step, together, towards a political, not a military solution. And there are reasons for hope.

Ministers, colleagues, soon the Syrian conflict will be a decade old. The overall situation appears bleak, yes. The long war is taking its toll on the Syrian economy with a real hardship for many Syrians.

Yet there are reasons for hope. Late last year the regime engaged in a Constitutional Committee and Russia and Turkey negotiated a ceasefire in Idlib at the beginning of March. But much more needs to be done to advance towards a nation-wide ceasefire and a comprehensive political solution in Syria. Because only a political solution can lead to a stable and democratic Syria. We need to seize this political momentum.

In the last few weeks leading up to today's Ministerial [meeting] and during the many events of our Days of Dialogue we have been inspired by the clear demand and fresh ideas of civil society for a new Syria. We also heard the strong appeal from the women of Syria for their full participation in the political process. Syria's women and its civil society offer us another reason for hope.

There is a way forward towards a new Syria. We have to pressure the regime. We, all of us, need to come together to pressure Damascus to engage in a political negotiation. Half-hearted engagement is again not enough. A sense of urgency is now required. This is the only way forward.

We, as the European Union, will continue to exert pressure on the Damascus regime. Our sanctions are in place so that the regime comprehends fully and unambiguously that there can be no normalisation and no reconstruction until it changes its approach, puts a stop to its repression of the Syrian people and engages in [political] negotiations.

The European Union remains resolute in its unequivocal and enduring support for a political solution in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution [2254]. And let me, in this respect, commend the efforts of the United Nations Special Envoy [Geir O. Pedersen] as we look forward to the reconvening of the Constitutional Committee as soon as practicalities allow.

Do not forget the humanitarian side of all of this. Ministers, colleagues, millions of Syrians continue to depend upon international support. We must respond in the name of our common humanity. This is our further task today.

Terrible human suffering and emergency humanitarian needs persist in Syria itself. Syria's refugees remain scattered throughout the region. Therefore we need to extend our support to Syria's neighbours - Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey - that in a spirit of solidarity and generosity harbour millions of Syrian refugees. Iraq and Egypt also deserve our support.

Since 2011, the European Union has collectively provided €20 billion in assistance for the benefit of Syrians in need, in Syria and beyond. This assistance will be provided for as long as necessary, but it will depend on the success of our pledge today.

From the EU institutions alone, [the pledge] is €2.3 billion for this and next year. This includes €560 million for 2021, an increased pledge of over €1 billion for 2020 and €700 million provided in macro financial assistance.

We ask today for generous pledges so that those caught in the crossfire of this conflict, and those who have had to flee their homes, know that they are at least protected.

In the spirit of today's Conference, and in the interest of ordinary people in need in Syria –the displaced, the sick and the suffering– I would like to add my own, personal call for a full renewal in New York next month of the cross-border resolution for Syria. It would be a signal of hope and of confidence in the future of Syria as a country for all Syrians.

Dear Ministers, dear colleagues, dear friends. Let us respond today to the needs of the Syrian people and Syria's refugees.

Let us also make an unequivocal choice, together, to overcome the current political deadlock and move towards a genuine, comprehensive and lasting political settlement of the Syrian conflict.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-192685>.

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