

Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament Plenary Session on the human rights situation in Turkey and the situation in Afrin, Syria

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Check against delivery!

Thank you, Mr President! Let me start by saying that this is not the first, and will not be the last debate we will have in this hemicycle about Turkey. We are holding this debate, I believe, because we care. We care about Turkey, we care about the Turkish people, we care about Turkey's democracy, security and stability, and we care about security and stability in the Turkish region because it is also our region. Sometimes we refer to Turkey only as a candidate country. Let me stress one thing that is obvious: it is first and foremost, through my lens, a regional player that shares the same geographic space with us.

We do have disagreements and we are extremely clear on them. We have what can be defined as a frank dialogue and, let me say this very clearly: our dialogue with Turkey is today more important than ever. The negative trend of the human rights situation in the country has not been reversed. There have been some small steps in certain human rights cases, but violations have continued, hitting prominent civil society figures, users of social media, medical staff, and the list could continue. And this adds to the initial violations we have seen in the last years, which have not been resolved.

Last Friday, Commissioner Hahn and I issued a statement focusing in particular on the unprecedented decision by the Turkish authorities to contradict a ruling by the Constitutional Court. This decision goes against the Turkish Constitution and it casts serious doubt on the independence of Turkey's justice system.

The ongoing state of emergency also remains a key issue of concern. We all know that it was established in one of the most difficult moments in Turkish history, we remember those hours very well, in which we expressed our concern, our proximity with the people and the leadership of Turkey after the attempted coup d'état. Yet, one-and-a-half year later, the state of emergency has allowed measures that go well beyond those initially foreseen, and this has to be clearly stated.

In parallel, it is true, there has been some work to normalise bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU Member States, and this is good news. But I want to be very clear: human rights and fundamental freedoms should apply to all Turkish citizens, to all of them in the same way. In our partnership with Turkey we have always been, as I said,

open and frank. We know that Turkey has faced, and is facing, incredible challenges and we have to acknowledge this: terrorist attacks on its soil, an attempted-coup, a difficult refugee crisis and a war just next door.

We do understand Turkey's concerns, for instance, about the situation at its borders. Turkey has the full right, and I would even say even the duty, to provide safety and security to Turkish citizens living near the border with Syria, yet we are deeply worried about the new front that has been opened in northern Syria. We are worried, first of all, for humanitarian reasons. The new clashes have already resulted in civilian casualties and thousands have been displaced. Humanitarian access must be guaranteed to all those in need. The United Nations is warning that the humanitarian situation all across Syria is definitely not improving, and the people of Syria cannot afford a new front and a new crisis, adding to the other ones still ongoing in the country.

Beyond the humanitarian tragedy, the Afrin offensive could have political consequences on the internal balances inside the future Syria, on the region at large and on the potential for political negotiations, because the new escalation of violence can push further away the chances for a political solution to the conflict. We need – all of us – to concentrate all our energies on supporting the UN-led negotiations in Geneva. That is where any concerns should be raised and addressed.

The war in Syria is not over yet. People are still dying, even if it is going away from the headline news. That is happening in Afrin as well as in Idlib and elsewhere. Opening new fronts is no solution and I am afraid it will not make Turkey more secure. Real security can come only from a negotiated political solution to the conflict. We believe that all military action should focus on UN-listed terrorist organisations, not others; and it should not make peace harder to achieve.

Let me also reiterate that the European Union stays committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. We have to be extremely careful about the moves we make today, in order to avoid consequences for the future set-up in the country.

Peace in Syria will require everyone's contribution and Turkey, as one of the guarantors of the Astana Process, has an essential role to play, as well as special responsibility to play. The agreement reached through the Astana Process on de-escalation zones needs to be pursued and implemented, including in northern Syria. We are working, together with the United Nations and all the international community, to make sure that our second Brussels Conference on the future of Syria and the region, which we will host next spring, supports the UN-led process in an effective and, indeed, a decisive manner, in particular with regard to the prospects for the future, and the need to make sure that each and every Syrian citizen will find in Syria his or her own home, his or her own country, with a system and a prospect of inclusion, and recognition of diversity and the diverse composition of the country and society. That is the only way out of the conflict in a sustainable manner.

Let me finish by saying that, as you probably know, President Erdoğan was in Rome yesterday, where he met Pope Francis. During the meeting – and I quote from the text supplied by the Holy See – ‘the Pope stressed the need to promote peace and reconciliation through dialogue and negotiation, with respect for human rights and international law’. I believe that we can all share the words of Pope Francis on this occasion, and make them ours.

For our part, we will continue our dialogue with Turkey, as we do every single week and, indeed, on a daily basis. We will keep all channels of communication open, working to overcome our differences, working to manage our differences when they remain, and working to find common solutions, when we manage to do so. We do this for ourselves, we do it for the Turkish people, and we do it for peace, security and democracy in our common region, starting with Syria.

Link to the video:

<https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I150323>