European Commission - Speech

Opening Speech by Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the 1st day of the Brussel Syria Conference: Day of dialogue with NGOs and partner organisations

Brussels, 24 April 2018

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

One year after the first Brussels Conference we still see terrible violence in Syria, extraordinary efforts by neighbouring countries and by a large number of partners. We all continue to work for the best, in a situation full of risk, grief and instability – for the refugees, for the people of the region, and for the wider international community.

Today we will show that despite all reasons for despair, we will continue to keep open avenues for hope.

We will work – together – to make a difference to individuals' lives wherever we can. And we will try to support the host countries to shoulder the enormous responsibilities they have taken on all our behalf.

The past year has seen record displacement inside Syria. There have been few returns as the necessary conditions are manifestly not met. Efforts to establish de-escalation zones or a lasting ceasefire have not succeeded. The Syrian regime has refused to engage in peace talks in any meaningful way. AND, there is continued pressure on the resources of host countries.

I was recently in Jordan and Lebanon. We have to applaud all those who are working to rebuild economies around the presence of so many refugees – most of whom will need to stay a while longer.

AND we should not downplay what we can do, and are doing, to help. The international community is helping refugees and Internally Displaced Persons to live in dignity. We are preventing the emergence of a lost generation of youth, even if they may not remember a time without conflict. And we continue to work for a perspective of recovery for the region.

The sad story of this conflict is the story of individual people. Yesterday I was discussing with children, students and young entrepreneurs from across the region. It is staggering to hear how these resilient youngsters have refused to be blocked by adversity. When I hear from teenagers who have trained, to help other kids stay safe; or from a young entrepreneur who has already had to restart his business three times – then I remember how important our work is. That is I am here today and why I am so glad to welcome you.

I am grateful to see so many organisations attending, particularly those who have travelled to be here today – in particular from Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.

I am proud that the EU and its member states have provided over €10.6bn in assistance to Syria and the region since 2011.

This includes €3.4 billion in EU non-humanitarian assistance to address stabilisation and resilience needs, such as for education, livelihoods, employment generation, agriculture, demining, advocacy and support to civil society.

While the future holds many unknowns, it is already clear that we will need increasingly to shift our focus towards helping host countries create the conditions for inclusive economic growth over the long term, and dealing with the realities of this protracted crisis.

I see today's discussions as an opportunity to learn from your understanding of the situation on the ground, and from your experience of the challenges providing assistance to people affected by the conflict. I will carry what I hear from you into the discussions tomorrow.

Thank you.