

Federica Mogherini's remarks at the panel on the future of Syria with the UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura

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Moderator: Looking beyond the conflict is the space where you were putting a lot of effort, caught between two roles, one your work on the humanitarian side and two being engaged in diplomacy trying to reach out. Context is different now for the post conflict, with Russia and Iran feeling strengthened and maybe Riyadh feeling on the other side. Can you take us into your thinking on the next steps beyond the current situation?

HRVP Mogherini: First of all, the European Union is not a military player on the ground. This is also maybe why this ticket, EU-UN, works so well. Because indeed, we might lack the military leverage, where the conflict is the hot one. But, for the European Union for sure, we are *the* humanitarian player, through UN agencies, through international NGOs, the European Union and Member States are the ones that are behind all aid delivered in Syria and around Syria – €9 billion invested so far in this. So whenever I am asked what are you doing on Aleppo, or on humanitarian, well, you should ask who else is doing? Because all the things that are moving in and around Syria on humanitarian level, are out of our work. So where are the others? That is my question. But, and we will continue, because it is our interest and it is also a must for us.

While [US President-elect Donald] Trump might reflect on brutal realism, the European Union is based on principled pragmatism. We refer to that in our Global Strategy. There are differences, there might be also some points in common, but for us principles and also a certain degree of pragmatism is what guides us in the region as well.

So humanitarian aid is the emergency, is the immediate and is a long-standing work that the European Union is doing and will continue to do. But with Staffan in this year, we have worked on the diplomatic and political track enormously. Let me say that I believe it is exactly the deal that we have done on the nuclear programme in Iran that has allowed that window of consensus in the Security Council for the first time since the war started and the ceasefire, the cessation of hostilities, in February. Because after the Iran deal in July, in September in the UN General Assembly, we managed to put together a framework, for the first time having all regional powers and international powers around the table to try to sort the political solution out.

Staffan has remembered how it worked in the beginning, how it is working less let's say right now, also because of changes happening here and there, and mainly also across the Atlantic.

In the European Union we believe that we cannot abandon the political track. And we cannot make the political track hostage of the military dynamics on the ground. Because so far we have always worked under the assumption that, first you have to have a cessation of hostilities that allows the humanitarian aid, and then you create the political conditions for having the political talks.

Maybe it is time to sound the ground with the regional powers and also with international players on what kind of future Syria could have, even in the moment when the fights still is going on in Aleppo and elsewhere. Many conflicts have found political solutions, negotiating political solutions, even during the fighting. So what we started, in agreement with Staffan and with Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, with the mandate of the Foreign Affairs Council, in the European Union, all the EU heads of State and Governments, I have started to reach out to all our regional friends, and the European Union is well positioned for that, because we talk to everybody, we are friends to everybody in the region. I have started visits in Teheran, in Riyadh, started talks with Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Emirates, Qatar, all the regional actors that, no matter what happens in Washington and Moscow, still live next door, will never, never afford forgetting it. Because Europe and the Middle East, we share the same sea, today it is quite self-evident, and those that live around Syria will have in any case to work on this proxy peace, and the reconstruction and the reconciliation, that is when the moment will come.

So we have started this work. I am very much encouraged, because I see that there are common grounds, common lines that can emerge from these talks. We are not looking for ministerial formats, we are not looking for photo opportunities. We are doing it very discretely, bilaterally. But we started to reflect with all the neighbours and all the regional powers on three fundamental questions: what kind of future Syria is a Syria that all the regional powers can live with, the day after the conflict finishes? This to say, the future of Syria will have to be decided by the Syrians, but the regional powers have to allow the Syrians to use this space. So we need the regional powers not to decide on the future of Syria, but to agree on what is the, how do you say in English, the perimeter, within which a solution will be acceptable for them. What kind of form of government, what kind of role for the president of the parliament, what kind of decentralisation, what kind of system can allow all the different components of the Syrian government to be part of an ownership, the day after the conflict ends.

Second, the reconciliation: How can we help the Syrians that sometimes look to me wiser than us. I met the other day the women advisory board that is helping the UN in this process. Let me tell you, they come from very different backgrounds, completely different political opinions. But among them, they find some common grounds. Maybe they can advise regional and international powers wisely on how we can find some basic common lines in the future. So how can we help and empower what is left of the civil society in Syria, to find bridges, to ways of living together, to heal the wounds of a long war? Because at the end of the day, in Italy we know that well: reconciliation after such a long war is needed. It is the most difficult part, having people living together, after having killed each other for so long.

Third, what kind of reconstruction we can work on for Syria? Because in Moscow or in Washington someone could think: It is broken, not my problem. For Europeans, for the Arab world, for Turkey, for Iran, for Iraq, for you name it, we cannot allow having, we cannot afford having a black hole there. So in any case, we will have to work on reconstruction. But, Staffan is perfectly right on this, no reconstruction will start if it does not go hand in hand with reconciliation, with the power-sharing, with the political transition in Damascus that would unite the country, and allow all the regional powers and the European Union, which is not only a global power, but is also in this case a regional power, because we are part of the region. Only a political transition, only a political solution, only a reconciliation process, only a power-sharing mechanism will allow us to work on the reconstruction of the country.

And we want to do this together with our friends in the region, because we have started to see how much it will cost. None of us together, not even together, if not with an incredible mobilisation from the international community and all the resources that the European Union and others in the region can mobilise, will ever make it. Because we are talking about an amount of money that is beyond imagination. So we have a leverage there, I will be very pragmatic, we have a leverage there, we can use it. But we need this to go hand in hand with power-sharing and reconciliation.

Moderator: If the EU is not in a position to call those terms, and this is the government that has been willing to allow its people be massacred and massacred its people and is working on a very different calculus, survival of the regime - this is a very brutal type of calculus that the EU might not be so good at playing at. What if the Assad regime stays in power indefinitely?

HRVP Mogherini: You know, Staffan also was right when saying: Look at the conflicts we have had in the region already. And we have to also learn our lessons. You can win a war, but you can lose the peace. Does the regime, or the countries that are supporting currently the regime, do they really want to win a war on a zero-sum game approach? Is it convenient for them? Is it convenient even for the regime? How do you fix a country after six years of war? And Daesh, Al-Nusra presence in it, and a region that is not the most stable one, if I can use a euphemism.

Do you want a confrontational kind of approach, also when you try to move out of the conflict itself? Or do you want to find some ground for win-win solutions? Do you want to unite or do you want to fight, to run the peace still fighting? Running the peace still fighting is not a way of having a country, I am not saying having a functional country, even having a country. Look at how we are struggling with other situations in the region, or even far away from the region. So what I say is not based on principles, even if we have strong ones, and especially when it comes to Aleppo and the protection of civilians, I come back to that later. But even looking at interests: who has the interest of winning a war in Syria, and getting as a prize a country that is divided, armed, full of terrorists, surrounded by complicated countries, in some cases areas of conflicts, and isolated, if not wars, from international point of view? Is this convenient?

Moderator: Coming back to the neighbourhood, the EU has paid particular attention in assistance programmes to Lebanon and Jordan, countries that are carrying huge amounts of refugees per capita, way above even Turkey's numbers. Are you worried about a spillover? What is the EU doing in those countries, for the refugees in the long-term? They may not be able to go back, who knows for how long. What are your biggest worries in the wider region?

HRVP Mogherini: What we are doing is, as I said before, we are the ones supporting, not only the humanitarian aid inside Syria - by the way with offices on the ground - the European Union as the UN has offices both in Damascus still, this is not so well known, but they are purely humanitarian offices that are operating still in Damascus and in Gaziantep for the north. So we are there on the ground, with our people, supporting UN agencies and international NGOs, in Syria, but mainly and also very strongly in the neighbouring countries. We are the ones financing the schools for the children, the Syrian children, be it in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Turkey. In Turkey I would like to underline this, with a major problem of language that sometimes we don't focus on enough because obviously the Syrian children in Lebanon or in Jordan don't have the same language problem for going to school, but when it comes to Turkey, we risk to have a full generation of Syrian children who don't learn Arabic or have a difficulty in education there. So that is why we are focussing so much on education programmes, including in Turkey, for Syrians, that are a people that are highly sophisticated and educated. I would stress what Staffan was saying, we should talk with them more and hear the level of knowledge and awareness of the challenges they will have in the future, and the willingness to go back and rebuild the country, the pride of being Syrians, no matter what kind of background. So what we are doing is this: support for the refugees, in the camps, in the local communities, and support to the local hosting communities, especially in Jordan and in Lebanon, because we have to avoid that the social tensions of those communities hosting the refugees explodes, creating more problems in Lebanon and Jordan, that are countries that in themselves are facing complicated times. So we are doing that kind of work, in the camps, outside of the camps, supporting the hosting communities, but also working with them on the political solution. Because they have, as well as other neighbouring countries, a knowledge, a familiarity with Syria, for good or for bad - the region has its own complicated story - but they can understand the dynamics in the country, better than we do - and we are still close - we are Mediterraneans, we understand the mentality, or that big international powers can, that can have the military power but not necessarily the soft power to interact with the Syrian players. So we are working with them to find ways to build this common ground. And again, you mentioned the Lebanon case. I find it extremely interesting that in this moment when Lebanon finally has a President, has hopefully finally also a new Government that can help the international community understand the shortcomings or the peculiarities of the Lebanon model. Personally I do not believe that the Lebanon model would work anywhere but in Lebanon. Lebanon is a miracle in itself, I think not repeatable, not possible to duplicate anywhere else. I think Syria will have to find its own model but for sure it be a model that cannot, as Staffan was saying, turn back time, simply because it wouldn't work. And the challenge there is this - and is what we are discussing with our regional friends - what kind of system, what kind of practice can keep together the power sharing, the participation, not even only

protection, but participation of all components of the Syrian society, to the running of the country, to the governance of the country. So not only a logic of a majority that rules the country protecting the minorities, but all of the different components taking an active stance in the reconstruction of the civil and political life of the country. And, the regional players, and the neighbours, creating the space that can allow them to do so. The space goes also with a little bit of encouragement, and some players have more leverage than others in this encouragement. But we have to put in the picture more the Syrians and the region, because so far, we have tried hard with the international card. It has worked for a certain time. Now I believe it is really the time for the region and the Syrians to come in a bit more prominently.

Moderator: Turkey is such a critical partner for the EU in the post-conflict phase. Where is the relationship with Turkey vis-a-vis Syria?

HRVP Mogherini: First let me say one thing on Aleppo. On a personal note, I am not that much at ease in the way in which we are now taking for granted that this is gone. I might be the only person in the room, but I don't think it is correct from our side to say - as I have seen that we have been saying these days - that Aleppo is gone, is lost, and let's think to the next step, be it Raqqa, be it how we manage the rest. I still feel that we have a political and a moral duty and responsibility. First, to protect the civilians: humanitarian corridors to let the civilians out of the city, at the same time as we try to bring the humanitarian aid in - food and medicines. Second, I still feel that we have a political and a humanitarian responsibility and duty to call for a stop of the strikes. It seems that we are simply forgetting that there is a reason for that. Sure, war is war. War is war and civilians need to be protected even in times of war. And we have international conventions for that. And from the European Union's side, you will always hear the voice calling for a stop of the airstrikes on Aleppo and the protection of civilians.

Moderator: But if we call and we don't offer consequences when the call isn't heard, how does that make the EU stronger?

HRVP Mogherini: My main concern - I hope you can understand this: you can be cynical only up to a certain point - my concern is not the strength of Europe in this moment, my concern is the people in Aleppo. So that is my focus. I am sorry but I know, that was the reference to sanctions - I don't believe that having sanctions tomorrow on one or two entities, which we are doing by the way - we have two hundred and thirty-something Syrians sanctioned at the moment and this has not prevented military escalations from happening. It is a possible way of pressure always, but it doesn't have an immediate effect. It can have a symbolic, or a political effect or a long-term effect, or it can be a push to enter into negotiations with the perspective of lifting them if you enter into negotiations. But what you do tomorrow to save the people in Aleppo, still, I think we have to work hard every single day on this. And I believe this is not out of the picture of the work we are doing. This is not out of the picture of what the European Union is doing, I know this is not out of the picture of what the UN is doing. This is a priority. We cannot pass the message that Aleppo is lost, we turn the page, we move forward. No, we still need to save the people in Aleppo, to protect the civilians, to call for a stop of the airstrikes. And, again: no peace process will be easy on the ruins of Aleppo. No-one has an interest in

destroying the city, killing other people, and then looking at what we do next. This will only make things worse. And by the way, I am convinced that the fall of Aleppo will not end the war; we will have other military escalations. So if a call to stop has to be made, it has to be made now, not tomorrow or in a week's time.

On [our relationship with] Turkey - I focus only on Syria. And this helps me also to say that the relations between the EU and Turkey are, Facebook would say "complicated", but also very intense. You cannot have a complicated relationship if it is not a real, true, intense relationship, and covers many different aspects. The media has been focussing mainly on the refugee issue. I always recall to our European friends, that the refugee crisis is not a crisis for Europe, it is a crisis for refugees first of all, and we have to be a bit calm on that - we can manage. And I know that [UN High Commissioner for Refugees] Filippo Grandi said important things here on this yesterday that I share. But our relationship with Turkey goes far beyond this: it is about Cyprus - and I would like to underline - in these days - very important - it is about Syria, it's about economic ties and so on, and internal developments in Turkey, by the way, but this is for another panel. On Syria, Turkey is one of the countries in the region that we are starting this work on the post-conflict scenario and the reconstruction and the reconciliation. I see Turkey as evolving its Syria policy in these months. It is not for me to comment on that or to describe this evolution, but we clearly see this and we will have to see how this materialises in real terms. But I see that there is a space - I clearly see this - among the main regional players on some common ground for the future of Syria, which might also lead to a bit more of that, which might also lead to a bit of common ground for a security architecture in the region that might finally bring us fewer proxy wars - because we have many of them around - and a way of living together next to each other, because you don't change geography at the end of the day. This is what Europeans have learned, after thousands of years of war, at a certain moment after the Second World War, we understood that it was much more convenient for us to live in peace and we started the economic cooperation. The European Union started like this, when we found out that it was more convenient for us to stop fighting each other and to start trading with each other. Maybe in the Middle East there is enough pragmatism to understand that it would be more convenient for all to trade instead of killing each other.

Moderator: If there was one thing you would like to be done differently in the coming months, what would you like to see?

HRVP Mogherini: I fully share Staffan's "wishes for Christmas" in the immediate, so I will focus on two in the mid-term and I hope not long-term. One is that we help the region - and the region goes from the Mediterranean to the Gulf, to the borders of Iran with Afghanistan - to find or invent a way of living next to each other. If not liking each other, at least accepting each other. Again, we have done this in Europe: Germany and France, Germany and Poland, Italy and Germany - we have managed to do that. I am 100 per cent sure that the region has in itself the strength and the wisdom to get to this kind of security architecture for the region. And we can help, and would be delighted to help. Second - it's a big wish - if we manage to take the religion out of this. Because this has nothing to do with religion. Shia and Sunni have been living together for centuries, in the

same countries, in the same villages. This is spoiling the rest of the world: from Africa to Asia, to Europe, to the Middle East. If you want to make a conflict, make a conflict, but don't cover it with a religious approach. I see this religious cover of a geo-political fight as the most dangerous poison that the region can spread in the rest of the world. So maybe I should turn this around. First, let's try to have a detox exercise, and bring the religious aspects where they belong, which is a very serious place, and leave the geo-politics and the religious spheres distinct. (*Applause*) Having the Secretary General of the Arab League clapping on this is a very encouraging sight for me. Second, is the more positive, engage with each other - if you want, we can offer a space - in building, you can call it a Helsinki approach, engage in a way of building a system that allows neighbours to accept the fact that they are neighbours and they can live with each other without making war.