

Syria: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP debate on 10 years of the conflict

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Check against delivery!

Mr President, dear Members of the European Parliament,

The conflict in Syria has lasted now ten years. Ten years of tragedy for the people of Syria. Displacement, exile, poverty, destruction, torture, enforced disappearances, barrel bombs, chemical weapons. We thought that we would never need to see this again, at our doorstep.

Five countries have soldiers in Syria in this moment. But even with the military support of Russia and Iran, Assad cannot win and only a political solution is sustainable. And yet, the political process set out by the United Nations Security Council in resolution 2254 is stuck, completely stuck. A Constitutional Committee has been set up to negotiate a new constitution, providing the basis for free and fair elections, supervised by the United Nations.

But the Assad regime blocks any real discussion. It does not want free and fair elections. Instead, in June, Assad will hold his own elections, to make sure he wins, to convey that Syria is at peace; that reconstruction should begin and sanctions be lifted; and that we should recognise that he won. Nothing else would be a bigger mistake.

Peace is not won by crushing the people, by crushing the opposition and pursuing a war until the country, the whole country is on its knees.

In Syria over 500,000 people have died. The economy is literally collapsing. More than half of the population has fled their homes. In Northern Syria today, hundreds of thousands live in tents. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges. Latest data suggests the poverty rate stands at 80%. And 12 million Syrians – nearly 60% of the population – are severely hit by food insecurity.

Dear Members, all this is happening on our borders, in our immediate neighbourhood on the other side of the Mediterranean. We should not and we cannot, and we will not allow Syria to be forgotten.

On the 30th of March, I will co-chair with the United Nations a fifth Brussels conference on the Future of Syria and the region. We must give the United Nations and its Special Envoy Mr [Geir] Pedersen our full support and continue to push for a genuine political solution, according to the United Nations Security Council Resolution.

The political process has to move forward. With a new negotiated constitution, free and fair elections, release of political prisoners.

The EU is ready to provide its support and – once the time is right – to focus its reconstruction funds on the rebuilding of Syria and of the lives of its citizens.

We are ready to provide very substantial support, but business as usual is not an option. We demand a safe Syria for refugees to return to their homes; a real search for the missing – the Commission is calling for the creation of an international mechanism to locate the missing or their remains, some in mass graves; accountability for the many war crimes and crimes against humanity – and an end to impunity. Until we see this, we must keep up the pressure.

There will be no end to sanctions, no normalisation, no support for reconstruction, until a political transition will be underway.

This must be the message from the Brussels conference.

Dear Members, we must keep providing assistance to the Syrian people in need. Both, in Syria and in the neighbouring countries, in particular in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, who host millions of refugees. These people deserve our continued support.

In ten years, as European Union and its Member States, we have provided €22 billion, it means in average €2.2 billion every year, in assistance for needs inside Syria, in support of refugees and in support of refugee-hosting countries. We are the biggest donor. And we will continue showing our solidarity. The support of this Parliament to these efforts has been, and remains, crucial. The needs are immense, and we will call on other donors to provide support too, because we cannot do everything.

And of course, we will continue engaging with civil society. Their voice is crucial to fully understand what is happening, and what is needed. They bring hope for the future, for a peaceful and different Syria. We cannot let them down. We cannot give up.

I thank you for your interest and count on your full support.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-202917>

Closing remarks

Thank you President, After listening to all of you, I share what you have been saying, but the important thing is not to repeat once and again the same figures “how many people killed, how many refugees, end of impunity, foreign troops have to leave”. The repetition of wishful thinking does not change reality, come on.

Let us try to be realistic. The European Union cannot solve this conflict alone.

The United Nations Special Envoy [for Syria, Geir] Pedersen has made clear that a common understanding amongst the Astana guarantors and likeminded Western stakeholders will be required if the conflict has to be solved.

We are ready to provide for a forum of this type, but we know that discussions will be very difficult to take place. But without an international understanding there is no solution. And even, an international understanding will not be sufficient on its own.

The only solution for the time being is to maintain pressure for a transition in the way Syria is governed. For real change. For the Assad regime to be held accountable, yes, for a decade of brutal war and repression. But this is not going to happen just because you invoke them.

We are going to hold the Brussels conference on Syria at the end of this month. It must be the place to revitalise the United Nations process, and it should be successful in raising pledges to meet the dramatic humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. Let us start by this. Let us start by collecting the resources needed to help in practical terms, here and now, the people in need.

I will do my best in order to push for this conference to be a success, but I am afraid that once and again the European Union will be the most important actor. The one who brings more resources. There is a certain fatigue in the international community to continue supporting the faith of the Syrian people after 10 years of pledging. I hope that you will participate in making this conference a success.

I take this opportunity to thank you for your constant support and for the claim for a need for justice and accountability. But this will not come just by claiming it, we have to put on the table political agreements among the actors. It is the only way out.

Assad will not leave because you ask him to do so. We make errors, yes. 10 years of conferences, yes. The important thing is how to get out of this. It has to be step by step, looking for a consensus among the most important actors. If not, we will not be able to solve it. Do not ask the European Union to solve what we cannot solve alone.

Let us start by bringing the resources needed to help the people in need and let us work for the United Nations to open the humanitarian access to the people in Idlib or, at least, to continue having open the access that there is still open.

Let us engage politically, I repeat it once again, with the actors, which are present in this war in order to get a consensus that can finish this war. But it is not going to happen just by asking for it.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-202919>.

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