

PRESS RELEASE

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Council adopts EU strategy on Syria

1. Recalling the Council Conclusions of 23 May and 17 October 2016 and the European Council Conclusions of 15 December 2016, the Council is appalled by the continuing dire situation in Syria and the persistent humanitarian, security and political issues arising from the conflict. 13.5 million Syrians are now in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria including 6.3 million internally displaced, 1.5 million living under siege conditions, and a further 5 million Syrian refugees hosted by its neighbours and the wider region.

2. The Syrian regime has the primary responsibility for the protection of the Syrian population. The Council therefore calls upon the regime and its allies, notably Russia including as a co-Chair of the ISSG, to undertake all efforts to ensure: a full cessation of hostilities; the lifting of sieges; and full unhindered sustainable country-wide humanitarian access. The Council strongly condemns the continued systematic, widespread and gross violations and abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law by all parties, particularly by the Syrian regime. This must end and those responsible must be held accountable. The Council condemns the use of starvation of civilians as a method of warfare through the besieging of populated areas, as well as the forced displacement of populations, both of which may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity. The EU will continue to consider further restrictive measures against Syria as long as the repression continues. The EU recalls that there can be no lasting peace in Syria under the current regime.

3. The Council recalls that the conflict in Syria affects directly the EU and agrees on the need for the EU to develop a specific strategic framework for its approach to Syria as a country specific part of the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the Da'esh threat adopted in March 2015. It therefore welcomes the Joint Communication by the High Representative and the Commission, and endorses the objectives as set out below. Together with these Conclusions, this forms the EU Strategy for Syria. The EU's strategic objectives in Syria are focussed in six key areas:

a) An end to the war through a genuine political transition, in line with UNSCR 2254, negotiated by the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy for Syria and with the support of key international and regional actors.

The EU firmly believes that there can be no military solution to the conflict and is committed to the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of the Syrian State. Only a credible political solution, as defined in UNSCR 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué will ensure the stability of Syria and enable a decisive defeat of Da'esh and other UN-designated terrorist groups in Syria. The EU continues to support the efforts of the Global Coalition to counter Da'esh in Syria and Iraq.

The EU strongly supports the work of the UN Special Envoy and the resumption of the talks in Geneva. Reaffirming the primacy of the UN-led Geneva process, the EU will continue to provide political support to it through the High Representative's regional initiative which is fostering political dialogue with key actors from the region in order to identify common ground in the framework of the mandate given by the December European Council. The Council agrees to increase EU efforts to ensure both the full and effective participation of women and sustained consultation and dialogue with civil society in the political process.

Progress in Geneva will depend on efforts to reduce violence and build confidence on the ground. In this context, the Council recognises the contribution made to re-establish a full cessation of hostilities and notes the establishment of the trilateral mechanism in the Astana meetings to observe and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire. It expresses serious concern at the continuing violence by terrorists, and from military actions against civilian and non-terrorist targets, including by the regime and its allies. The Council urges all sides to respect the ceasefire and calls on Russia, Turkey and Iran, to live up to their commitments as the guarantors, to ensure its full implementation. Further meetings in this context should achieve progress in securing full unhindered country-wide humanitarian access, the lifting of sieges and the release of all arbitrarily detained persons, especially women and children, in line with UNSCR 2268.

b) Promote a meaningful and inclusive transition in Syria, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué, through support for the strengthening of the political opposition.

The EU will continue to support the Syrian opposition and in particular the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) as the opposition delegation in the UN-brokered talks in Geneva. The EU will support the HNC's development of its vision of transition as well as the efforts it has made to consolidate the negotiating platform for the Syrian opposition.

The Council encourages the Syrian parties to engage constructively and without preconditions on the agenda set out by the UN Special Envoy and welcomes the positive approach adopted by the HNC, both in agreeing a more inclusive delegation and in setting out moderate and pragmatic proposals. The Council welcomed the HNC's integration of the Women's Advisory Committee and the progressive promotion of their full and effective participation. It urges the Syrian regime to lay out its own plans for a genuine inclusive political transition.

The political process must be fully inclusive to ensure that all segments of the Syrian society are involved in shaping Syria's future unity and reconciliation.

c) Save lives by addressing the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable Syrians across the country in a timely, effective, efficient and principled manner.

The EU expresses its continued grave concern at the deliberate restrictions that are put in the way of the provision of humanitarian aid and reiterates its call for full unhindered safe sustainable country-wide humanitarian access for the UN and other humanitarian organisations. Humanitarian access is not a confidence building measure but an obligation.

As the biggest funder of humanitarian efforts inside Syria, the EU will continue intensive humanitarian diplomacy and seek ways to improve access and protection as well as to promote humanitarian principles. The EU will continue to work to achieve full operation of the humanitarian exemptions and authorisations in its restrictive measures against Syria. The EU will also continue to support assistance to mine victims and mine risk education.

d) Promote democracy, human rights and freedom of speech by strengthening Syrian civil society organisations.

The EU will continue to provide substantive support to Syrian civil society organisations, including to the work of the Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board. Civil Society will need to play a prominent role in post-conflict Syria, and in helping the process of reconciliation. The Council agreed to increase EU efforts to promote free speech, including through supporting free and independent media.

e) Promote accountability for war crimes with a view to facilitating a national reconciliation process and transitional justice.

The EU will continue to work to help ensure accountability for war crimes, human rights violations and abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, including the confirmed use of chemical weapons. The EU deplores in the strongest terms the systematic violations perpetrated in Syria, as documented by the UN established Independent International Commission of Inquiry, including the detailed survey on crimes committed last year in Aleppo. The Council supports the Commission of Inquiry's recommendations. The Council agrees to continue to gather information in view of future legal actions, including at the International Criminal Court, against all those responsible for breaches of international law. In this context, the Council expresses support to the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism established for this purpose by the UN General Assembly and stresses the importance of providing sufficient resources for it to continue its vital work. The EU supports all efforts for national reconciliation and will continue to call for transitional justice.

The Council also condemns the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and Da'esh confirmed in the reports of the UN-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism, recalling its decision in March to adopt additional restrictive measures on individuals responsible. The Council supports all efforts in the identification of disappeared persons.

f) Support the resilience of the Syrian population and Syrian society.

The EU will continue to provide resilience support through the provision of education, job creation, support for local civilian governance structures in opposition held areas, including by working with the Syrian Interim Government, and work to avoid the collapse of the state administration. The EU will seek to increase assistance, combining cross-border assistance with support from inside Syria and will aim at delivering aid as part of a larger effort to address the needs of the population all across Syria, to prevent violent extremism and sectarianism and to build local resilience. The EU will not engage in early recovery/stabilisation efforts that could support social and demographic engineering.

4. The EU reiterates that it will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties in the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, is firmly under way. At that point, the Council will examine possible post-conflict assistance as detailed in the Joint Communication. In this context, the EU could review the current restrictive measures, engage in resuming co-operation with the transitional authorities, mobilise funds in support of post-war recovery and reconstruction,

including cultural heritage, and use the appropriate tools under the EU Neighbourhood Policy and other programmes to tackle transitional challenges and stabilise communities through economic development. The EU is actively supporting the UN in its coordination of post-agreement civilian stabilisation planning and will work with the UN, International Financial Institutions and other donors. Special responsibility for the costs of reconstruction should also be taken by those who have fuelled the conflict.

5. The EU is conscious of the effects the Syrian conflict has on neighbouring states, and confirms its commitment to provide support to Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, as well as Iraq and Egypt, who have demonstrated their commitment and resilience in hosting millions of Syrian refugees over the past few years. The Council commends these efforts and agrees on the need to maintain this support through the implementation of the EU-Jordan and EU-Lebanon Compacts and the EU-Turkey Statement as contributions towards reaching the respective London commitments for these countries.

6. The Council looks forward to the hosting of the Brussels Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region" on 4-5 April 2017, following up the London conference of February 2016, the Kuwait pledging conferences of 2013-15, the Berlin and Helsinki Conferences of 2014 and 2017. The Conference will strengthen international support for the UN-led political process and will raise funding to meet the needs outlined in the UN-coordinated appeals as well as supporting the resilience of refugee-hosting countries. It notes that the EU Strategy serves as policy guidelines for the EU approach at the Conference.

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