European External Action Service (EEAS)

Syria: Opening remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Ministerial session of the 8th Brussels Conference on ‘Supporting the future of Syria and the region’

2024-05-27 · Brussels · EEAS Press Team

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Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the 8th Brussels Conference on Syria.

It is with a profound sense of purpose and unwavering commitment that we gather here today. For thirteen years, the conflict in Syria has shattered lives and destabilised an entire region, and destroyed a country.

As we convene, the Syrian people continue to endure unimaginable human suffering. And this human suffering, we witness it across in the region - too much and too often. That is not an excuse to turn a blind eye on the specific situation of the Syrians. The horrors we see today in Gaza, we have seen before in Syria.

Last year when we met, Syria and Türkiye were still reeling from the effects of a terrible earthquake. Remember that? I felt like we had reached rock bottom. One year later, I wish I could tell you that things are slowly getting better, but that is not true. On the contrary, the sad truth is that we are going in the opposite direction.

The situation in Syria is [more] dire today than one year ago. In fact, it has never been so dire. The humanitarian needs are at [an] all-time high. Today, almost 17 million of Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance. The highest level since the start of the crisis over thirteen years ago.

That represents more than 70% of the Syrian population. It is, I could not say, worse than Gaza - because nothing is worse than Gaza – but [it is] almost equally bad.

70% of the Syrian population [are] in need of humanitarian assistance, and still worse - half of those are children. It means 8 million of children.

Economically Syria is in distress. Over the past four years the Syrian pound has lost 92% of its value. It means that it is worth nothing. And [the] price of basic goods has skyrocketed. The economy is on free-fall, and ordinary Syrians are paying the price.

This is on the socio-economic situation, but the security situation is also deeply alarming. We used to say that there is no development without security – neither security without development. But if we have to start by who is [first] the egg and the chicken. Maybe security is the most important thing at that moment, because it is deeply alarming.

The Assad regime, and its allies, regularly continue to violate international humanitarian law, assaulting innocent civilians and destroying critical civilian infrastructure.

The terrorists – remember, ISIS – are still there. We did not eradicate them. They are still there and are gaining ground in North-West Syria. And the camps where ISIS members are being held have become breeding grounds for radicalisation.

Iran-backed groups hold huge sway in areas controlled by the regime. They have recently contributed to further regional destabilisation, in an already tense situation and there is not a single day without reports of skirmishes, artillery shelling or airstrikes.

In short, the current situation is unbearable for the Syrian people – but it also unsustainable for Syria's neighbourhood and let me be clear, for the European Union, it is also an unsustainable situation for us.

And yet on the political front, things remain at an impasse. Yes, the United Nations Special Envoy, Geir Pedersen and his office are doing incredible efforts - significant efforts, more than important. But no meaningful progress towards the full and comprehensive implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254.

It is the only possible path for a lasting political solution to the crisis. Unfortunately, the Constitutional Committee has not convened since 2022, due to the intolerable obstruction of the Assad regime, supported in international fora by its Russian allies. Here again: Russia.

The Assad regime has shown no intention of engaging in any meaningful political process, nor on the priority files of its neighbours. Many of the strong messages that we heard from civil society organisations during the 'Day of Dialogue' - that we convened last month - further confirmed the soundness and pertinence of our position. We remain open to every genuine initiative to advance the implementation of [UN Security Council] Resolution 2254, under the auspices of the United Nations Special Envoy. But we also request everyone, including partners in the region, to use their political leverage to encourage a renewed impetus on the political process.

Ministers and colleagues, last year, when I addressed you in this very same forum, I wanted to speak about hope. In fact, I spoke about hope. This year, I wish to speak to you of a double imperative. As the international community, we have an absolute imperative to continue supporting Syrians and the wider region, and to continue pushing for a sustainable and comprehensive solution to the crisis.

This is both a moral and a pragmatic imperative.

Morally - we have witnessed the relentless brutality of the Assad regime, which continues to wage war on its own people with impunity, inflicting untold suffering and devastation. As I mentioned already, about 17 million Syrians are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, 7 million have been forced to take refuge abroad, over 500,000 have been killed, and the whereabouts of another 150,000 remain unknown. There are good reasons to believe they also have been killed.

We simply cannot remain silent in the face of these enormous humanitarian needs and atrocious human rights violations.

Pragmatically – Recent events have underscored the urgency of our task. A dark cloud looms over the region. Events in the neighbouring Palestine, should serve as a very stark reminder that so-called “frozen” conflicts, explode from time to time. Suddenly, they explode. They were frozen, until the moment they unfreeze. When they unfreeze, it is an explosion. The same happened in Nagorno-Kharabakh, or the most eloquent example is the one in Gaza.

These explosions have tragic consequences.

So today, we have a double imperative to translate our words into meaningful action – to reaffirm our commitment to the Syrian people and to provide the support they so desperately need. We cannot afford to waver.

Allow me to also briefly address the situation in neighbouring countries, which we cannot let down. Let me turn our attention to Jordan, to Lebanon, to Türkiye, Iraq, and Egypt.

First, and once again, we commend your efforts for hosting in total around 7 million Syrians. 7 million refugees [is] a lot of people. The efforts you have made along the last thirteen years are immeasurable. We are also fully aware of the political challenges associated with this situation. We understand that this big amount of people could de-stabilise the whole societies in many countries. Weak countries, with not lot of resources to face this burden.

I hope you will go home today reassured that the international community, and the European Union will first and foremost, continue to stand with you and will continue to help shoulder this effort - on the only way that we can shoulder it which is financially.

But allow me to say that we should also resist the utterly misleading narratives presenting the refugees as a problem [being them] themselves. Before being a problem, they are victims.

They are of this tragic conflict. Second, we all know that many Syrians have made significant economic and social contributions to their host communities – sometimes long before 2011.

While the EU would wish that returning home could be a realistic option for all refugees, everywhere and always, we concur with the UN system that, currently, the conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns to Syria are not in place. We insist that it is the Assad regime that bears the primary responsibility for putting in place these conditions. You can count on our steadfast support, but we expect our partners to uphold international law - including the principle of non-refoulement - and reject and condemn any forced deportations. Where not yet in place, we also encourage partners to establish the required national procedures for asylum and refugee rights, in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Looking ahead, let us not forget he reasons why so few of the Syrians feel safe to return home. Why do so few Syrians consider that it is a good and safe alternative to live as refugees, and not to go back home? That is why we have to talk about with the main party responsible, which is the regime in Damascus.

We should not forget the 438,000 Palestinian refugees hosted in Syria – many of them I suppose were born in Syria, not coming from Palestine - and supported by UNRWA. UNRWA, the most attacked United Nations' agency that is supporting and saving so many lives, being an irreplaceable lifeline for many Palestinians in different countries. We must continue to ensure the assistance to the Palestinian refugees, in Syria and elsewhere in the region, in the context of increasing needs, [and] our commitment to remain a key donor to UNRWA, also in Syria, where regional stability is at stake.

I am finishing my introductory words which are maybe too long. But I want to address you and talk about the challenges we face, and which should be our collective resolve.

This brings me to today's main order of business: to gather fresh pledges of support for the Syrian people.

I know we are all facing budget constraints and competing demands. But with the needs in Syria and the region increasing, we must ensure that our pledges of assistance remain substantial. So, allow me to announce first the European Union's contributions for 2024 and 2025.

For 2024, I am pleased – and my colleagues Commissioners who are attending this meeting will give more details – to re-confirm last year's pledge of 560 million euros for the benefit of Syrians in Syria, [and of Syrian] refugees and their host communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

This is for this year. We are almost in the middle of this year.

For 2025, we are pledging another 560 million euros for the same purposes, for the same people , and for the same host communities: Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

Also, for 2024, the EU pledges 1 billion euros in support for Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities in Türkiye for 2024.

I hope that these figures will encourage all delegations to pledge more in turn.

But our commitment cannot end with financial pledges alone. Despite the lack of recent progress, we must redouble our efforts to find a political solution to the conflict. A solution that upholds the aspirations of the Syrian people for a peaceful and democratic future.

After more than a decade of conflict, we must continue to hold all parties accountable for their actions. Only international cooperation can achieve this, especially regarding missing individuals and those held in extrajudicial detention.

Documenting the abuses perpetrated by all must continue, so that one day they will be held accountable. National courts in several European countries are doing their part to prosecute those responsible for these crimes.

United Nations institutions – welcome to you too - are also doing important work in this regard. I refer here to the Commission of Inquiry, the “Triple I M”, and the recently established Independent Institution on Missing Persons. Be sure that the European Union will continue to support them.

I am closing, remembering and reiterating the double imperative [that] I spoke [of] earlier. The desire to continue pushing for a political solution, justice, and lasting peace. Second, the imperative to continue pledging generously to support Syrians inside Syria, refugees in neighbouring countries, and their host communities.

As you have seen with the figures I announced, the European Union support remains unwavering. Standing with the Syrian people, with a sense of justice and dignity, is only the pragmatic way – I would not say the only way – to face this problem.

Once again, thank you to all of you for being here. I hope this is going to be a fruitful meeting.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-257515

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Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-opening-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ministerial-session-8th_en