

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the EU Strategy on Syria during the plenary session of the European Parliament

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Thank you very much.

I am particularly glad we have the opportunity to share in this hemicycle again the work we are doing on Syria, especially today as the UN has reconvened the talks; the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva just started this morning. I just spoke a couple of hours ago with Staffan de Mistura again, the UN Special Envoy [for Syria] who has concluded this morning the first renewed round of talks with the Syrian parties aiming at entering into the substance of the political transition, including on constitutional set-up. This is the process on which and in which the European Union is investing, supporting the intra-Syrian talks, the UN facilitation and the work of the Syrian opposition, the civil society, especially the women of Syria – work that we support every day with our teams, both in Geneva and in Brussels, but also in the region.

So, the European Union has a special role to play, to help the Syrian people end the war in their country. The European Union is not a military actor in Syria – I know some might argue that this makes us a less powerful player in the region. Even if, as you know well, I always value a lot whenever we manage or we decide to use also our hard power in some situations that require this, I strongly believe that the fact that we are not a military player in the Syrian crisis makes us stronger in the political context of trying to solve the problem and the crisis there.

Because we have not taken part in the devastation of the country, and at the same time we have been on the side of the civilian population, all throughout the war, as the first humanitarian donor for Syrians both within and outside of the country. Exactly for this reason we have a stronger role to play when it comes to the political mediation and solution.

First of all, let me stress one basic thing that sometimes we take for granted, but I think in these times we are living, it is definitely not something that is irrelevant: we are the ones contributing to the humanitarian work inside Syria and around Syria. We are the ones bringing aid through the UN agencies and international organisations; trying to save every single life; trying to bring every single child to school; trying to guarantee the minimum basic living conditions for Syrians.

This is something I will always be proud of. Some might consider that *realpolitik* goes as far as making this irrelevant. Let me tell you the basic condition not only of humanity from my perspective, but also for the political future of Syria, is that there are some

Syrians left. I am sorry, this is very hard to say but our work of saving lives on the ground, guaranteeing that people have humanitarian aid, medical assistance, food, water – basic, basic living conditions – is first a humanitarian duty, and second is also a major political asset also to be a recognised, trusted political actor for the parties. It is precious, so much precious that to me it is invaluable.

Because we have not destroyed, because we help people's daily life, we can better help the Syrians rebuild the future of the country. And this is something that not only the international community, not only the region, but also and first of all the Syrians recognise to the European Union. This is the core of the European Union's Strategy on Syria – adopted by the Council on the 3rd of April, with Conclusions endorsing my joint communication with the Commission [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements for an EU Strategy for Syria]. This is our answer to anyone who believes – as I was saying - that we are powerless because we are not shooting. It is exactly the contrary. The entire European Union is united behind the goal of a political solution to the war, and the means to achieve it. It demonstrates what we can do in practice to end this war and ensure that lives are protected, rights respected, democratic aspirations and needs are met.

In the Strategy we outlined a clear set of objectives: seeking a political solution to the conflict within the UN framework, supporting the opposition – including the High Negotiation Committee – to develop their proposal for a meaningful and inclusive transition, and in parallel – as I said – working to save lives, to promote human rights, to strengthen civil society, the role of women, to promote accountability for war crimes – extremely important, I will come back to that – and to support the resilience of the Syrian people.

The Strategy indicates the direction of our actions; it is not a philosophical paper; it is a roadmap for acting together. Two days after it was endorsed, we have begun to put it in practice, hosting the major Ministerial conference on Syria in Brussels, together with the Secretary General of the United Nations. We brought together 80 delegations from countries and international organisations from the region and the entire world, raising more than 9 billion euros until 2020, including 5.6 billion euros for 2017 alone. There was a risk of the international community being disrupted; of having a sort of donors' *fatigue* when it comes to the support to Syrians and I was glad to see that we managed to mobilise more resources than last year in London [Supporting Syria and the Region – London 2016]. This is important, it makes a difference to the lives of the people on the ground. But again – as I said – it makes a difference also for the UN and our support to the UN system, another political objective we have very deep in our hearts and minds in this period of time and it strengthens the possibility for a political work to be done in Geneva.

More than two thirds of this amount comes from the European Union and the Member States. So, once again, we are throwing a lifeline to millions of Syrians, inside the country and in the region, building in this way the basic conditions for the future of Syria, the survival of Syrians.

As you might remember, on the eve of the Brussels Conference, a terrible chemical attack hit Idlib's province and I do not believe this was a complete coincidence. Normally, as the international community gathers to work for peace and show unity, and determination and commitment, the enemies of peace tried to derail its efforts.

But that very same day, from Brussels, from the European Union, from the UN, from so many countries and organisations, we sent two powerful messages. First, we all agreed that those responsible for these crimes must be held accountable. And last week, exactly one week ago, on Europe's Day, the 9th of May, in New York, I was briefing the UN Security Council and sharing with them the fact that the European Union fully stands behind the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in its investigations: this is the right forum to document any responsibilities for the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Brussels Conference also made a call for support to the new "International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism," established by the UN General Assembly, which will assist in investigating and prosecuting war crimes cases in Syria. Accountability for us is key.

Second, in Brussels we all committed to work for a political solution agreed among the Syrian parties as the only just but also the only realistic way to end the war.

Accountability and the need to support a political solution and to be serious about that: these were also the main messages we heard from the representatives of the Syrian civil society, Syrian women, during the Brussels Conference. We heard a very powerful word from them: *hudna, hudna, hudna*. They were repeating it to us, and this means "we need a ceasefire". We need violence to decrease and peace to reach some areas of the country. For three days, around the Brussels Conference, over 40 Syrians from all parts of Syria and from the diaspora, representatives of civil society organisations with very different backgrounds, women and men, different ages, worked to agree on a set of common messages for the Conference. Their representatives delivered their messages to the ministers in the political session. We have immediately turned the Strategy's recognition of the civil society's crucial role into practice and I know this Parliament is particularly supportive of that, rightly so. These are the people who can reach across the conflict lines, talk to each other, heal the wounds of over six years of war, to make reconciliation truly possible on the ground, locally. And the expertise they hold will also be essential to post-conflict reconstruction.

In fact, let me say the Syrians who came to Brussels from within and outside of Syria, different parts of the country, agreed very much with our determination to begin preparations for the day after the end of the conflict. Because too many times - too many times - the international community - and also Europe - was not prepared for *winning the peace* after a war had ended. It is a mistake that we cannot afford anymore, Syria and the Syrians cannot afford that mistake. Of course, reconstruction will only begin when a political transition will be under way, not before. This is in the hands of the Syrian talks in Geneva under the UN auspices that the European Union is accompanying day by day. But the European Union has already started to engage and to contribute to the post-agreement planning in close cooperation with the United Nations and the World Bank.

Also because this can be a very powerful tool, maybe one of the most powerful tools today, to support and accompany the political process, showing the peace dividend, being an incentive to the Syrian parties to find and implement an agreement.

The same logic marks our Syria Strategy: we don't try to bet on the future, but to prepare for it and contribute to shaping it, together with the UN, together with the powers of the region, but most of all, with the people of Syria. Because peace can only come from the Syrian people, from a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties.

This is the most complex and the most violent conflict in our times and it is clear to all in the world that no regional or global power alone has the strength to solve it. We need forces to join along one line, which is a political solution agreed by the Syrian parties in Geneva under the UN auspices.

All different initiatives - and we wish that all of them manage to deliver and to be implemented, including the ones taken in Astana - now have the big responsibility to converge towards Geneva, to help the Syrians build peace and find their own path towards national reconciliation. And there are no shortcuts for that. We have seen it for six years: Geneva, the UN process, the multilateral framework, these intra-Syrian talks is and must remain the only way to transition.

As I said today, Staffan de Mistura has resumed the talks with a clear intention of entering into the substance of the transition, starting from the constitutional set-up of the country. The European Union stands there in Geneva, as well as the work we do in Brussels and in the region, to accompany the UN, their work, to accompany the Syrian people for a democratic, united and inclusive Syria to finally bring peace to the country and to our entire region.

Thank you.

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