Thursday 6 February 2014

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Situation in Syria

European Parliament resolution of 6 February 2014 on the situation in Syria (2014/2531(RSP))

(2017/C 093/18)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to its previous resolutions on Syria,

— having regard to the Foreign Affairs Council conclusions on Syria, in particular those of 20 January 2014; having regard to the European Council conclusions on Syria,

— having regard to the statements by the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (VP/HR), Catherine Ashton, on Syria, and in particular her remarks at the Geneva II Conference on Syria of 22 January 2014, and to her statement on the decision of the General Assembly of the Syrian Opposition Coalition to attend the Geneva II Conference of 18 January 2014,

— having regard to UN Security Council resolution 2118 of 27 September 2013 on the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons; having regard to the final report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, published on 12 December 2013,

— having regard to the statements by the Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, Kristalina Georgieva, on Syria,

— having regard to the resolution of the UN Human Rights Council of 24 September 2013 on the continuing grave deterioration of the human rights and humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic,

— having regard to the 6th Report of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic of 11 September 2013,

— having regard to the final communiqué of the Action Group for Syria ('the Geneva Communiqué') of 30 June 2012; having regard to the Geneva II meeting launched on 22 January 2014 and the opening and concluding remarks by the UN Secretary-General,

— having regard to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948,

— having regard to Syria's international obligations, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocol thereto on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,

— having regard to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the additional protocols thereto,

— having regard to Rule 110(2) and (4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas violence in Syria is escalating further and the death toll is constantly rising; whereas, according to the United Nations, since the start of the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters in Syria, more than 130 000 people, most of them civilians, have been killed; whereas according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), an estimated 9 million people are in need of humanitarian aid inside Syria, including more than 6,5 million people internally displaced and there are more than 2,3 million Syrian refugees, mainly in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq;

B. whereas the dramatic human rights, humanitarian and security situation continues to deteriorate; whereas human rights are being violated on a large scale by the Assad regime and hard-line groups supporting the regime, including massacres and other unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions, hostage-taking, enforced disappearances, executions of prisoners, systematic torture and ill-treatment, sexual violence and violations of children's rights; whereas the Syrian regime has demolished entire neighbourhoods, as a collective punishment policy towards civilians; whereas the large-scale destruction of urban areas has led to desperation and significant expulsions of civilians;

C. whereas there is evidence of summary extrajudicial executions and other forms of human rights violations committed by forces opposing the Assad regime; whereas up to 2 000 different factions are fighting the Assad regime, including many organised criminal elements; whereas the presence and infiltration of al-Qaeda-linked militant groups such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, also including many fighters of foreign and EU origin with a radical Islamist agenda, is increasing; whereas radicalisation is a big danger in the region;

D. whereas the increasing interference by foreign actors, their military supplies and political support, and the persistence of division in the international community, including the UNSC, are transforming the conflict into a proxy war;

E. whereas a photographer who defected from the Syrian military police delivered 55 000 digital images of some 11 000 victims to the Syrian National Movement, which suggested widespread and systemic violations of international humanitarian law by the regime; whereas a team of high-level international legal experts examined the images and concluded that 'upon the material it has reviewed there is clear evidence, capable of being believed by a tribunal of fact in a court of law, of systemic torture and killing of detained persons by the agents of the Syrian government' and that such evidence would support findings of crimes against humanity and could also support findings of war crimes;

F. whereas the violent crisis in Syria has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe of a scale unprecedented in recent history, with no end in sight; whereas more than half of those affected are children suffering from starvation, malnutrition and disease; whereas the lack of access to food, water, basic health care, hygiene, shelter and education is a critical dimension of this humanitarian catastrophe; whereas the delivery of humanitarian aid is being hindered by the lack of security, denial of access by the Syrian authorities, and infrastructure obstacles;

G. whereas the 560 000 Palestinian refugees in Syria constitute a particularly vulnerable group affected by the conflict; whereas 250 000 Syrians are stuck in besieged or hard-to-access areas, including 18 000 Palestinian refugees in the Yarmouk refugee camp outside Damascus who are facing mass suffering, with 57 people reportedly having starved to death; whereas following the outcome of negotiations regarding the Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, some aid has been delivered to its residents, though much more is needed;

H. whereas the continuous violence has had a dramatic destabilisation effect on neighbouring countries, notably due to the mass refugee flows; whereas these countries are facing tremendous domestic challenges of their own, with Lebanon and Jordan being particularly vulnerable; whereas any descent into violent conflict in Lebanon not only promises a humanitarian crisis, but also entails the risk of a regional collapse;

I. whereas the Geneva II Conference on Syria was opened by the UN Secretary-General on 22 January 2014, its aim being to achieve a political solution to the conflict through a comprehensive agreement between the Syrian Government and opposition for the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, which called for the creation of a transitional government leading to the holding of elections; whereas the constructive participation of all relevant actors in the peace process is crucial to achieving a lasting political solution; whereas, on 18 January 2014, the General Assembly of the Syrian Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces decided to accept the invitation to join this process, but several rebel groups were not represented; whereas Iran was invited and then disinvited to the conference held in Switzerland; whereas negotiations were suspended on 31 January 2014 and the next round of talks is planned for 10 February 2014; whereas fighting continues during the Geneva II talks;

J. whereas on 15 January 2014 the Second International Pledging Conference for Syria took place in Kuwait, raising USD 2,4 billion in pledges, but this sum still falls short of the vast humanitarian need which has been estimated at USD 6,5 billion by various UN bodies; whereas EU funding for humanitarian assistance to Syria and neighbouring countries has reached EUR 1,1 billion;

K. whereas a large number of peaceful civil society activists, human rights defenders, intellectuals, religious figures including two kidnapped bishops Ioann Ibrahim and Bulos Jazigi, journalists and medical professionals are subject to harassment, arrest, torture or disappearance at the hands of the Syrian regime, and increasingly also of the several rebel groups; whereas 2011 Sakharov laureate Razan Zeitouneh was abducted alongside her husband and other human rights defenders in Damascus in December 2013 and their fate remains unknown;

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L. whereas on 12 December 2013 the Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic concluded that chemical weapons were used against soldiers and/or civilians, including children, in 2013; whereas 27 September 2013 saw the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2118(2013), which inter alia, endorsed the expeditious destruction of Syria's chemical weapons programme, to be completed by 30 June 2014; whereas only 5 % of the total stockpile has been shipped out of the country for destruction; whereas, however, the overwhelming majority of deaths and injuries are caused by conventional weapons; whereas barrel bombs have been used on a large scale by the Assad regime in recent months, claiming massive casualties;

M. whereas asylum claims in the EU from Syrians have continued to increase over the past year and the Syrian refugee crisis constitutes a first test for the newly revised Common European Asylum System;

N. whereas, in its resolution of 9 October 2013, Parliament encouraged the Member States to address acute needs by providing safe entry into the EU in order to temporarily admit Syrians and through resettlement in addition to existing national quotas and through humanitarian admission;

1. Strongly condemns the widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Assad regime, including all acts of violence, systematic torture and execution of prisoners; condemns any human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law by armed groups opposing the regime; strongly condemns all violations and abuses committed against children and women, especially sexual abuse and violence, including in the name of jihad (Jihad al-Nikah); strongly condemns the increasing number of terrorist attacks, resulting in numerous casualties and destruction, carried out by extremist organisations and individuals associated with Al-Qaeda; calls for the cessation of all hostilities in Syria; stresses that those responsible for the widespread, systemic and gross human rights violations committed in Syria must be held accountable and brought to justice, and supports the EU's call on all foreign fighters in Syria, including Hezbollah, to withdraw immediately, and to cease all external funding and support;

2. Extends its condolences to the victims' families; applauds the courage of the Syrian people and reiterates its solidarity with their struggle for freedom, dignity and democracy;

3. Expresses its concern at the increasing involvement of extremist Islamist groups and foreign fighters in the conflict in Syria, the rise of religiously and ethnically motivated violence in the country, and the continued fragmentation and internal divisions within the opposition; continues to encourage the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to create a more united, inclusive and organised opposition front both internally and externally;

4. Reiterates its position that the political solution should safeguard the unity, territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Syria;

5. Fully supports the Geneva II Conference on Syria, which should be the first step in a process that will lead to a political and democratic solution to the conflict, and stresses the fundamental importance of keeping the Geneva II process going; welcomes the efforts of UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi in enabling this first, direct interaction between the warring parties; is convinced that a lasting solution to the current crisis in Syria can only be achieved through a Syrian-led, inclusive political process with the backing of the international community; underlines the need for a genuine political transition in the country, thereby addressing the people's aspiration for freedom and democracy; reiterates its call for President Assad to step aside;

6. Notes the crucial importance of confidence-building measures in this context; urges the negotiating delegations, therefore, to agree on and implement local ceasefires, the lifting of sieges on certain urban areas, including Homs, the release or exchange of prisoners and the facilitation of humanitarian access to civilians in need, as stepping stones to substantive negotiations on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué; notes that no serious breakthrough or major change in the position of either side was witnessed during the first talks; notes also the importance of involving all key international actors concerned in the Geneva II process; takes the view that a long-term rapprochement between the West and Iran may help to produce a regional context conducive to the reconciliation process in Syria;

7. Welcomes the progress and the international cooperation as regards the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons, and calls for full implementation of the decision of the Executive Council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons of 27 September 2013; is concerned at reports that, by the end of January 2014, only 5 % of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile had been removed from the country for destruction, and urges the Syrian authorities to abide by the

timetable laid down in UNSC resolution 2118 (2013); calls for particular attention to be paid to the environmental safety of the destruction process and the management of the remaining waste; emphasises, however, that the overwhelming majority of the deaths and injuries that have occurred in the violent crisis in Syria have been caused by conventional weapons;

8. Stresses that, in view of the unprecedented scale of the crisis, alleviating the suffering of millions of Syrians in need of basic goods and services must be a priority for the EU and the international community at large; calls for an urgent UNSC humanitarian resolution on this subject; calls in particular on Russia and China, as permanent members of the UNSC, to fulfil their responsibilities and facilitate the adoption of a humanitarian resolution; urges again the EU and its Member States to live up to their humanitarian responsibilities and increase their assistance to Syrian refugees, and to coordinate their efforts more effectively in this field; condemns the consistent thwarting of attempts to deliver humanitarian aid and calls on all parties involved in the conflict, and in particular the Assad regime, to facilitate the provision of humanitarian aid and assistance through all possible channels, including across borders and conflict lines, and to ensure the safety of all medical personnel and humanitarian workers;

9. Recalls that under international humanitarian law the wounded and sick must receive, to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention required by their condition; highlights the fact that deliberate starvation of civilians and attacks on health facilities are prohibited under international law and will be considered war crimes;

10. Reiterates its call for the establishment of safe havens along the Turkish-Syrian border, and possibly within Syria, and for the creation of humanitarian corridors by the international community;

11. Calls for the immediate, unconditional and safe release of all political prisoners, medical personnel, humanitarian workers, journalists, religious figures and human rights activists, including 2011 Sakharov Prize winner Razan Zeitouneh, and for coordinated EU action to secure her release; calls on all parties to ensure their safety; urges the Syrian Government to grant immediate and unfettered access to all its detention facilities for international documentation bodies, including the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria;

12. Condemns the intimidation and attacks against peaceful activists and journalists; regrets the existence of web censorship and limited access to blogs and social networks; recalls that safeguarding freedom of expression, the protection of journalists and a free and independent media sector are fundamental elements in the democratic political process; stresses also the importance of strengthening civil society actors in Syria, and of the active and meaningful participation of women, young people and civil society representatives in the Geneva II process and in the rebuilding of the country;

13. Stresses the importance of all actors providing protection to particularly vulnerable groups in Syrian society, such as ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, in the current crisis, and of their participation in the Geneva II process, with the aim of preserving the tradition of intercultural, interethnic and interreligious coexistence in the country for a future new Syria;

14. Calls for zero tolerance with regard to the killing, abduction and recruitment of children in particular, and calls on all parties to the conflict to comply fully with UNSC resolution 1612 (2005) of 26 July 2005 on children and armed conflicts; underlines also the importance of preventing acts of sexual and gender-based violence and of providing appropriate support to victims; stresses, in this context, the importance of early response programmes in respect of gender-based violence (GBV); welcomes also the 'No Lost Generation' initiative of the UN and its humanitarian partners, which aims to heal the wounds of Syrian children and to preserve their future, and encourages the EU to actively support this initiative;

15. Calls for special attention to be paid to the situation of Palestinian refugees in Syria, and particularly the alarming humanitarian situation in the Yarmouk refugee camp; calls on all the parties involved in the conflict to allow the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and other international aid organisations immediate and unconditional access to this camp, with the aim of alleviating the extreme suffering of its population;

16. Continues to support the work of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, established by the UN Human Rights Council, and reiterates its call for the UNSC to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court for a formal investigation; asks the Vice-President/High Representative (VP/HR) to take action in this direction;

17. Pays tribute to host communities and to Syria's neighbouring countries, in particular Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt, for their resourcefulness in providing shelter and humanitarian aid to families fleeing the armed conflict in Syria; reiterates its grave concern regarding the humanitarian, social, economic, political and security impact of the Syrian crisis

on the entire region, especially Lebanon and Jordan; recalls that a cohesive response is needed to support the host countries, including humanitarian, development, and macroeconomic assistance, and reiterates its calls for the EU to convene a humanitarian conference on the Syrian refugee crisis, with priority being given to actions directed at host countries in the region so as to support them in their efforts to host ever-growing refugee populations and maintain an open-door policy;

18. Stresses that the crisis in Syria requires a coherent common approach by the EU and its Member States in the field of humanitarian aid delivery and beyond, and continues to support VP/HR Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva in their efforts to ensure better coordination in this field;

19. Welcomes the USD 2,4 billion in pledges raised in Kuwait and calls on the donors to fulfil their promises and deliver on those pledges in a swift manner; welcomes the commitments made by the EU and its Member States, as the biggest donor in terms of financial aid and future pledges; notes, however, that further significant efforts are required in order to meet the humanitarian needs in Syria, and calls, therefore, for additional financial contributions from international actors;

20. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission/High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the parliaments and governments of the Member States, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, the Parliament and Government of Iraq, the Parliament and Government of Jordan, the Parliament and Government of Lebanon, the Parliament and Government of Turkey, the Parliament and Government of Egypt, the Parliament and Government of Russia, the Parliament and Government of China, and all the parties involved in the conflict in Syria.