European Commission - Speech

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Speech by Commissioner Šuica at the European Parliament plenary on a just transition and reconstruction in Syria

Strasbourg, 11 March 2025

Dear President,

Presidency of the Council,

Honourable Members,

Thank you for having **this very timely debate on Syria**.

The resolution that you will adopt tomorrow is the first one this Parliament after the fall of the Assad regime and it is a **vital contribution to the further shaping of the EU position**.

When we last debated the situation in the country, here in this House in mid-December, the former Assad regime had just been toppled.

Three months after, while the fall of the regime represents clearly a historic window of opportunity and hope –

the **challenges** the country is facing **remain immense**.

Three out of four Syrians depend on humanitarian aid.

This includes essential areas such as food insecurity, water, and housing, but also health and education.

Around half of the population are without clean water.

After 14 years of war **Syria's economy is in ruins**.

The **GDP loss is estimated at EUR 740 billion** and at its current trajectory, it may not regain pre-war GDP levels before **2080**.

The **poverty rate** today is at 90 percent.

Two thirds of the Syrian people live in extreme poverty.

Around half of the **children** in Syria are **not attending school**, and **energy production has fallen** by 80 percent compared to pre-conflict levels.

In addition to the **economic catastrophe** there is an overwhelming **human tragedy that needs healing**.

Syria mourns over 618,000 **casualties** and 113,000 **missing persons**.

Coming from a country with missing persons, I understand that not knowing the whereabouts of your loved ones is unbearable.

More than 12 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced, out of which 7.5 million being internally displaced and almost 2 million living in camps.

Moreover, tensions in the **South** and the recent **escalation in the coastal areas** show us clearly how fragile the security situation remains.

The EU condemns strongly any form of violence against civilians. A swift investigation must be conducted. The **investigative commission** established is a welcome commitment that needs to be translated into action.

However, there are also positive developments. The **agreement reached between the Syrian authorities and the SDF** is an extremely positive step that could pave the way for increased stability.

A **resurgence of civil war** or **Daesh** must be prevented at all costs.

Overall the situation remains quite volatile and we need to remain vigilant. It is vital that **Syria's territorial integrity, unity, and sovereignty** must be respected, not least by the neighbouring states.

Honourable Members,

The **EU** has been **leading international efforts and support since 2011**.

- We kept Syria in the political forefront.
- We have invested jointly with our Member States **more than 35 billion** euro in support of Syrians in Syria and in the region.

This is the **moment to keep our leading role and step up our support to Syrians** at this historic point.

And we have been doing so over the last three months.

Last month, I had the opportunity to participate in the **Paris Conference on Syria**, alongside interim Foreign Minister Al-Shaibani and international partners.

Three key conclusions emerged from that meeting:

First, a **peaceful and inclusive transition** in Syria and Syria's stability is **critical** to the overall **regional security** and to the **EU**.

We want this transition to be **Syrian-led and Syrian-owned** guided by the **respect for international law, human rights, fundamental freedoms, pluralism** and **tolerance among all components of society**.

The organisation of the **National Dialogue** and the appointment of the **Constitutional Committee** are steps in the right direction. We must keep supporting the Syrian authorities so that these ambitious endeavours do not slide into delays.

A swift conclusion of the **government-formation** process will be another step with many more hopefully to follow.

Second, while refugee returns are now a realistic perspective – with millions hoping to go home – **returns cannot and should not be rushed** in the context of a **very fragile transition**.

The international consensus is clear – **improving conditions inside Syria** must be **prioritised** if we want **returns to be sustainable** and in line with international standards.

Third, on **sanctions**, the EU has responded to the international call for support sending a **powerful message in support of the Syrian people**.

We **suspended sectoral sanctions in energy, transport, and** introduced new exemptions to allow the banking sector to re-engage with Syria on transactions associated to these sectors as well as on transactions needed for reconstruction.

As you are aware, the **sanctions relief** is rolled out **gradually and is reversible**.

We will regularly assess if the conditions in Syria allow for further suspensions.

The EU is prepared to **scale up its support for Syria's recovery and future reconstruction**.

We intend to **scale up our development assistance** inside Syria in key areas such as access to basic services, support to livelihoods, and economic recovery.

Our approach will be gradual and proportionate to the steps taken by the interim authorities in view of an **inclusive** transition.

As a tangible sign of our continued support and building on the last eight years –

the EU is preparing the **9th edition of the Brussels Conference on the future of Syria** and the region.

This Conference, organized on the 17th of March, will mobilise funds from the international community to **support the immediate needs** of all Syrian people **and the early stages of the transition**.

The funds pledged would be mobilised **both in Syria and in refugee-hosting countries**.

With **uncertainty** concerning **U.S. assistance and decreasing pledges worldwide**, the EU assumes its increased responsibility to ensure that assistance reaches those in need.

We are keen to **cooperate** in a coordinated manner **with all like-minded partners** in the region and beyond.

Our reconstruction efforts will be aligned with the upcoming **New Pact for the Mediterranean** and its bilateral partnerships and regional investment agendas.

The reconstruction of Syria must go **hand in hand** with **strengthening** Syria's **state institutions.**

Capacity-building is existential.

Accordingly, we intend to call on the **technical expertise from Member States**.

The **electricity sector**, for example, is an area where immediate support would be helpful.

Syria's electricity infrastructure is of Western origin, and **where we can help we should.**

President,

Honourable Members,

Let me conclude by underscoring the paramount importance of **justice and accountability**.

One can build all the houses and roads – but the **key remains reconciliation**.

The EU will continue to support the different accountability mechanisms as Syria moves forward with its transitional justice.

In this context, as also in the context of reconstruction, Syria's **vibrant civil society – within the country and abroad – plays a vital role. The EU remains a strong supporter** of civil society actors and diaspora networks.

We will keep supporting them in their historic task of rebuilding their country.

I look forward to our debate.

Thank you.

Concluding remarks

Dear President,

Council Presidency,

Honourable Members,

Thank you very much for your **contributions** to this debate.

Syria's transition is in the making.

The path to stability and prosperity is long.

And the **challenges are numerous**.

But we should remain there.

I am grateful for the **vast support** you have shown.

Syria's reconstruction will need the backing of us all, Commission, Member States and Parliament in a **Team Europe** spirit.

Parliamentary diplomacy, outreach and expertise in state building are of essence at this critical juncture for Syria.

We need to remain **united and committed.**

Syria's future depends on our collective action today.

I look forward to the European Parliament **resolution**.

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