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Speech by Commissioner Lahbib at the Standing with Syria: Brussels IX Conference

Brussels, 17 March 2025

After more than a decade of war, displacement, and hardship, Syria is at a turning point. The fall of the Assad regime has opened a new chapter — with immense challenges but also with unprecedented opportunities to rebuild a nation.

During this political transformation, the humanitarian needs remain staggering. Just a snapshot of the situation on the ground:

Three out of four Syrians — over 16 million people — still need humanitarian aid.

More than half of the population faces food insecurity. The education and healthcare systems are under immense strain, leaving millions without basic services.

Two out of three Syrians live in extreme poverty. Infrastructure is crumbling and the economy is in freefall. The scars of war —both physical and emotional — run deep.

More than 12 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced, with over seven million internally displaced and almost two million living in camps.

The Syria of today is like post-World War Two Europe before the Marshall Plan. We need coordinated international action to keep up the humanitarian aid. As Syria rebuilds, millions will still rely on humanitarian assistance. We must continue to address their lifesaving needs and protect the most vulnerable.

Since the beginning of the Syria crisis in 2011, the EU and its Member States have mobilised nearly €37 billion in humanitarian, development, economic and stabilisation aid. From this amount, more than €4.3 billion have been mobilised in humanitarian aid to Syrians and vulnerable host communities in Syria and the region. This includes over €1.7 billion in Syria, €959 million in Lebanon, and €431 million in Jordan.

Our decision at the Foreign Affairs Council last month to extend indefinitely the humanitarian exemption of EU sanctions on Syria sent a powerful message of support to the Syrian people. It will make it easier to deliver humanitarian aid to those in need.

We must work together to avoid duplication. Efficient coordination between governments, international financial institutions, the UN, and NGOs will maximize our impact.

The peaceful transition from a humanitarian phase into a reconstruction phase — linked to conditions fulfilled by the interim Government — is also essential. This includes the commitment to comply with international law and the protection of all Syrians.

The EU has been at the forefront of international discussions on Early Recovery in Syria. We have supported early humanitarian recovery efforts to make sure essential services continue and to avoid the collapse of critical civilian infrastructure. Protection will also be a priority of our humanitarian and recovery programming to strengthen the resilience of Syrian communities.

Rebuilding Syria requires more than just humanitarian and development aid. This new chapter must be fair, inclusive, and representative of the people's will. It must provide opportunities for all Syrians, no matter their background.

In January, I met with the new Syrian leaders, civil society, and humanitarian partners in Damascus. I reaffirmed the EU's support for Syria and its people and the importance of a peaceful and inclusive political transition.

That is why I am deeply concerned by the serious violence, notably in the North-west of the country, with hundreds of innocent people killed. The EU calls on all parties to respect International Humanitarian Law and protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. The independent committee that was launched last week to investigate the violations is an essential step.

It is also important to keep in mind the regional dimension of the crisis and the situation of refugees in the neighbouring countries. The return of Syrian refugees must remain voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable.

I commend the extraordinary efforts of Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt in hosting millions of Syrian refugees. More assistance is needed to meet the growing needs of both the refugees and their host communities. I also commend the efforts of all humanitarian actors working in the region.

I recently visited Zaatari Camp in Jordan, where I met young Farah again. Maybe you remember her? She opened one of the first Syria Conferences when she was only seven years old. Now she is 13 and still lives in a refugee camp. She still has big hopes and big dreams — for herself and her country. We cannot let her down.

Today's conference is not just a call for generosity — it is an extended hand to help rebuild Syria's future. Farah's future. It is a moment to invest in stability, security, and prosperity in a country that remains central to the region's long-term peace.

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