European External Action Service (EEAS)

Syria: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the EP plenary on the situation in the region

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Dear President, honourable members,

It is really a pleasure to be here, to see the plenary from this side.

It is with a sense of cautious optimism that I address you today as we witness a historic turning point in Syria.

The fall of the Assad regime marks the beginning of a new chapter for the Syrian people and the broader Middle East.

First, I would like to take a moment to reaffirm that the European Union's approach to Syria all these 14 years has been both principled and firm – and has proven [to be] the right one.

We remain true to our values. We hold dear freedom, human rights, inclusiveness, respect for minorities, and accountability.

We stood with the Syrian people in Syria and the diaspora, organizing each year an international conference for the future of Syria.

The European Union and its Member States mobilize more than 33.3 billion in humanitarian, development, economic, and stabilisation assistance, providing support both Syrians inside the country and in the region, as well as outside.

Assad had proved time and again that there would be never a peaceful, united, and stable Syria nor regional stability under his rule.

And his allies, especially Russia and Iran, had used Syria to advance their destabilising strategies hurtful for our key interests.

Now there is a historic window of opportunity, and we Europeans need to act decisively and cohesively also with our key partners.

I was in Aqaba on Saturday for the international meeting convened by Jordan, important because it included the key regional actors, the neighbours of Syria, as well as the United Nations, United States, and the European Union.

We agreed on principles which are very important to the Syrian people and to all of us – stability, sovereignty, territorial integrity of Syria. A Syrian-led and Syrian-owned inclusive political process with the support of the United Nations, [with a] government respectful of all components of society, buildup of institutions – also the fight against Daesh and the destruction of chemical weapons.

Finally, accountability for the crimes committed by the Assad regime and others.

Yesterday, European Union foreign ministers endorsed these key principles and supported my proposal to swiftly design a new approach to Syria.

We are already stepping up humanitarian assistance to meet emerging needs.

We have a key interest in the success of the Syrian transition.

We need to adapt our early recovery parameters to the new political reality with a view to eventual reconstruction. To start reflecting on a possible revision of our sanctions regime in order to support Syria's path to recovery while keeping our leverage. To further support accountability efforts at this crucial juncture in order to lay the foundations for transitional justice and reconciliation.

This approach is driven by two objectives – early engagement and prudence.

Finally, we must see how the European Union, and especially this House, can support the democratic aspirations of Syria.

Earlier this year, in May, over 600 Syrian civil society representatives met in the European Parliament in Brussels for the Syria conference.

For the eighth year in a row, Brussels was the place – the only one in the world – where Syrians from across the country and the diaspora were able to come together and reflect both on concrete issues and how to build a better future.

Now, six months later, this future of peace, freedom, and dignity is closer than ever for all communities, for all people – men, women, and children.

It is for the Syrians to build, but the European Union has much more it can do for its aspirations.

And this parliament has very much to offer.

Now, I have instructed my services to start thinking about what the ninth Brussels conference on the future of Syria and the region could look like. This time in a new Syria. I look forward to also European Parliament's contribution.

In conclusion, this is a critical moment for Syria and for the international community.

The European Union has been consistent in its tireless efforts in supporting Syrian people, and we must continue to do so.

Together, we can help shape a future for peace, security, and justice [to] prevail for Syria and its people.

Thank you.

Link to video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-265221

Closing statements

Dear President, Honorable Members, thank you for this debate.

I think it was very, very useful.

It is true, and I agree with you, that we cannot leave a vacuum in Syria. We have to avoid the mistakes that we made with Libya, with Afghanistan. We have to be also there.

The future of the country must be Syria-led and Syria-owned, and reflect the Syrian people in all their diversity.

Yes, we know that Syria is very diverse. I agree with those that we do not talk about protection of minorities, but we talk about inclusivity of the government, that all the groups that you also mentioned in the plenary would be sitting around that table.

I agree with those who said that the European Union must be present, and we have already started to have a process to engage cautiously with Damascus, pushing for an inclusive and tolerant approach.

I see we have a chance here to really impact the region, and we need to follow closely the next steps in the short term.

I have asked the head of delegation [Michael Ohnmacht] to go to Damascus yesterday to have constructive first contacts with the new leadership and various other groups, also the civil society.

We are ready to reopen our delegation, which is the European embassy, and we want this to be fully operational again.

I think this is a very important step, [the fact] that we will reopen the delegation in Syria, to have – like many of you said – really constructive engagement and to have the input and information from the ground, as well.

In parallel, the European Union remains the biggest donor of humanitarian aid to Syrian people – and we stand with the Syrian people through this transition, as we did during Assad's brutal rule.

Like I have said, Syria faces a positive, but uncertain future, and we have to work together with the regional actors.

That is why meeting with the Arab countries, the United Nations, United States, but also Türkiye – and having the same principles in mind – is extremely important to deliver the same messages also to the new leadership what we want to see.

So thank you very much for this debate, and we will continue to cooperate also with the European Parliament.

Thank you.

Link to video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-265223

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