European Commission - Speech

Speech by Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the third Brussels Conference "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region"

Brussels, 13 March 2019

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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

This is the third Brussels conference on the future of Syria and the region hosted by the European Union.

It is a pleasure to see such a large and diverse attendance, with Ministers from the region and the EU Member states, UN colleagues and representatives from Syrian, regional and international non-governmental organisations. – so many of us here, committed to bringing some form of hope to those caught up in the Syrian crisis.

Like everyone here I regret that a conflict that has brought such tremendous suffering is now about to enter its ninth year.

The EU has, with its Member states, mobilised EUR 17billion since 2011 in response to the widespread violence, displacement and humanitarian needs of ordinary people.

This has been money spent – *well* spent – to support those displaced in Syria, the refugees and refugee hosting countries in the region. Providing education, sanitation, clean water, jobs.

But it is not enough.

- Families who have lost livelihoods, or fled for their lives still need us.

- A whole generation that has no experience of what is 'normal' still needs us.

BUT as we all-too-well know from other protracted crises, our support has to be not only heartfelt, but alsosustainable.

Refugees need to return under conditions of safety and dignity, when, and only when, it is of their own will.

Those conditions do not currently exist.

- Idlib is controlled by a terrorist organisation.

- Reprisals have taken place in areas retaken by Damascus.

- Property rights are being actively undermined.

- There is continuing uncertainty over issues of civil documentation; and no one knows if education certificates will be recognised.

Damascus appears intent on screening returnees for 'loyalty', slowing and manipulating the issue of return.This has miserable consequences for Syrians, but impacts as well on Syria's neighbours, the wider region, and of course the European Union.

There are no 'winners' in this conflict. But we must seek to minimise the number of 'losers' in the interest of creating lasting stability in future.

Some will choose - are choosing - to return to Syria before the European Union and others, particularly the UNHCR consider it safe to do so.

This is their right, their decision. The European Union will not encourage them nor stand in their way.

We are helping the vulnerable inside Syria with humanitarian assistance and we will continue to provide this support to Syrians whether they have weathered the conflict inside the country, have been internally displaced or have recently returned.

We will also continue to support the emergence of conditions that will, one day, allow more refugees to return. That means helping citizens hold the authorities accountable, promoting the respect of property rights and working to ensure that civil documentation is not a source of uncertainty for those seeking to return to their homes.

For most, the moment for return has not yet come. It is therefore essential, now more than ever, to accompany Syria's neighbours in their efforts to expand their economies, as they cope with the reality of continuing refugee presence.

This means boosting investment, inclusive growth and job creation. The EU has stepped up at both the Cedre conference for Lebanon and the London 'Initiative' event for Jordan. Both countries need to make good on their reform commitments, if private investors are to be convinced to put in their money. There is no room for inefficiency in the use of investor funds, and these must be used for the benefit of the largest possible number of individuals.

Citizens expect accountability, and the EU will continue to insist upon the meaningful involvement of civil society and the private sector in governance and investment prioritisation. The benefits of our investments must filter through to the most vulnerable

BUT perhaps my key message today is that refugees, themselves, need to become increasingly economically self-reliant. They need to be given the opportunity to provide for themselves. Not because of some alleged "donor fatigue", but because this is the way back to dignity, and control over their own lives.

This is a region with experience of long-term refugees, of people who have lived a lifetime without escaping that status. My conviction is that displaced Syrian people, their host countries and the region will be better off if as many refugees as possible can carve out normal lives for themselves, through regular employment, while they wait to go home.

I applaud Jordan's decision to allow refugees to open home-based businesses. Entrepreneurs pay tax and support their own families, reducing the burden on the public sector. The EU has been able to help individuals, create profitable businesses – and each person who does this, has the possibility to use their own funds to buy health services or to help extended family. This is the way forward.

Everyone understands the sensitivities and the challenges. BUT I encourage Lebanon to take another look at the contribution of refugees to VAT receipts and consumption, and at how tax on declared earnings could be maximised. We all share the same objectives, that Syrians should be able to return home, but for the immediate future, pragmatic responses are required.

On our side, we intend to propose to extend the EU regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis, whose purpose is to help both vulnerable locals and refugees. The Trust Fund will increasingly focus on Jordan and Lebanon. It is already shifting to an approach where it can effectively reinforce the national systems for service provision that need to continue to meet refugee needs over more than just the short term.

Today is not about pledging but I can assure you we will maintain our funding levels: AND we will also leave no stone unturned in seeking to leverage grant funding to draw in private sector support or provide loans for relevant projects on subsidised terms unmatched by any other organisation.

Just a word on Turkey, a country that is host to the largest number of refugees world-wide, in absolute numbers.

The EU is grateful that, with more than 3 million Syrians in Turkey, the children *have been* integrated in the education system and adults *have access* to the labour market, while the health system has also been opened widely.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We have spent almost nine years peddling hard to stand still, to prevent any further deterioration of conditions. I ask you to explore today, in this day of dialogue, how we can support an end to the war in Syria that will lead to sustainable stability in thecountry. How the international community can best accompany the neighbours in their recovery from the impact of the crisis.

And, how we can, working together, recognise those displaced by conflict as individuals with the potential to contribute to solutions, not just as aid recipients.

Again it is about dignity of human beings.

Your work today will be brought into tomorrow's event. I encourage you to be both demanding and creative.

Thank you.