

Remarks by HR/VP Mogherini at the press point with Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria

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Good afternoon,

Let me, first and foremost, say how glad I am to share the stage once again with [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan De Mistura and to see our two flags – the European Union and the United Nations – together, for the work we do together, as we do work together on all major issues around the world, be them crises or global issues of concern. This week it is for the Second Brussels Conference [on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region"] we are having tomorrow at ministerial level, together, co-chaired by the European Union and the United Nations.

Already the fact of having the European Union and the United Nations together is a very powerful symbol of our common approach that is based on the search for peaceful political solutions, the role of diplomacy, dialogue and respect - respect for people and human beings. It might sound basic, but especially in moments like this one - that do not look particularly encouraging, to use an euphemism – starting from people and persons is our common approach. And this is why I am glad that we started this Conference with a segment with civil society.

[UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan [De Mistura] and I have just met representatives from Syrian civil society organisations, for almost three hours, and they will bring their contribution, their vision, their analyses and their recommendations to the ministerial session tomorrow, here in Brussels, at the Brussels Conference on "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region".

The main message that we brought to them and we underlined with them - why it is so important they are here with us - is that Syria is not a chessboard, it is not a geopolitical game. Syria belongs to the Syrian people and the Syrian people have to decide themselves about the future of their country. It is when a political stalemate is so dramatic as it is today and the military escalation risks to spread even further, and even deeper, that the role and voices of the Syrians, of the men and women and young men and women of the country, count the most. As they have shown courage, determination, engagement, wisdom in working together now for three days, on common ideas, despite different backgrounds, coming from different places – some of them are in Syria, some of them are outside – they show the courage to listen to each other, to respect each other, to understand and find common ground.

I believe this is a great model for those who should sit around another table, the UN-led table, and find a political solution for the crisis.

The people gathered here are the voice of Syrians, the ones who suffer the most from this endless war, those who lost their loved ones, those that suffered themselves and those that have not yet lost hope, but indeed still hope for just a normal life. It is for these people that the Brussels Conference is held; it is for these people, it is for the Syrians that the international support will be gathered tomorrow. Political support and financial support. We will discuss more about this tomorrow, [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan [De Mistura] and I, but let me say that for us the work with the Syrian civil society, for us the European Union, has been key from the very beginning and it is today even more important both inside Syria and in the rest of the region.

We have founded and assisted the civil society to grow in many different areas such as human rights, humanitarian aid, the role of women - and I was pleased to see so many Syrian women around the table today, let me also say, with a voice of wisdom and pragmatism that I believe could be useful for bringing the conflict to a solution - but also on peace-building, on resilience, on crossline dialogues, support for minorities in Syria. And on their role as not only the ones that are taking care of their people today during the conflict, but also as those that can build the future of Syria in reconciliation and dealing with the wounds that will be hopefully managed. This is the true meaning of the European Union: supporting people, supporting the values of democracy, dignity, freedom, accountability and justice through the everyday work of what we have called the "Syrian heroes," those that are every day still working in very difficult conditions for their people.

Tomorrow I will talk more about the need to return to the political process under UN auspices and I will talk more about the financial pledges that the European Union has gathered in support of Syrians. Let me say that I am particularly glad to be together with [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan [De Mistura] and recall my support on behalf of all the European Union for his tireless work to start real, meaningful political negotiations, that in the situation of today I believe are clearly the only way forward for the country.

So, again, what matters for us is the Syrian people. They are the ones who pay the price of the war the most, and they are the peace-builders that everybody should look at as a model. Some of them in the room have said something very wise, I believe: "Peace is not just a document that somebody else can sign, a piece of paper in a faraway capital, it is a process that needs to be built in communities, by the Syrian people themselves. It is a process of reconciliation, inclusion and unity that requires Syrians to be the protagonists". And this is exactly what we are trying to do together with the United Nations.

Q&A

Could you update us on your efforts to get an humanitarian ceasefire on the ground, mainly through the letter you sent to the main military key players?

I sent a letter – by the way, also consulting with Staffan de Mistura – already a couple of months ago to the three Astana guarantors, simply reminding them their responsibility to implement their own decisions. The Astana process had brought some hope on the possibility of calming down the situation in terms of military activities, but that seems a very long time ago, and that seems gone. I believe they have not only a responsibility but

also an interest in making the ceasefire work, in implementing the latest UN Security Council Resolution that was – by the way – agreed upon also thanks to the tireless work of one the EU Member States, Member of the UN Security Council – Sweden –, together with Kuwait. And we still believe that it is vital that the cessation of the hostilities, in particular for the humanitarian access, is guaranteed.

I also said to our friends of the civil society, the European Union is not and has never been a military player in Syria. We are a humanitarian and a political player in Syria and for Syrians. For being an effective humanitarian player we need access; and for having access we need the conditions on the ground. We will discuss this tomorrow with the United Nations and obviously with all the countries that are coming. But I still believe that the three guarantors of the Astana process have a responsibility and also an interest in guaranteeing that the military situation on the ground gets calmer and that the cessation of hostilities happens. Actually in the last months, we have seen the contrary. So, I see clear contradictions in terms here, and I believe that tomorrow we will also have the chance of discussing that. Because again, as Staffan [de Mistura] has just rightly mentioned, more military activity does not open the way for a political solution, it rather makes it more difficult. We need the arms to be silent, for humanitarian reasons and for political reasons. That is the European Union's position.

How do you characterise the situation of the Syrian civil society? Is it today mature and healthy to have an effective involvement on the negotiations table?

You asked if the Syrian civil society is mature, I think it is definitely so. Syria is a country and the Syrian people are people with a deep culture. I used the word sophisticated, with a deep understanding of their societies, with long traditions and histories, and, yes, with a lot of maturity in the way in which they address also their own difficulties and differences. It is a civil society that is expressing the suffering of people for more than seven years of war. I wish all parties to the conflict were able to show the same maturity as the civil society of Syria is showing. We would probably have solved the problem a long time ago. And, this is also why we are continuing to support them, because the European Union together with the United Nations is investing a lot in the Syrian civil society. We believe they can be the building blocks of the Syria of the future.

Why was the delegation from Syria not invited tomorrow?

We have – I think – shared with all of you the criteria on which we have made the invitations for the [Second Brussels] Conference [on "Supporting the Future of] Syria [and the Region] that were - by the way - agreed between the European Union and the United Nations, and they were exactly the same criteria we used last year. So, I think you can refer to that.

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