European External Action Service (EEAS)

Syria: Opening speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Ministerial session of the VII. Brussels conference on the future of Syria and the region

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Welcome to the 7th Brussels Conference on the Future of Syria and of the Region. I am pleased to see so many friends from the region, from Europe and beyond, and also from the UN family, which has come in strength, as always.

The Syrian people – Syria's refugees, those displaced, those suffering desperate levels of poverty brought about by more than a decade of conflict and repression at the hands of the Syrian regime – have suffered a painful and traumatic year since we last gathered in this forum.

It is a year which has seen a devastating earthquake in the region, bringing yet further misery to Syrians in the north-west of the country, not to mention millions of Turkish people across the border. Already 90% of Syrians living in Syria live in poverty; 60% suffer food insecurity. They barely know where their next meal is coming from.

The situation for Syrian refugees and for their host communities in neighbouring countries has become no easier, quite the contrary. Nor can we forget 438,000 Palestine refugees in Syria, whose plight the international community cannot overlook.

And, unfortunately, over the last year there has been little progress, very little progress, towards a resolution of the Syria conflict, despite the unstinting efforts of UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen. Thank you for your efforts, dear Geir.

It is unacceptable that Syria has been brought so low. It is unacceptable that we tolerate the present plight of the Syrian people. Our task must be to find ways of working positively towards a resolution of the conflict. Our task today must be to bring hope. Some hope, some relief.

On 7 May 2023, the League of Arab States took a decision to readmit Syria in the League of Arab States (LAS). There has been a process of normalisation between a number of Arab states and the regime in Damascus. We are following, too, Turkey's attempts to resolve some of its concerns through contacts with the Syrian regime.

Allow me to say, this is not the path that the European Union would have chosen. It's not. Very soon, we will see if these efforts have convinced the regime in Damascus to engage in a dialogue with Gulf and Arab states over various aspects of UN Security Council resolution 2254.

I am afraid, we are a long, long way from the full and comprehensive implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2254, from a lasting resolution of the crisis in Syria. In fact, progress seems to have stalled completely.

Yet signs of hope must not be dismissed. After all, it is our job as diplomats to be positive, even in the worst circumstances, to find hope even where there appears to be none.

Let us draw hope from the refusal of Syrian and international civil society – as witnessed at yesterday's Day of Dialogue – to give up on their commitment to building a future Syria. To building peace from within. Yesterday we heard how Syrian civil society envisages a future Syria of human rights, of peace and democracy. We will hear them speak in a moment. We will continue to support and encourage them, paying special attention to the crucial role played by Syrian women. They must have a seat at the table.

I draw hope too from the Syrians living in Syria, who have decided that they will no longer remain dependent on emergency handouts, and who refuse to set aside their aspiration to rebuild Syria – despite the depredations and abuses of the Assad regime - along renewed, democratic and peaceful lines.

I draw hope from the openness of the international community to supporting early recovery efforts in Syria, to making sure that its assistance is both efficient and sustainable. It is by working with Syrian civil society, with local organisations, with local leaders to help Syrians rebuild their lives and communities, their economy and social services, that we can ensure that our assistance not only has maximum impact, but contributes positively to a future Syria.

I draw hope from the continuing commitment of refugee-hosting countries in the region. Thank you so much to all of them for doing right on behalf of the Syrian refugees. Even as needs rise and tensions mount, these states continue to provide generously for nearly seven million Syrian refugees. This is certainly a heavy burden. While supporting refugee-hosting countries in their difficult work, we also need to defuse tensions and to avoid the exploitation of the presence of refugees for political ends. We cannot set aside the need for a long-term solution to the refugee situation. We need to work positively for solutions. So we will continue to support all attempts to prevail on the Syrian regime, which has the primary responsibility for ensuring the conditions for voluntary, safe, sustainable and dignified returns, and make sure that these conditions are monitored by the international community.

I draw hope as well from the continuing generosity of the international community, both to the Syrians in Syria but also to the refugees and their host communities. This generosity was

witnessed yet again as recently as March of this year, when we gathered in Brussels to raise pledges for the victims of the earthquake which struck the region in February.

This brings me to the immediate purpose of today's Conference. Our first task is to gather fresh pledges of support for the Syrian people as they continue to suffer the effects of more than a decade of conflict, economic collapse, corruption and repression. We cannot forget either the needs of Syrian refugees living in neighbouring states - in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq – and the needs of their host communities. We must maintain the hope that the Syrian people, and the region, place in all of us.

Dear Ministers, dear colleagues, thank you for being, here: we need to ensure that pledges of assistance remain substantial.

I am pleased to confirm the pledge I made last year on behalf of the European Union of €1,5 billion for the benefit of Syrians in Syria, and of refugees and their host communities in the region, for this calendar year 2023.

I am also able to pledge that for calendar year 2024 the European Union will make available €560 million.

Ministers, colleagues: I draw hope most of all from the steadfast commitment of the international community to the full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 2254. This is the reference point, the point of departure for a solution. I draw hope from the continuing commitment of the Syrian opposition to that resolution.

Now is not the time to give up. The European Union will not waver in its commitment to this resolution [UNSCR 2254], to the efforts of UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen to generate momentum for the political process, to a future Syria of rights and democracy. The only way out of this conflict is a political one.

We must maintain, too, our commitment to justice and accountability for the crimes committed over what is now more than a decade of conflict. I would like to make a special mention in this regard of the work of the Commission of Inquiry and of the 'Triple I M' whose work we continue to support.

The EU is already considering how it can support a new mechanism that, we hope, will be created by the UN to discover the fate and the whereabouts of those missing, and to support victims' families.

Another priority are the millions of people in Syria whose survival depends on continued cross border assistance from Turkey. This is a very important issues The European Union will work with Turkey and other likeminded partners to achieve the renewal of the vital cross-border resolution guaranteeing the delivery of humanitarian assistance into Syria.

Let me be clear: the conditions are not in place for the European Union to change its policy on Syria, Member States are united on that. It will maintain and has recently actually intensified its targeting by sanctions of the Syrian regime. The European Union will not support organised returns to Syria unless there are cast-iron guarantees that those returns are being made voluntarily, safely, and in dignity, under international monitoring.

Ministers, colleagues: we all want the same thing in Syria, we all want to end to the conflict in Syria, lasting peace for the Syrian people, the return of refugees, stability for the region as a whole. We know that, realistically, we can achieve our goals only through genuine political reforms in Syria. The path to that goal is the UN Security Council resolution 2254.

My sincere hope is that over the coming year we can combine our different approaches in order to make progress towards peace in Syria. I have set out quite clearly the European Union's own approach. It remains unwavering. Yet this does not mean that we are not ready to explore, with our partners, every possible manner of bringing the Syrian regime to engage in a political solution to the conflict in Syria.

Ministers and colleagues: allow me to finish by saying that the purpose of the annual Brussels conferences has always been to show a beacon of hope for the Syrian people. We are here to today to help keep that hope alive. I hope that we will continue to seek a way forward.

Our presence today demonstrates that the international community will stand with the Syrian people and keep alive its determination to achieve a just and peaceful Syria. Today, we have to reiterate our commitment – the commitment of the international community - to the future of the Syrian people.

Thank you in advance for your pledges, for your support, and simply for being here to attest our continued and joint commitment for the future of Syria. We continue standing with the Syrian people.

Thank you for your presence, and let's get to work.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-242302

Source: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-opening-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ministerial-session-vii_en