Syria: Joint press conference by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syria, Asaad Hassan Al-Shaibani

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Thank you, dear Minister Al-Shaibani. Thank you for welcoming us in Damascus and also thank you for really good discussions that we had today. We just met a few days ago in New York, but it is really a pleasure to be here in Damascus.

The success of Syrian transition matters greatly to Europe. Above all, it matters to Syrians, of course, who have waited for far too long for peace, freedom, and future. The European Union is using its political and economic tools to help Syria on the path of inclusive and peaceful transition.

After Assad's fall, the European Union moved fast and lifted economic sanctions on Syria to support recovery and reconstruction. We restored the full application of the EU-Syria Cooperation Agreement and held our first ever High-Level Political Dialogue in May.

All these have been important political signals in the normalisation of the relations between EU and Syria. Now we aim to mobilise even more investment and upgrade our partnership, but that is also very much dependent on Syria's side.

I have proposed technical talks this year on political and security issues, as well as recovery and reconstruction ahead of another High-Level Political Dialogue before next summer. These discussions will build on the substantial support that is already in place. The European Union is already providing €620 million for recovery, humanitarian needs, and strengthening institutions.

Today, we also visited Jobar and saw ourselves the damage Assad regime has done. Through EU foreign policy instruments, we have also mobilised €51.5 million, including around €18.85 million to clear mines and unexploded ordnance. Clearing explosives means children can safely reach schools and farmers can return to their fields. But it is clear that aid alone cannot build Syria. Foreign and domestic investment needs trust, and trust needs security, clear rules, rule of law, functioning institutions, but also equal participation of women

in the society. We are ready to help to build the institutions, and it is good that we address these topics today.

Successful transition depends on the national reconciliation and accountability. European Union supports serious justice and missing persons commissions to investigate past mass violence. Families need answers. Victims need justice. An estimated 1.8 million people have returned to Syria from abroad after the end of the war. Returns must be safe, dignified, and durable. Those returning need homes, schools, hospitals, and security. Reintegrating northeast Syria is also a major step. It must protect Kurdish rights and give communities a meaningful say. In Sweida too, dialogue and confidence building are essential.

We also talked about the wider regional security. Syria's restraint towards Israel and its decision to stay out of the US-Iran war helped prevent the conflict from spreading any further. Syria and Israel have been in security negotiations over the past year. Syria's sovereignty and the 1974 separation agreement must be respected.

And finally, on Russia's military presence in Syria. Russia used its bases to help Assad kill Syrians. Moscow still shelters him. We hope that recent memorandum will lead to a reduced military presence and influence. Syria has credible alternatives to dependence on Russia.

Dear Minister Al-Shaibani, EU-Syria relations have come a long way since the fall of Assad regime. Europe wants Syria's transition to succeed. We want Syria to take its rightful place in the international family, and we are ready to help turn this into a lasting process. Our task now is to turn closer relations into concrete improvements for Syrians' lives.

Thank you again for receiving us here.

Q&A

Q. [inaudible]

I guess the question is about the bank, being part of the EBRD and Syria joining this. Because [the] European Commission, it is only the Member States and it is only the European countries so geographically that is not possible. But when it comes to the EBRD - European Bank of Reconstruction and Development - then I know that there are discussions also how the EBRD, which is a financing organisation, can look into the projects that are here in Syria, how this cooperation could work. Also, the European Investment Bank is looking into this cooperation because clearly, what is required is also the support for infrastructure build-up and such things that are the backbone of economy. So, we are looking into ways what we can do there. We do not have an agreement on these things yet, but I know that the discussions are ongoing.

Q. [inaudible]

First of all, the return of refugees. We very much welcome the safe and dignified return of refugees to Syria, also to help to rebuild Syria. Now, it is clear that what Syria needs is also more investment. The investments are usually made by the private companies, so we should also see what is important for these private companies. What is important for them is the rule of law and their functioning institutions. Meaning that, if a company comes invest here, there is a problem, then it is sure that they can go to court and get a decision for this, so they trust the economy. That is why it is very important that these things go hand in hand. We are ready to help to build institutions, so that actually also the private companies who have the funding, who have the finances, can come here to invest in your economy to create the jobs that people want. So, this is very much interlinked.

Watch the video of the press conference

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