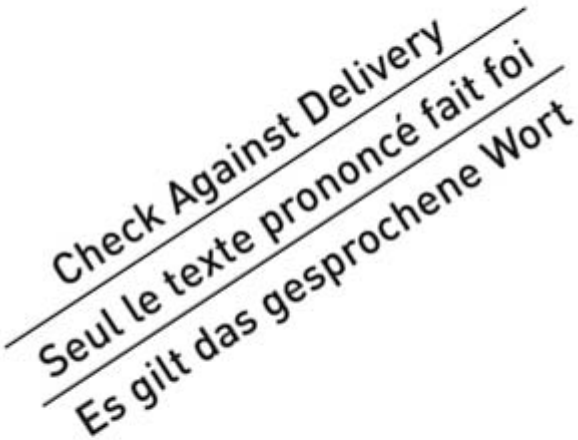
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Catherine Ashton
High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission

Speech by Minister of State for European Affairs Lucinda Creighton on behalf of HRVP Catherine Ashton on the situation in Syria



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Distinguished members of the European Parliament, permit me to update you, on behalf of the HRVP Catherine Ashton, on EU's assessment of the situation in Syria.

I am sure that all of us here would agree that the political solution to the heart-wrenching, and almost 2 year long, conflict in Syria is not yet in sight. The political process that the EU and the international community have been supporting with true resolve has, unfortunately, not moved far enough yet.

Conversely, there are also no signs that the Assad regime has moved in its own intransigence. We all witnessed the defiance of President Assad in his unacceptable speech, as recognised by many of our partners and the Joint Special Representative Brahimi. From our side, the EU's official statements remain unambiguous: There is no future for Assad in the political future of Syria.

The EU has incessantly worked with all partners on the bilateral, multilateral and inter-institutional levels to address the whole array of pressing issues. Political efforts continue and there is no need to recall all the daily diplomacy that operates in Brussels as well as European and world capitals. From our side, we can count the most recent statement of the HR/VP on Assad's speech, the European Council and FAC conclusions of December that covered very broad areas of our approach to the Syrian tragedy. We must also mention the extension of the sanctions regime, official recognition of the Syrian Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition forces as legitimate representative of the Syrian people, or support to 3rd Committee, as well UN HRC resolutions. And we will keep on examining if further sanctions cen be adopted in order to put more pressure on the regime.

The EU commends and continues to support the mission of Mr Brahimi. His perseverance in reaching a workable solution over the last months has earned him much deserved respect. We do hope that within the international community we are nearing a compromise on how to best assist Syria's future. Here we will be watching very closely a report of Mr. Brahimi that he will present to the UNSC on 29 January. He could not attend the Foreign affairs Council (FAC) in January but we have invited him at the FAC in February.

At the same time, the EU has managed to reinforce actions addressing the challenges faced at present by the Syrian population. They range from the increasing flow of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Syrian neighbourhood countries during an extraordinarily harsh winter, continuing massive internal displacement of millions of Syrians, to possible chemical incident scenarios and the consolidation of the opposition. The European Council tasked the Foreign Affairs Council to work on all options to support and help the opposition and to enable greater support for the protection of civilians. This issue will be tackled at the next Foreign Affairs Council on 31 January.

Although financial assistance is only part of the solution, it does help in easing some of these challenges. Since the last debate here in the EP, the EU has almost doubled all types of assistance in and outside Syria. Today, over €500M (of which over €350M is in humanitarian aid) go to long-term actions on supporting refugees, Syrian youth, and population particularly affected by the unrest including skills, education and mentoring for the refugees. The EU is also funding activities, such as the Regional Protection Programme, aimed at building up resilience of displaced Syrian population as well as enhancing the capacity of communities which host them in neighbouring countries. More is certainly needed, and improved channels of delivery will have to be devised, given harsher weather conditions descending on refugees and internally displaced Syrians. I would like to commend the work done in this field by Commissioner Georgieva and her staff.

Our efforts also try to prepare for the "day after" and the transition, which will include financial assistance to support political transition, institutional and economic recovery as well as support to the population and post-conflict accountability. The EU is also preparing preventive measures in case of a potential chemical weapon incident. At the moment the focus is more on the trans-border element of this threat on which we cooperate closely with Syria's neighbours such as Jordan and Turkey.

In all our financial interventions the EU uses a four pronged approach. It includes ongoing support to the multilateral institutions such as the UN and INGOS, civil society organisations and alongside just being rolled out support to local Syrian NGOs and civilian structures together with structured support to the opposition. As you know, the EU co-chairs, the UN Humanitarian Forum and chairs the donor coordination work within the Friends of Syria working group on economic recovery. We are working with our partners to improve channels of our delivery, planning and gap analysis. The EU will also participate in the donor conference initiated by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and hosted by the Kuwaiti Emir on 30 January. While on one side we work towards a political solution, on the other we do not lose sight of the human dimension of the Syrian tragedy that has unfolded in the past two years. It resulted in over 60 thousand dead, 2.5 million internally displaced Syrians, and 500 thousand refugees; numbers, which unfortunately, are rising as we speak.

As Commissioner Georgieva will tell you later, we are working tirelessly every day to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people. But we all agree that such a tragedy cannot go on without more action and initiatives. I know that some of you are of the opinion that today more direct military assistance to the opposition should be envisaged. But such an option is still very divisive and runs the risk of hardening the conflict.

This is why in spite of all the difficulties, the doubts on the short comings, we must remain determined to keep the course, by supporting Mr. Brahimi's efforts, assisting the opposition and by relentlessly calling for the Syrian leadership to face up to reality in the country and at last putting an end to all violence.

Honourable members, in this tragic and bloody conflict where diplomacy can go only as far as there exists concerted political cooperation, the EU and the HR have remained focused on all important aspects of the conflict.

We do hope that you will continue your singularly important role to look for joint solutions to carry forward our daily work. Heeding the call of the European Council we are stepping up efforts to work on all options to support and help the opposition and to enable greater support for the protection of civilians. We will be focusing on finding better ways to make our efforts in more effective. Intensive regional cooperation efforts are also under way to ensure that spill-over effects from the Syrian conflict do not further destabilise an already volatile region.