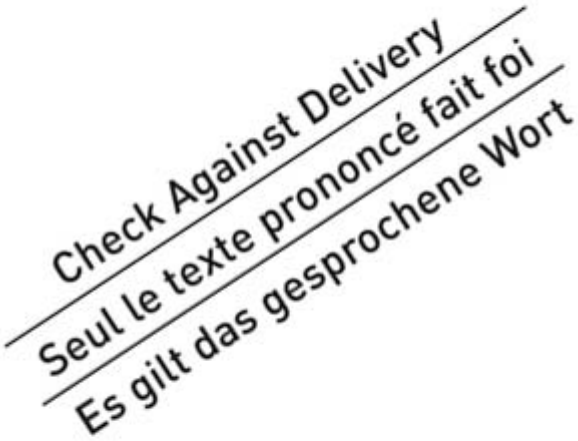
EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Human rights and civil society in Syria: revealing the truth, preparing the transition



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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very glad to be here with you today, and I first of all want to express my solidarity with the Syrian people, who have lived in deeply shocking circumstances for the last 15 months, with the death of more than 17.000 people, the disappearance of around 67.000 people and the arbitrary detention of 200.000 people.

These figures speak for themselves, and show clearly that Syria is a country in war currently. As such, it does not respect the very fundamental human right - immortalized by John Lennon - of all the people, living lives in peace…

As a reaction to the events on the ground and the continuing violations of human rights, the EU has given a strong political response, condemning the widespread and systematic human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime, calling for swift investigations and reiterating that the perpetrators of such crimes must be held accountable.

To exert pressure on the regime to change course, the EU has adopted 17 rounds of sanctions since May 2011. By now there is a comprehensive list of restrictive measures in place, ranging from travel bans and asset freezes targeting senior regime figures, Assad family members and/or government controlled entities to bans on the import of petroleum products, the export of arms, IT technology and luxury goods. Insurance and reinsurance of petroleum and arms shipment to resp. from Syria is equally prohibited

As for cooperation with the Syrian government we, as European Union, have suspended all of it: bilateral under MEDA and ENPI (May 2011), regional cooperation (September 2011), EIB loans and technical assistance (November 2011). However, and in spite of the major operational constraints on the ground, we remain committed to deliver aid in support of the Syrian people, refugees, students, human rights defenders and the civil society.

As the topic of this seminar is human rights and civil society, let me spend a few words on the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, which is a specific financial instrument that aims at supporting civil society actors in their efforts to promote and defend democracy and fundamental rights and freedoms. The EIDHR offers a comprehensive package of local actions to encourage political pluralism, empower disenfranchised groups, defend victims and promote dialogue, foster mediation, transparency, accountability and consultation from a grassroots level.

Since its creation in 2007 The EIDHR has been present in Mediterranean countries. Already before the spring of 2011, the EIDHR was supporting numerous actors that had an essential role in the events in the region. The EU invested through this instrument over € 24 million before the 2011 changes.

Some of the projects supported by the EIDHR were public, as part of official EIDHR action. 15 others were non-public projects supporting local human rights and pro-democracy activists, journalists, lawyers or trade unionists in countries such as in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, the Occupied Palestinian Territories or in Yemen.

During the Arab Spring, the EIDHR was reactive in adapting its priorities and put a much stronger focus on projects aimed specifically at supporting transition to democracy and the rule of law. In 2011, the EIDHR has doubled its investment reaching a total amount of approximately € 12 million to allow for 54 new projects to be set up in the region to support democracy and human rights in the context of the Arab Spring uprisings.

This EU support led to results such as, among others, enabling human rights defenders, peaceful demonstrators, protestors and journalists to be freed from jail and arbitrary arrests in Egypt, supporting free and fair elections in Tunisia, empowering women and youth groups as actors of change in Egypt, Libya or Yemen; sustaining further democratic transition in Morocco, or combating torture and promoting reconciliation in Libya.

Furthermore, since January 2011, though its emergency fund for human rights defenders at risk, the EIDHR has supported numerous individual cases of victims of anti-democratic repression. This facility proved particularly useful in the context of the Arab Spring, where more than 70 Human Rights Defenders from the region, individuals and organizations alike, received direct support for legal and medical assistance, physical security, urgent relocation or basic subsistence for detainees and their families. In addition, many more defenders received support via many of the projects that our international partners have with us in the region.

In Syria, the EIDHR is currently supporting different actions for a total of around 4.5 million: to start with, a project that protects the internet freedom of independent bloggers, writers and journalists. These activists are trained to circumvent internet censorship and to protect themselves at the digital level. Because of the risk that such activities involve, the project also incorporates a part aimed at protecting the activists physically, both in normal conditions and in case of emergency. This action contributes to maintain an information flow from independent sources in Syria.

Another key EIDHR project aims at supporting local human rights defenders inside the country in their efforts to monitor and spread reliable and independent information outside Syria about the current abuses and human rights violations all while ensuring the security of their communications and above all, their personal security.

Moreover, under the EIDHR emergency fund for Human Right Defenders at risk, several emergency direct assistance has been given to three Syrian organizations on the ground and 1 international NGO to support, among other things, the urgent and safe relocation of several activists to inside and outside Syria; the legal representation of political prisoners, the provision of medical support to activists and the basic assistance to relatives of several detained or murdered activists.

As you are aware, the details about EIDHR support that we currently providing to Syrian activists unfortunately cannot be made public, in order to protect their physical safety as well as that of others whose lives may be seriously endangered.

Cooperation with Syrian Universities is also continuing; the Tempus and Erasmus programmes for example, allowing students and academic staff to benefit from exchanges with European higher education institutes. Since 2007, around 100 students and academic staff from Syrian Universities have benefitted from exchanges to European higher education institutes. We are currently hosting 19 Syrian nationals in Europe and an additional 21 are expected before the end of 2012. We are at present concentrating on efforts to make sure that students currently out of Syria can benefit from scholarships to European universities under the Erasmus Mundus programme.

Also support to Palestine refugees is continuing: the Commission has approved in December 2011 two projects targeting both Palestinian refugees and the Syrian population, for a total of around 10 million euros, in cooperation with UNRWA. The first project, Engaging Youth phase II" (EUR 7.3 million), is enhancing the economic and social prospects of Palestine refugee youth through vocational training and participation in local development initiatives. The second project, "Protecting Vulnerable Palestine Refugees" (EUR 2.7 million), is providing an integrated package of assistance, supporting immediate service delivery and broader early recovery among vulnerable conflict-affected communities.

On 7 June 2012, the Commission has approved a EUR 23 million Special Measure to reserve ENPI funds for support to civil society within Syria, and Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

Out of these 23 million, a 5 million EUR programme is under preparation In Lebanon with UNHCR to alleviate the medium and longer term needs of both the local population and Syrian refugees in the main host communities in Lebanon (northern region and Bekaa valley). The UNHCR will provide educational support to some 3,000 Syrian children and 1,000 vulnerable Lebanese children, as well as targeted support to national, local authorities and local NGOs dealing with Syrian refugees.

Another 5.4 million EUR has been destined to a programme with UNICEF in Jordan in order to provide safe and appropriate services for vulnerable Syrians living in that country. Syrian children and children in host communities will get access to free formal education and other relevant education services. Support will cover the setting up of additional classrooms, training of teachers, and provision of equipment to cope with the influx of Syrian refugees.

The remaining 12.6 million EUR are immediately available to assist the Syrian people to cope with the unrest and its consequences and to prepare for the transition. Selected projects will address the short and medium-term needs of the Syrians and will enhance the role of the civil society in the transition context. Initiatives eligible for financing should focus on health, education, livelihoods and media. I am proud to underline that this very conference has been financed thanks to the funds available under this package.

Finally, a number of contracts with local and international NGOs are still on-going, even though most of them had to be suspended due to force majeure or following requests from the beneficiaries. We are currently assessing a number of proposals to be funded under the 2012 available allocation (EUR 500 000).

Last but not least, humanitarian assistance for a total of 20 million EUR so far has been provided to the Syrian population inside the country and in neighbouring countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, covering need such as health, food and livelihood, water and sanitation, shelter and non-food items.

EU member States, also through their Foundations, have also given their support to the Syrian population; 24.6 M for humanitarian aid only, but also individual actions to support activists in different ways inside and outside Syria.

I believe that the message of my speech is clear: the EU is deeply committed to support the Syrian people wherever they find themselves. My presence here today is the best proof of our continuing solidarity. You can rely on this.

Next time, I hope we will meet under better circumstances. Perhaps in Damascus – who knows?. I would definitely wish so, and I am certain: we shall overcome – one day.

Thank you for your attention.