

Council conclusions on the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat

1. The EU remains committed to achieving lasting peace, stability and security in Syria, Iraq and the wider region, as well as to countering the ISIL/Da'esh threat. An inclusive political transition in Syria and inclusive political governance in Iraq are crucial to sustainable peace and stability in the region. The EU will continue to support the role of the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and the efforts of the Iraqi Government to achieve those objectives. In this regard, the EU recalls the Council Conclusions of 20 October, 15 December 2014 as well as 9 February 2015.

The EU underlines that the fight against ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups must be conducted in parallel with the search for lasting political solutions. ISIL/Da'esh has committed barbaric acts against the peoples of Syria and Iraq. It poses a clear threat to our partners in the Middle East, a threat to wider international security and to Europe directly. It has sponsored terrorist attacks on our soil and against our citizens overseas. The EU will use all its relevant tools to tackle the threat posed by ISIL/Da'esh and its violent ideology.

The Council welcomes the response of the High Representative/Vice President to its request for a comprehensive regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat.

The Council adopts the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat, based on the annexed Joint Communication ^[1] of the European Commission and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the present Conclusions.

2. The EU condemns unreservedly the indiscriminate attacks, atrocities, killings and abuses of human rights which are perpetrated by ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups, in particular against Christians and other religious and ethnic groups. The EU underlines the importance of preserving the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-confessional character of the Syrian and Iraqi societies. The EU supports international efforts and initiatives to address these issues and welcomes in this regard the Ministerial meeting that will take place at the UN Security Council on 27 March on the victims of attacks and abuses on ethnic or religious ground in the Middle East.

The EU strongly condemns acts of violence and abuses committed against children, noting with concern the practice of Da'esh/ISIL of enlisting children into its armed units, forcing them to participate in executions and subjecting them to various forms of physical and psychological pressure.

3. The EU urges all international actors, in particular the countries in the region, to play a constructive role in addressing the crises as their engagement is necessary in order to achieve regional and international stability and to find durable solutions.

4. The EU supports efforts by the Global Coalition to counter ISIL/Da'esh, including military action in accordance with international law. It recalls that military action in this context is necessary but not sufficient to defeat ISIL/Da'esh. It will coordinate closely with international partners in the framework of the Global Coalition's working groups on stabilisation, strategic counter-messaging, foreign terrorist fighters, countering terrorist financing and military action. It will also contribute to implement UN Security Council resolutions 2161, 2170, 2178, 2199, and other relevant resolutions. This will include the security measures spelled out in the EU Syria and Iraq counter-terrorism/foreign fighters strategy endorsed by the Council on 20 October 2014, which is an integral part of the EU regional strategy.

The EU calls on all states to comply with UN Security Council resolutions 2161 and 2199 to ensure that no funds, other financial assets or economic resources are made available, directly or indirectly, by their nationals or by persons within their territory for the benefit of ISIL/Da'esh, Al-Qaida and affiliated groups.

5. In the implementation of the strategy, the EU will focus its efforts on policy areas in which it has an added value in relation to the activities of the Member States. In pursuing its policy actions the EU will act in close coordination and will seek complementarity with the measures implemented by other international and regional partners, and the Iraqi government.

6. The EU will integrate women's empowerment and their full and effective participation as a key objective in all efforts which will be supported under the strategy, in line with the UN Security Council resolution 1325 and related resolutions. Sustainable political solutions or effective strategies against terrorism and violent extremism cannot be pursued without women's active participation in these efforts. The EU will pay special attention to the violence and insecurity faced by women and girls in the area, and calls for an immediate end to all sexual and gender-based violence.

7. Humanitarian aid and longer term assistance will remain important pillars of the EU's response to the consequences of the crisis, with humanitarian aid focussing particularly on the most vulnerable groups including children. Humanitarian assistance must remain distinct from military operations and reach all people in need, regardless of their political, religious, ethnic or other affiliations or their geographic location, based solely on needs and be delivered in full respect of the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence of humanitarian action as enshrined in the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid. It will remain strictly separate from and not subordinated to other strands of EU actions.

The EU notes with grave concern that access to those in need is decreasing. The EU calls on all parties to respect international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law, and to ensure at all times the protection of civilians and medical facilities and the safe, unhindered access to all people in need. The EU condemns all attacks on humanitarian workers and attempts to restrict humanitarian access.

8. The EU strongly condemns ISIL/Da'esh's deliberate destruction of archaeological and cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq and the extremist ideology behind it, noting that such actions may amount to a war crime according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The EU is committed to help document and protect the heritage of Syria and Iraq while taking appropriate steps in accordance with UNSCR 2199 to prevent the illegal trade of cultural property, noting that such illicit traffic of cultural artefacts, directly contributes to the financing of ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist organizations.

9. The EU commends the considerable efforts of all countries sheltering and offering protection to refugees. It will spare no effort to help them provide protection and assistance to refugees and vulnerable host communities, build resilience and comply with international law, standards, conventions and humanitarian principles, including through the new European Union Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syria crisis (the Madad Fund) which is open to all donors. The Madad Fund will operate in close co-ordination with existing funding mechanisms and in line with relevant national and international planning, responding to priorities set out in the UN Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, to support an effective international response to the crisis.

10. The EU remains fully aware of the immense security challenges that the crises pose to the region, in particular Lebanon and Jordan. The EU underlines the importance of the ongoing EU and Member States' support, and it reiterates its commitment to keep enhancing this support to both countries to meet those challenges.

11. The Council will work with the EEAS and the Commission within their respective competences towards the planned, swift and coordinated implementation of the strategy including through exchanges of best practice and information. It will make every effort to mobilise adequate assistance at bilateral level in addition to the EUR 1 billion assistance package from the EU budget, in order to provide a substantial collective response for the implementation of the strategy.

The Council, the EEAS and the Commission will monitor the implementation of the strategy including through 6 monthly reports.

Syria

12. As the Syrian conflict enters its fifth year, the EU reiterates that a lasting solution urgently requires a Syrian-led inclusive political process leading to a transition, based on the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 and in line with relevant UNSC Resolutions in order to maintain the country's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. There cannot be lasting peace in Syria until the legitimate grievances and aspirations of all components of the Syrian society are addressed.

13. The Assad regime's brutal war against its own people, massive human rights violations and systematic obstruction against democratic reforms have heavily contributed to the flourishing of ISIL/Da'esh in Syria. The intolerable violence perpetrated by ISIL/Da'esh and other terrorist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as the different militias present in Syria adds to the considerable human suffering. As a consequence of its policies and actions, the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh.

14. The EU reiterates its full support to the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura's efforts to achieve a strategic de-escalation of violence that should alleviate the suffering of the people as a basis for a sustainable and inclusive political process leading to a transition that meets the aspirations of all the Syrian people. The EU calls on all Syrian parties to show clear and concrete commitment to this process. The EU urges those with influence on the parties, and notably on the Assad regime, to put pressure on them to end all violence and to engage constructively in the process. The EU strongly condemns the escalation of violence by the Assad regime including in Aleppo which threatens De Mistura's efforts.

15. The EU stands ready to provide immediate practical support upon the establishment of local freezes of hostility compliant with

international humanitarian law in Aleppo and elsewhere.

It will also seek ways to further enhance its ongoing support to local governance and administration, to the restoration of basic services and to the return to normality in areas of reduced violence including through the already operational Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF) operating from Gaziantep.

16. The EU underlines the importance of preserving state structures and functions, in order to ensure security, order and the provision of basic services to the people of Syria.

17. The EU is determined to support all efforts to reach a political solution by mutual consent based on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 and in line with relevant UNSC Resolutions. To achieve results, these endeavours must be inclusive, involving women and civil society, coordinated and accompanied by confidence building measures such as the end of indiscriminate bombings, notably with barrel bombs, and of arbitrary detentions. The EU will actively encourage members of the international community with influence over the Syrian parties, to take a special responsibility for ensuring the success of such efforts.

18. The moderate opposition both inside and outside Syria has a crucial role to play in the framework of this process. It is a vital element of both a future political settlement and in fighting the extremist groups on the ground. The EU welcomes and encourages further efforts by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) to help moderate groups unite behind a common strategy in order to present an alternative to the Syrian people. It will continue to support all efforts to that effect. It will sustain its political and practical support to the moderate opposition.

19. The EU will continue its policy of imposing additional sanctions targeting the regime and its supporters, as long as repression continues. In this regard, it recalls that earlier this month the EU listed 13 additional individuals and entities in the context of its restrictive measures pertaining to the situation in Syria.

20. Reports of gross, widespread and systematic human rights violations and abuses and sectarian violence are a matter of grave concern. The EU welcomes the UN Commission of Inquiry's ninth report, and condemns the crimes against humanity and human rights violations and abuses detailed therein, perpetrated in particular by the Assad regime and terrorist groups. The EU supports the renewal of the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry. It also supports the documentation of crimes in Syria to ensure that all perpetrators are held accountable. The EU reiterates its call to the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

21. The EU welcomes UN Security Resolution 2209 and its Chapter VII provisions condemning in the strongest terms any use of toxic chemical, such as chlorine, as a weapon in Syria. The EU reiterates its condemnation of the use of chlorine gas as a chemical weapon by the Assad regime, which constitutes a blatant violation of international law and may amount to a war crime and a crime against humanity. The EU stresses that all those responsible for such horrific acts must be held accountable.

The EU calls on the Assad regime to extend its full cooperation to the OPCW fact-finding mission. The EU reiterates its readiness to support actions foreseen under this and previous resolutions.

22. The EU notes with serious concern that humanitarian needs continue to rise while access to vulnerable people faces an increasing number of constraints. The EU condemns the Assad regime's continued intransigence on humanitarian access and the use of administrative procedures to hinder the rapid and sustained delivery of aid, including medical material. The EU reiterates its call on all parties, in particular the Assad regime to implement in full the provisions of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139, 2165 and 2191. The EU will seek to scale up the implementation of those Resolutions to deliver cross-border and cross line assistance in order to help those Syrians most desperately in need. The EU condemns also the continued sieges of civilians and recalls the regime's primary responsibility for ensuring the protection of its own population. The EU is deeply concerned that ISIL/Da'esh has significantly affected the presence and operation of humanitarian agencies and actors in northern Syria, thus compromising their humanitarian function.

23. The EU and its Member States are the largest contributor to the international response to the Syria crisis, having mobilised so far more than €3.2 billion for relief and recovery assistance to those affected by the conflict inside Syria and refugees and host communities in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey. Ahead of the third international humanitarian pledging conference for Syria in Kuwait on 31 March, the Council reiterates the commitment by Member States to put forward alongside the financial package of the European Commission substantial pledges of new humanitarian and development funding that reflect the scale and protracted nature of the crisis. The Council further calls on all international partners to also put forward a substantial pledge in Kuwait and in the longer term to enhance also the level and the predictability of their respective support to the people affected by the Syria crisis in the region.

Iraq

24. The EU reiterates its firm support for Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. It also underlines its strong support for the Iraqi Government, led by Prime Minister al-Abadi, and welcomes the government's commitment to pursue reforms and

comprehensive dialogue with a view to achieving inclusiveness, national reconciliation and long-term peace and stability, and in this context welcomes the concrete progress made in several areas, including the adoption of the budget. The EU calls on the Government and Council of Representatives to step up their reform efforts in order to achieve effective progress rapidly. It underlines the importance of the agreement on the transfer of revenues and oil between the federal Government of Iraq and the Government of the Kurdistan Region and calls on both to resolve other outstanding issues in a constructive manner. It calls on the countries of the region to support the Iraqi government in its efforts to restore long-lasting peace and stability in Iraq.

25. The EU deplores the continuing presence and brutal actions of ISIL/Da'esh in Iraq, and insists that the underlying political and security crisis in Iraq must be addressed in order to defeat ISIL/Da'esh and to achieve long-term stability. It urges all the components of Iraqi society to unite in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. Reports of gross and widespread human rights violations, abuses and sectarian violence are a matter of serious concern. The EU underlines the importance of full respect for international law, human rights and the rule of law in stabilising Iraq. It condemns the extra-judicial killings committed by various armed groups, as recently reported, and recalls that the fight against terrorism will only be successful if conducted in full respect of international human rights. It stresses the necessity of rebuilding inclusive and democratically controlled Iraqi Security Forces and underlines that all armed groups must come under the command and control of the Iraqi state, and that perpetrators of violations and abuses must be held accountable. The EU reiterates its call on Iraq to accede to the Rome Statute.

26. The EU calls on the Governments of Iraq, as well as the Government of the Kurdistan Region, to make all possible efforts to ensure that humanitarian aid is delivered to all IDPs and refugees in line with international law and humanitarian principles. The EU encourages all relevant authorities to reinforce current IDPs' registration efforts and offer equal protection to all ethnic and religious communities that are part of Iraqi society, as well as Syrian refugees. It stresses the importance of strengthening civil-military coordination as appropriate in accordance with humanitarian law.

In 2014, the EU and its Member States have been the second-largest humanitarian donor in response to the crisis in Iraq, providing €163 million in urgent humanitarian aid. The EU will step up its humanitarian efforts in 2015.

27. The EU pledges its full support for the efforts of the Iraqi Government, as well as the Government of the Kurdistan Region, in pursuing the necessary reforms across a broad spectrum of sectors. The EU expresses its commitment to working closely with the Iraqi partners using all its available instruments, as set out in the Joint Communication, including through the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives, transparency and accountability measures, including in the security sector and the judicial system which need to be reinforced, the delivery of development assistance, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Moreover, the EU and Member States remain committed to providing long-term assistance.

[1] doc. 6031/15

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