

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Syria at the plenary session of the European Parliament

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Madam President, Honourable Members,

Thank you all for keeping a constant focus on Syria in your plenary debates. I am really sorry I could not be with you in person last month, but I believe this is the fourth or fifth time this year that we have a plenary debate on our work on Syria. Last month I was in Brussels for the Afghanistan conference, another important file in which the European Union has a very important part to play, but the Slovak Presidency briefed me on your October exchanges, and they also provided a very important input for the discussions we had at the Foreign Affairs Council both in October and last week.

We have discussed Syria again, as I mentioned, in the Foreign Affairs Council both in October and last week, on Monday to be precise, and I have engaged in a number of meetings with both Syrian, regional and international actors, so for me this debate is a very precious opportunity to update you with the most recent initiatives and contacts and work we are carrying on, starting from the work on the humanitarian side that, together with Christos Stylianides, we have carried out relentlessly, I would say, in these last months.

Over the last few days, there has been a new escalation of violence against the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo. The resumption of airstrikes has worsened the humanitarian situation even further, particularly because it has left hundreds of thousands of besieged civilians without access to functioning hospitals. Together with Christos and his team, whom I would like to praise, and together with the United Nations, we are working literally day and night to create the conditions to let the humanitarian aid in, and to let the wounded out, of East Aleppo, as well as to other besieged areas all across the Syrian territory.

To reach this goal, we are engaging both internationally with all relevant actors, and on the ground. We are in constant contact with the city council of eastern Aleppo, as well as with civilian administrations in several parts of Syria. We are helping them provide services to the local population in the areas where this is possible. Our activity on the ground is increasingly recognised, first of all by the local players, by the Syrians themselves, and this is for me – and I can speak also on behalf of Christos and all the people who are working with us on this – the number one priority; that our work reaches the Syrians on the ground. Believe me when I tell you our frustration about not managing to do more, but all the humanitarian work that is done is basically thanks also, I cannot say all, but almost all, to the funding, the work, the support, the logistics, the commitment

of the European Union. Here again, I would like to thank our team, both on the ground and in Brussels, that has been working really at an incredible rhythm on this, in full coordination always, with the United Nations.

Our work, as I said, is increasingly recognised inside Syria but also internationally. The contacts and the channels we have developed in this field will be crucial also to any settlement and to the transition. As you all know, the delivery of humanitarian aid is proving to be a very difficult exercise, given the lack of a broader political agreement on the cessation of hostilities, and we have realised very clearly in these last couple of months that the military-to-military work on the cessation of hostilities is more and more difficult in the absence of a wider political understanding on the future of Syria. So what we risk is a vicious circle.

This is why, after having discussed this with the Foreign Ministers and with the Heads of State and Government in the Foreign Affairs Council and in the European Council, I have started to reach out to the key regional actors on the future of Syria. This means that in the last weeks I met and had talks with the foreign ministers or leaders, presidents, of different countries of the region on a clear agenda. In the name of transparency, and also in sharing with you this work, let me go into a rather detailed list again. I know this is not the politics we need to talk – we would also need to talk politics, but I think it is also important for you to know exactly what this regional outreach is meaning by now.

Meetings with Foreign Minister Al Thani of Qatar in Brussels. Then I headed to Tehran where I met President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, and two days later to Saudi Arabia to see King Salman. Last week I discussed this in Brussels with Foreign Minister Bassil of Lebanon. Over the weekend I met with the Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah and Foreign Minister of Jordan Nasser Judeh. Contacts with others, notably the Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and the Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry will also follow. And on Friday, just a few days ago, we hosted a meeting with the Syrian opposition groups, the leaders of different groups that I met at length in Brussels to share this process with them, to listen to their views to ensure full ownership and an active participation on their side. And obviously all of this is done in constant contact with Staffan de Mistura and his team, both in Geneva and in the United Nations headquarters in New York.

So on content now. The focus of this outreach is on the future of Syria, looking in particular at the post-conflict end state. What I am trying to do is to identify areas of common ground and possible elements of a positive agenda with all the key actors. The issues that we are discussing in the framework of this outreach include political accountability, decentralisation or devolution, participation and protection of all components of the very diverse Syrian society. I know that this Chamber is particularly attentive to the situation of Christians in the region; this is also part of our outreach. Reconciliation, especially the local exercises of reconciliation, and economic reconstruction. On the latter let me be extremely clear: the European Union is and will be ready to engage in the economic reconstruction of the country, together with other

partners. But, let me stress, as I stress it to our partners in the region, this will only happen once a political transition has begun under the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

This work aims at improving the chances for the success of the UN mandate and the UN Special Envoy for the intra-Syrian talks. Our regional outreach can help create some space and some confidence for the talks to start because of course it is, as I said, for the Syrians to decide the future of the country in direct talks under UN auspices, but in the meantime, if as the European Union we can provide some space regionally to accompany this process, it could only be useful.

In six years of war we should have learned something about the conflict in Syria. At times, an agreement between global powers could not hold, even if it was found, because the situation was out of control on the ground. In other cases, local ceasefires did not hold even if they were reached, because there was no agreement on a broader political level, either in the region or internationally. As I said, sometimes it is a vicious circle. Things locally do not hold because the international regional framework is not accompanying; at some other times you find an agreement on regional and international level and you do not have the local actors on your side.

So peace in Syria will require at the same time an agreement among world powers, the UN framework, among regional actors, the work we are trying to do, and all local players. I understand that it might sound strange to talk and to work on post-conflict at exactly the moment when war still rages on, and yet, talking about reconstruction, reconciliation, post-conflict, the system of governance, that could ensure Syria a future, is a way of maybe opening the door for a process of peace. Because only if we start putting all the pieces together and to create some kind of consensus among the regional actors and among the citizens will we contribute to building peace in Syria.

Now as you know very well, and as I repeated many times, the European Union is not militarily involved in this war. This is the result of a political decision, one that was taken years ago, that I fully share and that unites us all in Europe. We are not a party to the conflict. But this is not a constraint on our diplomatic action. On the contrary, this puts us in a privileged position as we work for peace. From our position, we understand better than others that there is no military solution to the war. We see that every escalation leads us further away, and not closer, to peace. We are in a privileged position as we can talk to everybody, we do talk to everybody, we are trusted by everybody, and I am convinced that the European Union will be, and is becoming, an indispensable force to make peace in Syria possible and to achieve it concretely on the ground.

I can only ask you, this Parliament, to keep supporting, as you have done constantly this year, our work on humanitarian grounds for creating the political space for peace in Syria and for all the people of Syria, to benefit from a brighter future in their country.

Thank you.

Link to the video:

<https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I129278>