

# Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the read-out of the meeting of the College of Commissioners

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*Check against delivery!*

Thank you. As you said, the College [of Commissioners] today adopted the [Joint] Communication [to the European Parliament and the Council – Elements] for an EU Strategy for Syria that I will then present to the Foreign Ministers at the Foreign Affairs Council on 3 April, and that will constitute the basis for our further work on the country to support Syrians, to support the future of Syria and also will contribute to shaping the international [Brussels] Conference [on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region] that the European Union will host and co-chair in Brussels on 5 April together with other partners, but I'll come back to that in a moment. Let me start by saying that we adopt this Joint Communication, in the same days where we remember the 6th anniversary of the beginning of the conflict. It was March 2011 and since then we had 320,000 people losing their lives, millions that were forced to flee their country, and we continue to see victims every single day. Just a few days ago we've seen victims in different parts of the country, in Damascus but also in Homs. And I have to say that this decision we have taken today reflects the need that the European Union feels to fulfil its responsibility. Every time I meet Syrians, and especially Syrian women and children, I see, yes, a lot of desperation, a lot of suffering, but at the very end of the story you also recognise still a sparkle of hope and a smile when they mention their country, when they mention the need to reconstruct the country, when they mention the fact that they would be ready to guarantee a future for a united, democratic Syria.

So, we have worked on this Communication, we've worked on this strategy, to give a clear message to all the Syrians that the European Union is at their side. Obviously, we have done this already in these last years: we've been the first donor for Syrians, mobilising over €9.4 billion for Syrians both inside the country and in neighbouring countries. Only from the EU budget, inside Syria we've mobilised in the last years €939 million, and I give you just a few examples of what this means in concrete terms: this means some 2 million people having access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene items; this means almost one million people receiving food; this means one million people receiving shelter; and hundreds of thousands of children being covered by child protection programmes or receiving education. And just last year we have helped, only with our humanitarian support programmes, 350,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan and 665,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon – and I could continue on a very long list of what this money means in concrete terms for the real lives of real people.

But the European Union has not only played its leading humanitarian role in these years; we have also played our diplomatic and political role. And you might remember in September here in Strasbourg, President [of the European Commission, Jean-Claude] Juncker mentioned the need for the European Union to become even more of an active player on the political scene when it comes to Syria, and this is exactly what we are doing today. Politically and diplomatically, we have started in the last months a regional initiative with the key eight regional players - the European Union being perfectly placed to work equally and with the same level of trust with Tehran and with Riyadh; with Ankara and with Beirut; and I could continue. We have worked together with them at the ministerial level - and not only - to identify the common ground on the basis of which the regional players could facilitate a solution that has to be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned, but can be accompanied by the regional actors.

We have identified some common ground that we have provided to the UN – and in particular to my good friend [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan de Mistura – as he has reconvened talks in Geneva among the Syrians. We have constantly provided him and his team the outcome of our preparatory work. This political work that the European Union has done goes together with the continuous support we are giving to the Syrian opposition, to civil society organisations – in particular women organisations – in Syria and now especially in the framework of the Geneva talks, but also looking ahead to enabling them to play a role in the transition and post-transition periods, as we believe that all Syrians deserve to take part in the definition and construction of their future, for a united, inclusive, and democratic Syria where they deserve to live in freedom, diversity, dignity, securely and safely.

This can seem a remote future; it is for sure not the present of Syria, but we believe that working to make this happen is in itself one fundamental element to give the Syrians the space to invest in themselves shaping the future of the country. This is why this strategy is so important at this time: because it comes in a moment when the intra-Syrian talks have restarted in Geneva under the UN auspices; a ceasefire mechanism has been established as a result of the Astana talks, with which we are in constant contact; and we come in, as the European Union, in connection with the rest of the international community, on future engagement on Syria to support the future of the country, looking beyond the current state of play in a longer term perspective and starting to prepare and to coordinate already now. This is going to be what we will do especially on 5 April at the ‘Brussels Conference on Supporting the future of Syria and the Region’ that we will co-chair together – as I said – with the UN but also with Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar and the UK. The Conference will first of all give the strong support of the international community to the UN-led political process but also we will check where we are on the pledges that the international community did last year in London. The European Union, as always, has fulfilled all its commitments, but we will have to check where we are on some needs that might still be open.

But we will also start to look at the future and how we and the international community can support the future of the country in terms of reconciliation, in terms of stabilisation, in terms of also coordinating our collective engagement on post-agreement planning and

assistance, including on reconstruction once a political transition is underway. Let me say that too many times the international community has not prepared the post-conflict time in time. Too many times we got to the point of an agreement without being ready with the international assistance to be put in place immediately. And we have seen in so many places that the consequences of this have been quite heavy.

So, this time we want to be ready properly, coordinating, and also using this element of looking beyond the current situation as a dividend for peace that could encourage different parties in Syria to make the necessary compromises and begin a political transition under an agreement brokered by the United Nations.

This will involve Syria, Syrians but also the rest of the region in particular the neighbouring countries and our work with them will continue both in the present, in terms of supporting the Syrian refugees that they host and especially supporting the hosting communities in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon as we are doing, but also in terms – as I said – of turning a proxy war into a proxy peace.

I believe and we are seeing that there is some common ground that can be found with the international players, with the regional actors who can facilitate this process that again, as I said, it's up to the Syrians now to lead under the UN auspices.

I would finish by saying that the European Union is perfectly positioned to play this role, as I said, not only from a humanitarian but also from a political perspective. We are, for Syrians and in the region, a credible, reliable, trusted partner, first of all able to work with all the different regional players equally, and also with a humanitarian presence on the ground that can constitute a fruitful starting point to help local reconciliation processes, being a humanitarian player who has helped and not bombed the country – if I can be a little bit blunt.

I would like to finish by thanking my colleagues and friends [European] Commissioner [for Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes] Hahn and [European] Commissioner [for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, Christos] Stylianides with whom we have worked on this [Joint] Communication, but also concretely, every day on the ground, and we will continue to work as a team, heading towards the presentation of the Communication to the Foreign Ministers of the European Union on 3 April and then continuing our work for the conference and beyond.

Thank you.

## **Q&A**

***Q1: You mentioned this very complex matrix of organisations – the Astana talks, the UN, the eight regional actors. How do you think that this is going to be brought together? And you mentioned that a proxy war is being replaced by a proxy peace. That is just the particular role that Russia has played in this conflict. And I am just wondering: are they willing to play a role in this proxy peace?***

**HR/VP:** First of all, I wish this was already turned into a proxy peace. We are not there yet, and I want to make this very clear. We are starting to look at the future, we are starting to look at the post-conflict, but we are still in a conflict, and every single day we have people dying on the ground. But you cannot build peace if you do not believe at least a little bit that this is possible, and this is why we have started this work. Yes, I believe there can be a space for all international players and especially all regional actors that live with borders and dynamics that are interlinked with the situation in Syria, so that they can see that it is far more convenient in this moment to turn this into a proxy peace and allow Syria to restart somehow, with a political transition that will be needed. When it comes to the complicated set-up of different meetings: it is probably because it is a complicated conflict, and so you have different layers that are needed. On one side you have the military talks that are necessary, and that is happening mainly in Astana. As you know, the European Union is not a military player in this conflict. I am proud and I always underline the fact that Europeans are proud not to be a military actor in this scene. And we have seen that the work in Astana – led by Russia, Turkey and, to a different extent, Iran – has led to at least some provisions of ceasefire and some mechanisms on ceasefire, which is something we welcome – not only we, but also the UN Security Council has welcomed [it] with a Resolution. But it is clear that *The* – with a capital T – *The* process is the UN-led process in Geneva. That is the place where Syrians come together, that is the place where the entire international community supports intra-Syrian talks and where the parameters of a political solution are worked out and found – hopefully found. What we are putting in place, as the European Union, is a supporting work for the UN, because we recognise the value of multilateralism embodied in the UN at the maximum level; and also because any outcome will have to go through the Security Council again, for sure. So the spirit with which we are working – being it on humanitarian or political and diplomatic tracks – is in support to the UN. And the work we have done, as I said, with the 8 regional actors we have convened and we are continuing to meet – constantly, bilaterally in Brussels – has always been provided to the UN as a content that provides the basis for their elaborations on governance, on transition, on reconciliation, on different other elements. So we are at the service of a process that we recognise is led by the UN in Geneva, also because it is the Syrians that have to decide on the future of their country. But again, our work can support, and the Brussels Conference will gather also – hopefully – political support to give a push and encourage the Syrians and the Syrian parties convening in Geneva to take the necessary decisions for them to live together, feeling home in their own country.

***Q2: How do you expect to overcome the political problems that can arise from the fact that Turkey is at the same time a key player in this conflict, but there are also rising political difficulties with the European Union – not only in this case with the latest development in Holland, but also their relationship with us is becoming more and more difficult? And they are clearly opting for being closer to Russia. And also you did not mention the United States – what is the role of Washington in this plan?***

**HR/VP:** I will be in Washington again for my second visit in the last month from Sunday onwards exactly for, obviously, a bilateral visit. But also because we will have there the meeting of The Global Coalition against Da'esh, at ministerial level, where I would expect that the new US administration will also present its anti-Da'esh strategy that will probably cover also part of the Syria strategy. You should not ask me but them what is going to be their Syria strategy – I am presenting here the EU Syria Strategy. But what I can say is that from the first elements I have received from my interlocutors in Washington during these first weeks of intense contacts with them –them being Secretary of State [Rex] Tillerson, Secretary of Defence [James] Mattis, but also Vice President [Mike] Pence and many contacts at different levels in the White House and in Congress – I see a certain engagement still on the Syria file, but also the recognition of the fact that other players have a fundamental role to play, including or starting from the European Union. It is not for me to comment or present positions that are going to be in case eventually presented by the US administration. What I can say is that in our first exchanges, our talks on Syria have been productive and I have presented obviously to my US interlocutors the main features of the work we are, not only doing, but also planning to do on Syria. And they have been extremely well perceived and received; so I see good space for cooperation there. But again it is not for me to comment or to present elements of a strategy that is not a European one, it is an American one. On Turkey itself, you might have seen, I have released a statement yesterday with Commissioner Hahn and I would not elaborate further on that. I have nothing more to comment beyond what we have said yesterday. What I can say is that our work with Turkey on this file for instance – on Syria – but also on other files has been in these weeks and months constructive, very constructive. I have been in contact with the Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu very, very often in the last three, four months; in particular Turkey being one of the key interlocutors we had to create connections between our regional work, our EU regional work on Syria and the Astana meetings. And I think we still share an interest to bring peace in Syria and to bring this war to an end. So our work on the Syria file with Turkey in these months has been not only constructive but also very intense.

**Q3: *Due domande in italiano, se posso; una sulla Siria. Lei ha più volte detto che non c'era soluzione militare a questo conflitto, di essere fiera che l'Unione europea non è un attore militare, ma il processo di Astana, i meccanismi di cessate il fuoco, alla fine non sono la conferma che una soluzione militare c'era ed era quella imposta, in qualche modo, dalla Russia? La seconda domanda, se mi permette, sulla Turchia, perché il Parlamento europeo in una risoluzione – lo hanno ribadito oggi i presidenti dei due principali gruppi – chiede di sospendere, congelare i negoziati di adesione, anche in virtù di quanto sta accadendo in queste ore. Cosa risponde a questa richiesta presente in una risoluzione del Parlamento?***

**Alto rappresentante / Vicepresidente Mogherini:** Su questa seconda domanda, come ho detto, non ho intenzione di commentare. Ho rilasciato ieri, insieme al Commissario Hahn, una dichiarazione particolarmente esaustiva, non soltanto sulle tensioni attuali tra la Turchia e alcuni governi di alcuni Stati membri dell'Unione europea, ma anche – e soprattutto, vorrei dire – su un importante rapporto della Commissione di

Venezia relativo al merito della proposta di modifica costituzionale. Quindi abbiamo già parlato ieri e non ho nulla da aggiungere a riguardo. Sulla soluzione militare, sulla Siria: credo che esattamente quello che è avvenuto in questi ultimi mesi sia la dimostrazione del fatto che non c'è soluzione militare al conflitto siriano. C'è sicuramente bisogno di avere una strategia anche militare nella lotta contro Da'esh, ma se ci fosse stata una soluzione puramente militare al conflitto, degli scambi, degli incontri a livello militare come sono avvenuti ad Astana sarebbero stati sufficienti per portare la fine del conflitto, cosa che invece non è avvenuta in questi mesi. Questo perché abbiamo sempre saputo che dei meccanismi d'introduzione e di monitoraggio del cessate il fuoco sono indispensabili, se non altro per creare delle situazioni di calma sul terreno – relativa, purtroppo, ma comunque, diciamo così, un passo in avanti –, ma non sono sufficienti a creare quelle condizioni politiche di fine del conflitto, di costruzione della pace, di transizione politica, di inclusività e di unità per il paese, altrimenti questo sarebbe avvenuto attraverso questi incontri che si sono svolti a livello militare. Questo significa che tutti, compresi i promotori degli incontri di Astana – ai quali, come ho detto, riconosciamo il ruolo dell'aver positivamente introdotto dei meccanismi di cessate il fuoco, anche se parziali e anche se non perfetti –, ma loro stessi riconoscono nel processo politico, puramente politico, e puramente intra-siriano condotto sotto l'egida delle Nazioni Unite a Ginevra il luogo e il processo che può portare ad una soluzione del conflitto. Ed è la stessa valutazione che facciamo anche noi, ed è per questo che sosteniamo pienamente il lavoro di Staffan de Mistura e delle Nazioni Unite e il nostro lavoro politico e diplomatico è volto a rafforzare, a sostenere, ad accompagnare questo lavoro che si svolge a Ginevra. Per questo credo che la sequenza e il coordinamento che c'è stato e che continua a esserci tra gli incontri di Astana sul piano militare, i nostri incontri a livello regionale, la nostra iniziativa regionale, il nostro lavoro sul piano umanitario, ma anche sull'inizio della programmazione e della pianificazione del post-conflitto e della ricostruzione, collegato ad una transizione politica, possano bene accompagnare questa ripresa degli incontri tra le parti siriane a Ginevra sotto l'egida delle Nazioni Unite.

**Q3:** *[Translated from IT] Two questions, the first one on Syria. You said several times that there was no military solution to this conflict and that you were proud that the EU is not a military actor – but are the Astana process and the ceasefire mechanisms not the confirmation that there was indeed a military solution – and it was the one somehow imposed by Russia? My second question is on Turkey, because the European Parliament has asked in a resolution – the Presidents of the two main political groups have repeated that today – to suspend, freeze the access negotiations, also due to what is happening right now. What do you say to this request?*

**HR/VP:** *[Translated from IT]* On this second question, as I said, I do not intend to comment. I gave a declaration with Commissioner Hahn yesterday which was particularly exhaustive, not just on the current tensions between Turkey and the governments of some EU Member States, but also – and above all, I would like to say – on an important report of the Venice Commission regarding the proposal for constitutional change. We have therefore already discussed yesterday and I have nothing to add regarding that. On the military solution, on Syria: I believe that precisely what happened in the past months is a

demonstration of the fact that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. There is certainly a need to have a strategy that is also military in the fight against Da'esh. But if there had been a purely military solution to the conflict, then some exchanges and meetings at military level such as those that have taken place in Astana would have been sufficient to get to the end of the conflict, which instead has not happened in the past months. This is because we have always known that mechanisms to introduce and monitor the ceasefire are essential, at least to create a situation of calm on the ground – a relative calm, unfortunately, but still a step forward –, but they are not sufficient to create the political conditions for the end of the conflict, for peace-building, political transition and inclusiveness and unity for the country. Otherwise this would have happened through these meetings that have taken place at military level. This means that everyone, including the promoters of the Astana meetings – of which, as I have said, we acknowledge the role of positively introducing ceasefire mechanisms, though partial and not perfect – but they themselves recognise in the purely political and purely inner-Syrian process led under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva the place and the process that can lead to a solution of the conflict. And that is the same evaluation of the situation we make as well, and that is why we fully support the work of Staffan de Mistura and of the UN, and our political and diplomatic work aims to strengthen, support, accompany this work that is being done in Geneva. That is why I believe that the sequence and the coordination that has taken place – and that continues to take place – of the meetings in Astana on the military level, our meetings at a regional level – our Regional Initiative – and our work on the humanitarian side and also on the beginning of the planning of the post-conflict phase and of the reconstruction, connected to a political transition, can well match this resumption of the meetings of the Syrian parties in Geneva under the auspices of the UN.

***Q4 : Quand on parle avec des Syriens qui sont ici depuis longtemps, donc avant la situation de conflit, et aussi avec les réfugiés, ils nous disent: mais vous savez, les représentants de l'opposition – on ne voit pas ce qu'ils représentent. C'est très troublant d'entendre cela, et ils considèrent qu'ils ne sont pas représentés correctement. Qu'est-ce que vous en pensez ?***

**HR/VP:** Les Syriens, j'en rencontre beaucoup. Je serais tentée de demander – à vous-même ou à n'importe qui dans cette salle – si nous nous sentons pleinement représentés par un parti ou l'autre. C'est la diversité d'une société qui, bien sûr, a des connotations politiques mais aussi ethniques, religieuses, extrêmement complexes. Il n'y a pas un Syrien comme l'autre. Il y a une diversité de la société qui était là avant le conflit et qui est exacerbée par le conflit. Et c'est pour cela que de notre côté – du côté de l'Union européenne – on soutient le travail de l'opposition politique dans ses plusieurs formes, parce que l'opposition aussi est formée de plusieurs partis politiques, de plusieurs organisations, parce qu'ils arrivent à avoir un rôle bien préparé, unifié et constructif pendant les négociations à Genève; mais on soutient aussi les plusieurs groupes de la société civile, à partir des femmes, mais aussi d'autres formations, religieuses ou pas, qui représentent la diversité de la société syrienne. Je pense que c'est une richesse, et le danger, c'est que le futur de la Syrie – si la transition politique ne démarre pas comme elle devrait – ne représentera pas la diversité, la richesse de la société syrienne comme elle

est. Et c'est pour cela que nous insistons tellement en tant qu'Union européenne, mais aussi avec les autres dans la communauté internationale, sur le fait que le futur de la Syrie ne peut qu'être un futur inclusif. Parfois on fait référence à la nécessité de protéger des minorités – je pense personnellement que pour la Syrie, cela va au-delà de protéger des minorités, cela doit aller dans la direction de faire de sorte que chaque Syrien et chaque Syrienne trouve sa place comme citoyen et citoyenne dans un pays qui est vraiment extrêmement complexe et diversifié en tant que base sociale et identité. Et on a vu dans la région que chaque fois que cet élément de la protection de la diversité n'est pas pris en considération d'une façon profonde, cela amène après à des problèmes majeurs. C'est pour cela que ce sont seulement les Syriens qui savent vraiment comment construire le futur inclusif – unitaire et inclusif en même temps – de leur pays, et nous pouvons aider, nous pouvons soutenir, nous pouvons accompagner ce processus.

***Q5 : Ma question va être un peu différente. Ce serait plutôt de savoir si dans ce document il y a des orientations qui sont d'ordre sécuritaire, et notamment je pense aux options qui étaient préparées par le SEAE – il me semble une possible mission de soutien aux forces en Iraq ?***

**HR/VP:** Cette stratégie est ciblée sur la Syrie. On a une stratégie plus régionale qui est la stratégie qu'on avait adoptée, si je me trompe pas, il y a deux ans plus ou moins, qui est encore valable et qui couvre en même temps la situation en Syrie et la situation aussi en Iraq et dans la région dans un sens plus large. Et cela est sûrement quelque chose que l'on discute mais que l'on ne décide pas du côté de la Commission mais, comme vous le savez bien, du côté du Conseil. Ce n'est pas pour ne pas répondre à la question mais c'est pour rester un peu ciblé sur le fait que maintenant c'est vraiment un travail de soutien – pas seulement humanitaire mais aussi politique – à la transition syrienne et au processus de mettre fin au conflit en Syrie. Mais il y a aussi un travail qu'on est en train de faire sur l'Iraq et le reste de la région, en particulier dans le cadre de la coalition anti-Da'esh. Comme vous le savez, je l'ai dit avant, je vais être à Washington la semaine prochaine pour la réunion ministérielle de la coalition anti-Da'esh, parce que l'Union européenne en tant que telle fait partie de la coalition, sur des aspects non-militaires. On travaille surtout sur le déminage et sur le travail sur les zones libérées de Da'esh. C'est un travail qu'on continue à faire mais aussi de soutien aux forces de sécurité en Iraq et de renforcement du travail local. C'est un travail qui continue, c'est aussi une réflexion qui est en cours, avec les Etats membres, de comment on peut faire plus et mieux. Cela va continuer, mais ce n'est pas l'objet spécifique de cette stratégie-ci, qui est ciblée sur notre travail avec et sur la Syrie.

***Q6 : Madame Mogherini, je voulais savoir concernant la situation des Kurdes en Syrie, parce que sur le plan militaire tout le monde dit "nous sommes avec les Kurdes" mais sur le plan humanitaire et politique, quelle est la politique de l'Union européenne à cet égard ?***

**HR/VP:** J'ai déjà dit que la Syrie a une population qui est extrêmement variée, et la position de l'Union européenne est celle de garantir que chacun et chacune des citoyens de la Syrie trouve sa place, pas seulement comme minorité protégée mais comme protagoniste du futur du pays. Et je pense que cela répond aussi à votre question; cela,



pour nous, vaut pour tous les différents *backgrounds* – pour les différentes communautés, pour les différentes identités qui composent le pays. Cette diversité doit être préservée et chaque partie de la population en Syrie doit être capable de trouver sa place non seulement dans la vie civile du pays mais aussi dans la vie institutionnelle et politique du pays dans le futur. Mais là, ce n'est pas pour l'Union européenne de dessiner la gouvernance de la Syrie dans le futur. On peut assister, on peut aider, on peut accompagner ce processus, mais c'est dans les mains des Syriens, de tous les Syriens de décider quel type de transition politique ils vont mettre en place dans le futur post-conflit – en espérant qu'on va arriver au post-conflit, et c'est sur quoi on travaille.

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