

Syria: Speech by HR/VP Josep Borrell in the EP on the current security situation in Syria

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Mr President, Honourable Members,

The war in Syria is now in its ninth year. The most severe humanitarian catastrophe and security crisis is unfolding right now in the northwest of the country. In other parts of Syria we continue to see instability and dramatic human suffering.

Last Thursday we heard the United Nations Special Envoy [Geir] Pedersen and the Head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] Mark Lowcock briefing the UN Security Council on the situation in Idlib. They described how regime forces, aided by Russia and Iran, are launching heavy military offensives with no regard for the civilian population or civilian infrastructure. “We appear to have lost sight of the principle of proportionality”, United Nations Special Envoy [Pedersen] said.

The intensification of military operations in Idlib has resulted in the indiscriminate killings of hundreds of civilians. Attacks continue on civilian targets in densely populated areas, medical facilities and settlements for internally displaced people. These are blatant and serious violations of international humanitarian law. There has to be accountability for those responsible.

Since military operations began in Idlib in February 2019, one year ago, more than 1 million people have been displaced towards Turkey. We are talking about one million displaced people in one year. Every day more Syrians are fleeing the fighting and another wave of refugees is quite possibly in the making.

We also see clashes between the Syrian regime and Turkish forces, plus the risk of Turkish and Russian militaries confronting each other. These tensions could in turn trigger a wider regional conflict. The ceasefire agreed between Ankara and Moscow must be implemented.

This is the situation. Now, let me say this. After almost a decade of violence, the suffering of the Syrian people at the hands of the regime and its backers must cease. Too many people have died, and those that are alive face a bleak future.

The EU has major stakes in Syria and in the surrounding region. We cannot afford more regional instability and another migrant crisis. We must avoid a resurgence of Da’esh and other terrorist organisations at Europe’s doorstep. The EU has a duty to preserve the rules based international order including the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council. Yes, I know, we say that once again and we have to continue saying that.

Recent military gains by the Syrian regime are not translating into stability, on the contrary. The Syrian regime will not bring peace and stability to Syria if it continues to pursue a military logic and the repression of its people. The economic situation is deteriorating rapidly, exacerbated by the banking crisis in Lebanon. The regime must change its behaviour.

[Honourable] Members of the European Parliament, we have stated from the very beginning that only a comprehensive and inclusive political solution in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 will allow sustainable peace and stability in Syria and the region.

The European Union will continue to support the efforts of the United Nations Special Envoy Pedersen in relaunching the Constitutional Committee in Geneva. We also need to focus on other parts of this resolution [UNSCR 2254] such as a nationwide ceasefire, the release of detainees and getting progress on the file of missing persons.

Let's recall that the European Union is and remains the largest humanitarian donor in relation to crisis in Syria and to its people, both inside [Syria] and to Syrian refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries. We are supporting the resilience of ordinary civilians and civil society to maintain the social fabric of Syrian society.

We are convinced that our support is a fundamental investment – it is not an expenditure it is an investment – in the future of Syria and the region which is part of our future. And as a partner in the Global Coalition to defeat Da'esh, the EU is conducting stabilisation projects in the north east of Syria.

We are always prepared to do more on all these lines of action, within the limits of our common redlines. These are: no normalisation with the regime; no risking of our funding being diverted to the regime or to terrorists, and no reconstruction before a political process is firmly under way.

Honourable members, we will continue to apply European Union sanctions targeting individuals and entities associated with the regime and responsible for its repressive and inhuman policies, and not the Syrian people.

As I said before: the conflict in Syria is a geopolitical struggle. The European Union has a responsibility to lead, for the sake of the Syrian people and to protect our own interests. While difficult, we must redouble our efforts to identify common interests with other international stakeholders, Russia, U.S., Turkey and others.

Maybe I will have the occasion to update you on our discussions in Washington about this issue.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-184216>

Closing remarks

Gracias Señora Presidenta, gracias a todos los miembros del Parlamento [Europeo] que han participado en este debate,

No puedo sino decirles que comprendo y comparto el sentimiento de frustración de muchas de sus intervenciones, porque ante la crisis siria, lo cierto es que la Unión Europea ha quedado impotente. Por mucho que digamos “deben cesar, deben, deben, deben”, “il faut, il faut, il faut”, “they should, they should, they should”. Sí, pero ¿con qué leverage?, ¿con qué fuerza?, ¿con qué capacidad podemos actuar sobre los actores?

Nos hemos pasado muchos años diciendo que no había solución militar al conflicto en Siria y al final ha habido una solución militar. La está habiendo, ¿por parte de quién? por parte de los que son capaces de utilizar la fuerza militar. Y Europa no está en esa situación. Entonces, seguiremos urgiendo a todos a que paren los ataques contra la población civil, a que dejen de impedir el acceso de la ayuda humanitaria, a que respeten las reglas y las obligaciones del derecho humanitario internacional y a que protejan a los civiles. Pero todos sabemos que eso es una declaración de principios que no se apoya en una fuerza coercitiva que permita hacerla realidad.

Lo que ha ocurrido en Siria es una gran lección para Europa. Es una gran lección para ese actor geopolítico que decimos querer ser. Si de verdad queremos serlo, tenemos que tomar acciones y tener los medios necesarios para ello. De lo contrario, seguiremos haciendo sesiones parlamentarias como esta para seguir diciendo “il faut, il faut, il faut”.

Muchas gracias.

Link to the video: <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-184218>

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