

Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on recent developments in north-east Syria

In light of the Turkish military operation in north-east Syria, the EU reaffirms that a sustainable solution to the Syrian conflict cannot be achieved militarily. The EU calls upon Turkey to cease the unilateral military action. Renewed armed hostilities in the north-east will further undermine the stability of the whole region, exacerbate civilian suffering and provoke further displacements. Prospects for the UN-led political process to achieve peace in Syria will be more difficult.

Unilateral action on Turkey's part threatens the progress achieved by the Global Coalition to defeat of Da'esh, of which Turkey is a member.

Military action will indeed undermine the security of the Coalition's local partners and risk protracted instability in north-east Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence of Da'esh which remains a significant threat to regional, international and European security. The secure detention of terrorist fighters is imperative in order to prevent them from joining the ranks of terrorist groups.

It is unlikely that a so-called 'safe zone' in north-east Syria, as envisaged by Turkey, would satisfy international criteria for refugee return as laid down by UNHCR. The EU maintains its position that refugee and IDP returns to their places of origin must be safe, voluntary and dignified when conditions allow. Any attempt at demographic change would be unacceptable. The EU will not provide stabilisation or development assistance in areas where the rights of local populations are ignored.

We share the goal of ending violence, defeating terrorism and promoting stability in Syria and the wider region. Turkey is a key partner of the European Union and a critically important actor in the Syrian crisis and the region, and the European Union commends Turkey for its important role as a host country of Syrian refugees. Turkey's security concerns should be addressed through political and diplomatic means, not military action, in accordance with international humanitarian law. The EU continues to urge all parties to ensure the protection of civilians and unhindered, safe and sustainable humanitarian access throughout Syria.

The European Union remains committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state. These can be assured only through a genuine political transition in line with UNSCR 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, negotiated by the Syrian parties within the UN-led Geneva process.

The Candidate Countries Republic of North Macedonia*, Montenegro*, Serbia* and Albania*, and the EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as the Republic of Moldova align themselves with this declaration.

*Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

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