

Opening statement by Federica Mogherini at the Brussels Conference “Supporting the future of Syria and the Region”

Check against delivery!

Welcome to Brussels for this important international conference. First of all let me particularly welcome Secretary General [of the United Nations], António Guterres, also the Prime Ministers of Lebanon, Mr [Saad] Al-Hariri, and Jordan Mr [Hani] Al-Mulki, and my fellow co-chairs, the Foreign Ministers [Foreign Minister of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman] Al-Thani, [Foreign Minister of Norway, Børge] Brende, [First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Sabah Khalid Al Hamad] Al-Sabah, [Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor of Germany, Sigmar] Gabriel and [United Kingdom Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris] Johnson, and all of you representing so many countries and international organisations here today.

And let me start by saying that, indeed, today and yesterday are sad days – as there have been hundreds and thousands of days that have been sad, dramatic, horrific, in these last six years. How many minutes of silence we have observed in these six years and how much frustration we have all felt in front of the victims – the children, the innocent people losing their lives.

This is a conference where all of us come together, as international community, to tell the Syrian people that we care for their lives and that we are ready to support the livings, the ones who are still alive, and prevent the lives of those who are at risk inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries. But this is also, I think, a conference where our voice can join the voice of so many Syrians, as the civil society representatives that we will hear in a few minutes. All the Syrian women and men that have only one word to say to us: “Hudna” – a ceasefire and peace. And I think we have also a collective responsibility as international community to be consistent, not only with our humanitarian efforts, but also with our political work, to make sure that peace can be reached in the country with the help and the support of all of us. We have a responsibility to put an end to this war.

We are here in Brussels today with clear purposes and clear reasons. First of all, giving an answer to these Syrians who still hope and believe that peace can be built in their country. Every time I meet with representatives of Syrian civil society – and especially the women if I can say so – I see this mix of desperation and hope. And if they still have hope, I think we have a duty to live up to these expectations to be able to rebuild their own country in freedom, in democracy, in full respect of human lives and rights.

The first thing we have today is obviously condemning all loss of lives and

particularly the horrific chemical attack close to Idlib that was yet another reminder – if we needed it any – of the need for us to come together and put an end to this war.

Some in our public opinions might think that the humanitarian effort in this moment is a naive exercise. Ask to the millions of Syrians who live thanks to that humanitarian aid, thanks to that humanitarian support that we are mobilising here and you will realised that this is a must; it is not a naive exercise. It is where peace can be built.

First objective of our work today is this: support the Syrians, inside Syria and in the neighbouring countries and help the living. The people in need – including the most vulnerable, children, women – cannot wait until the war is solved, ended and everything is settled. They need our help right now.

So we must look at the commitments we made in London [*The Supporting Syria and the Region conference*] last year, assess where we have made progress and where progress has been too slow. We must look at the needs for 2017 and raise the necessary funding through our pledges today. And we will look forward to 2018 and 2019 to ensure that we can provide some continuity and predictability to the humanitarian support we give to Syrians. Here in this room I think we have to be very clear on the fact that we are supporting the Syrians and we are supporting them as they hope to build the future of their country.

The European Union has fulfilled its pledge for 2016. We are always the ones that not only pledge but also deliver on our pledge. I can today announce we will also deliver on our pledge for 2017. We are and we will continue to be the first humanitarian donor, the strongest supporter of the people of Syria and of their host countries. Today we commit to maintain similar levels of support, amounting to €560 million for 2018 for Lebanon, Jordan and for the humanitarian work inside Syria and we have the ambition to maintain our level of engagement also in 2019.

What is vital is that humanitarian funding – this humanitarian funding – turns into humanitarian action. And for this to happen, for this money to become something real to the Syrian people and to the hosting communities, we need not only the energy, the passion, the dedication of the humanitarian workers that put sometimes their lives at risk but also we need to make sure that full access throughout Syria is guaranteed to humanitarian access.

Second objective of this conference is to support the region and to support the future of the region. This is why I am particularly glad to have next to me, the Prime Minister of Jordan [Hani Al-Mulki], the Prime Minister of Lebanon [Saad Al-Hariri], but also representatives of countries like Iraq or Egypt that are hosting in the region a large number of Syrians.

Because the story of the Syrian conflict is the story that affects the entire region and the broader region including Europe, but it is also the story of generosity and solidarity. We cannot just praise the solidarity or commend the solidarity. We have a responsibility to support those who are showing solidarity and make it sustainable in the long term.

The people of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey deserve all our support, as well as those in Iraq, Egypt and elsewhere who are hosting thousands of Syrian refugees. It is a promise we made in London and we continue to honor our promise. More than half of the overall pledge from the London Conference came from the European Union and our Member States and we have fully delivered on our commitments both financially and through the compacts with Lebanon and Jordan. On top of the humanitarian aid, we are promoting economic growth and jobs for our Lebanese and Jordanian friends, as well as for the refugees because we do not want to see a conflict between the hosting communities and the refugees who are hosted by these communities.

Third objective: make peace possible. Here we are more than 70 countries and organisations. The world is looking at us, the Syrians are looking at us and are expecting us to give a strong push to the political talks in Geneva under the excellent leadership of the UN and the Special Envoy [for Syria, Staffan de Mistura], because it is clear that the best investment for all the people of Syria and for a sustainable future in the region is a commitment to peace – serious, consistent commitment to peace.

The task undertaken in Astana by Russia, Turkey and now Iran, is important, is increasingly urgent – the attack in Idlib makes it even more evident. A mechanism for an implementation of the ceasefire has to be a serious one and we have to put a halt to the continuing breaches committed on a daily basis, some more dramatic than others but the ceasefire is a must. *Hudna, hudna, hudna!*

It also needs a political horizon if it has to be sustainable and you will hear the civil society representatives – they met here in Brussels for four days, we met them yesterday -, they make this point very clear. The people of Syria need progress at the talks in Geneva, they want their country back, they want peace back. We need to have the talks in Geneva moving towards an inclusive credible political transition that builds on UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

And I will go even further: only a political solution to the conflict in Syria will allow for a real defeat of Da'esh, Al-Nusra, Al-Qa'ida and all the UN-designated terrorist groups in Syria.

Only a political solution will allow all Syrians to return home without fear of arbitrary detention, torture, executions and child recruitments. Only a political transition can make all Syrians feel home in their own country and be part of a joint effort to give a rebirth to the country.

It is up to the Syrian parties to reach a political agreement and shape the future of their country. But we can collectively contribute to creating the space for them to engage in peace, with political pressure and with the right incentives.

We will hear in the political session the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura on the progress made in the latest round of talks in Geneva. We will also hear from him the latest difficulties and the ways in which we can support his work for real.

All of us, I think, have a responsibility to contribute to a successful outcome of the talks in Geneva. And I want to be very frank: this is the most complex and the most violent conflict in our times. No regional, no global power has the strength to solve it alone. We see many who attempt to worsen it by the day. This will only make the situation worse, not only for the Syrians, but also for the rest of the world. No side can impose one solution on the other. Peace in Syria will require an agreement among local players, but also support from all regional actors and world powers under the auspices of the United Nations.

We, the European Union, are eager to do our part. We have been engaging with the regional actors, all of them, international powers and we believe that there is common ground, but we need serious political will from all.

Fourth objective for today's meeting – and I will close: supporting the future of Syria and of the region.

Today, in Brussels, we can begin to work on one more contribution we can make to make peace possible. Once an agreement is reached, and only once an agreement is reached in Geneva, the reconstruction of Syria will require a massive collective effort. So it is crucial that the international community starts to get ready for that.

Too many times we were unprepared to peace and we did not win the peace even after the conflict was over. We have to start preparing for that day even if today in particular that day seems very far away. It can also be a very strong incentives for the parties and for some regional and international players to see that there is a peace dividend for all the people of Syria, all of them, without any distinction or discrimination, to see that the international community – the European Union for sure – is ready to help them reconstruct and rebuild the future of their country, on the basis of the end of violence and of a political transition that starts.

The future of Syria belongs to Syrians. We all agree on that. Peace and reconciliation is in their hands – has to be in their hands. But today we can send a powerful message to our Syrian friends – women, men, children – : We are on your side, on the side of the Syrian people who are suffering; we are helping you already, we are ready to help you more for a free, united, inclusive, democratic Syria.

Thank you.

[News story: IHAT to close at the end of June](#)

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon today announced that the Iraq Historic

Allegations Team (IHAT) will officially close on 30 June 2017. This follows his decision in February to bring IHAT to an end by the summer, enabled by the striking off of Mr Phil Shiner.

The remaining cases, expected to number around 20, will then be dealt with by the Service Police – a combination of Royal Navy Police and Royal Air Force Police, led by a senior Royal Navy Police officer. All investigations are expected to be completed by the end of next year.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

We took the unprecedented step of submitting evidence which saw Phil Shiner struck off and allowed IHAT to dispose of many false allegations he made. Now I can confirm that IHAT will close in June and the Service Police should complete investigations into the small number of remaining cases a year earlier than planned.

We are taking steps to make sure the reputation of our Armed Forces cannot be attacked in this dishonest way again.

In 2015 the Defence Secretary directed the MOD to submit evidence of wrongdoing by Phil Shiner which led to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal striking Mr Shiner off in February.

The exposure of the dishonesty of Mr Shiner meant that many of the allegations that his now defunct firm, Public Interest Lawyers, had brought forward were discredited and enabled the Defence Secretary to decide to close IHAT. IHAT's caseload is expected to reduce from a peak of over 3,000 allegations to around 20 investigations by the time it closes.

Chief of the General Staff General Sir Nick Carter said:

The Army's Leadership Code requires the highest values and standards. It is right therefore that on the occasions that there are credible allegations of unacceptable behaviour they should be investigated.

However, a significant number of claims made against our soldiers have not been credible. The recent exposure of unscrupulous law firms and vexatious claims has clearly shown this to be the case; it is right therefore that the Defence Secretary has decided to close IHAT and hand over the remaining investigations to the Service Police, a process the Army supports.

Mutual trust is at the heart of the Army Leadership Code as is the care of soldiers and their families. We therefore welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring we have the Nation's confidence and the tools to do our jobs effectively on operations, free from the burden of unjust litigation.

The Service Police will be supported by a minimum level of essential contractor support for specialist back office functions, such as the operation of the Forensic Data Handling computer, in order to complete its investigations. Contractors will have no contact with UK witnesses or suspects.

[UK passports should allow 'X' as an alternative to 'male' or 'female'](#)

UK passports should allow people to define themselves as “X” as an alternative to male or female, Stonewall have said today.

[World-class transport system suggested for Xiongan New Area](#)

Xiongan New Area, a new economic zone near Beijing, should have a “world-class transport system” that is green and smart, a policy advisor said Wednesday.

Transportation in the new area should mainly focus on rail and bus transit options, complemented by bike-sharing and other “green, advanced and highly intelligent” transportation options, said Lu Huapu, from Tsinghua University and a member of the expert committee advising the coordinated development of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region (Jing-Jin-Ji).

Public transportation, parking, traffic management and logistics should all be supported by smart systems, Lu told Xinhua in an interview.

He also suggested smooth and easy transit between Xiongan and the metropolises of Beijing and Tianjin, saying this was essential to attracting high-level talent from those cities and key to the new area’s development.

There should be “seamless connections” between Xiongan and the airports of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei, Lu noted.

China announced plans to create Xiongan New Area on Saturday, which authorities described as a “major historic and strategic choice” that would be “crucial for the millennium to come.”

The new area, some 100 kilometers southwest of downtown Beijing, is designed

to advance coordinated development in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and cure “urban ills” such as traffic congestion and air pollution in the capital.

Establishing Xiongan New Area will help with the ongoing drive to transfer “non-capital” functions out of Beijing, officials said.

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Nicola Sturgeon must focus on delivering her day job, not threatening a second referendum, the Scottish Conservatives have said today.

Following the First Minister’s fresh threat to hold another vote in a speech in California last night, the Scottish Conservatives are highlighting the potential cost of such a plan.

The 2014 referendum cost £17 million to stage.

Meanwhile, a potential legal challenge on the powers to hold a referendum – raised by the First Minister last night – would also run into hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Combined, the cost of this unnecessary constitutional plan would be enough to put 750 teachers through their probation – helping to tackle Scotland’s crippling recruitment crisis in the classroom.

Scottish Conservative constitution spokesman Adam Tomkins said:

“There is a price to pay for Nicola Sturgeon’s constitutional tunnel vision.

“If the First Minister decides to go to the courts, or ram through her own referendum, millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money which could be spent on hiring teachers will instead go on her independence vanity project.

“The wider cost is a government in charge of the NHS, education and public

services which isn't focused on improving our quality of life, but is instead campaigning for separation.

"It is a lose-lose situation for the Scottish public. Nicola Sturgeon has dug herself into a hole on the constitution.

"It is time to stop digging and get back to the day job she was elected to do."

Notes to editors:

- It cost £15.8 million to run the first independence referendum. This was £2.1 million more than had originally been estimated by the SNP (Scottish Parliament, *Question S4W-27304*, 4 September 2015, [link](#)).
- It cost £1.2 million to print and distribute copies of the white paper (Scottish Parliament, *Question S4W-20080*, 11 March 2014, [link](#); Ibid, *Question S4W-20080*, 17 December 2014, [link](#)).
- Teacher probation salary in 2016/17: £22,416 (*The Educational Institute of Scotland*, [link](#))
- The cost of a legal challenge is unclear – however, the Scottish Government spent £136,000 purely to intervene in the Article 50 case at the Supreme Court before Christmas.