

Mr. Vale de Almeida:

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU).

The ongoing crisis in Syria, including the connected spread of Da'esh, poses an existential threat to the Syrian people. The consequences are also particularly felt by its neighbours and the wider region, and in Europe itself as well. If we want to tackle this threat, we must first intensify our joint efforts to put an end to the war in Syria by arriving at a political solution within the framework of the 2012 Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015). Secondly, we must all join forces against Da'esh in an even more effective way.

The European Union is an active member of the International Syria Support Group and its two task forces, on humanitarian access and a cessation of hostilities, and fully supports the efforts of Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General. There is no alternative to the intra-Syrian talks being conducted under the aegis of the United Nations if we are to reach the goal of a political settlement. We expect all Syrian parties and their backers to engage in the process. In particular, we encourage the Syrian regime to engage in good faith and to address the substantive aspects of a political transition.

In that context, the EU emphasizes the importance of four key elements agreed on by the International Syria Support Group and endorsed by Security Council resolutions. First is the consolidation and expansion of the cessation of hostilities. It is incumbent upon all parties to respect the agreement of 27 February. Secondly, there is the consolidation and expansion of humanitarian access, especially to besieged and still hard-to-reach areas. The Al-Assad regime has a particular responsibility in that regard, since a clear majority of the besieged areas are under its control. Thirdly, there is the release of arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children. Fourthly and, I would say, extremely important, is embarking upon a political transition, without delay and with the intention of reaching a lasting solution.

As we have stressed in the past, the Middle East peace process remains vital not only for those directly affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also for the stability of the wider region and thereby also for the European Union. Despite current challenges on the ground, the EU remains united in its commitment to achieving a two-State solution based on the parameters set out in the Council's conclusions of July 2014. We reiterate that there is no alternative to a negotiated two-State solution, which remains the only realistic way of ending the conflict to the main benefit of both Israelis and Palestinians. Regrettably, those populations are now adversely affected by the recent violence, which is taking a terrible human toll and further undermining trust on both sides.

The EU has taken a clear stance and condemned acts of terror and violence against innocent civilians from all sides. In January, our Foreign Affairs Council also urged all sides to refrain from actions that could fuel further tension by way of incitement and provocation, while adhering to the principles of necessity and proportionality in the use of force. We also recognize the special significance of holy sites and urge all to uphold the status quo for the Temple Mount, Al-Haram Al-Sharif. However, we remain convinced that security and short-term measures alone are no substitute for sustainable political solutions. Only significant policy shifts on the ground and the re-establishment of a political horizon can end the violence, rebuild trust and pave the way for meaningful negotiations on the outstanding issues. In that context, it is vital to ensure that all international initiatives are directed towards that goal.

The EU will play a leading part, not least through the its Special Representative for the Middle East peace process and the Quartet, which is currently drafting a report on the dangers of the current

trajectory with significant recommendations on the best way to advance a two-State solution. In that context, the European Union also welcomes other initiatives in the international arena, such as the international peace conference proposed by France, as one part of a broader and coordinated effort to preserve and strengthen the two-State solution.

The role of regional partners remains essential. The Arab Peace Initiative could serve as an important pillar of any future comprehensive peace agreement, while it also provides an opportunity for building a regional security framework. The Security Council has an obvious and crucial role in that context. We take this opportunity to offer our full support to the Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for the Middle East Process, Mr. Mladenov. The EU believes that an integrated approach among international stakeholders can help revive the Middle East peace process. We look forward to working closely with partners in the months ahead towards that common goal. The power to change the situation is obviously primarily in the hands of local leaders and societies. The support and active participation of both sides of the conflict remain a crucial prerequisite for the success of any peace initiative.

Both sides will need to demonstrate through policies and actions that they are genuinely committed to the two-State solution. They must end all actions that undermine the viability of the two-State solution. The EU is highly concerned by the ongoing erosion of the viability of a two-State solution. In that context, we reiterate that settlements are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-State solution impossible. As it has consistently reaffirmed in its Council conclusions, and most recently in January 2016, the EU is strongly opposed to Israel's settlement policy and to actions taken in that context, such as the recent increase in demolitions, including those of EU and EU-member States' funded projects in Area C, the declaration of private land as State land, the legalization of unauthorized outposts and confiscations, as well as the forced transfers of people. Settlement activity in East Jerusalem seriously jeopardizes the possibility of Jerusalem serving as the future capital of both States.

By the same token, jointly addressing the needs of the Palestinian population should be a top priority for Palestinian political leaders. We therefore urge Palestinian factions to bring ongoing reconciliation efforts to a rapid and successful conclusion, on the basis of democracy and the principles of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Palestinian unity and accountable and democratic Palestinian institutions will be crucial in establishing a viable Palestinian State. We welcome the meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for the Coordination of the International Assistance to Palestinians, the main mechanism for aid management and donor coordination, being held in Brussels today and tomorrow in the presence of the two parties. Its role is to underpin political efforts to achieve a two-State solution by supporting the development of institutions in preparation for Palestinian statehood.

There must also be accelerated efforts to address the dire situation in Gaza. While the EU has delivered on all its pledges made at the Cairo Conference in 2014, we urge all others to follow suit. Increased access to Gaza through legal crossings would also contribute to an improved situation in accordance with resolution 1860 (2009).

Let me end by noting that, in our view, the forthcoming Quartet report should be the basis to set out in more detail the concrete steps that both sides must take to recreate the political horizon for a two-State solution with the full support of the international community.

Together, we need to find ways to prevent further disasters in the Middle East mainly for humanitarian reasons, but also because despair can breed radicalization and further violence. Together with international partners, and hopefully with crucial input by the core parties to the conflict, the

European Union will continue its concerted efforts to prevent the further escalation of violence and defend the viability of the two-State solution

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