

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks at talks with Head of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) Nasr al-Hariri, Moscow, January 22, 2018

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Mr al-Hariri,

Gentlemen,

Welcome to Moscow. We have a direct interest in this meeting. We hoped it would be held sooner. During this important meeting, we plan to discuss all aspects of a Syrian settlement in the interests of the Syrian people.

We were ready for a meeting with your delegation immediately after the Riyadh consultations, which our Saudi colleagues organised to bring together the three Syrian opposition groups – the Riyadh, Cairo and Moscow groups. We supported Saudi Arabia's efforts towards the result achieved, proceeding from the belief that any effort to promote the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 deserves to be supported.

We helped and continue to help achieve the goals that were formulated by the UN Security Council, including by working with Turkey and Iran to launch the Astana process. The agreements on four de-escalation zones, which were coordinated in Astana, have helped us to seriously lower the degree of violence. Despite individual instances of fighting, the situation in Syria is now much better than a year ago.

The terrorist threat has been undercut and ISIS has not created a caliphate, which was its goal, largely thanks to the Astana format and the agreement on the southern de-escalation zone between Russia, the United States and Jordan. However, there are still a few remaining pockets of terrorism that need to be suppressed. We hope that progress in the intra-Syrian dialogue and the launch of sustainable negotiations on Syria's future will unite the efforts of all Syrians towards eliminating the terrorist threat in their country.

We believe that the success of the political process hinges on strict compliance with all provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for launching an inclusive dialogue involving the Syrian Government and the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition. We would like to facilitate the achievement of this goal through the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in our "southern capital", Sochi, which is scheduled for January 29-30. We hope that all those who can influence various opposition groups will help us ensure a truly inclusive intra-Syrian dialogue.

The main goal of the congress in Sochi is to promote the most efficient operation of the UN-led Geneva process possible, so that dialogue involving all Syrians brings the results all Syrians want. We tried to form a list of invitees that would ensure the achievement of our goal, which is to bring together representatives of all groups of Syrian society, including the Government and the opposition. Working together with our Iranian and Turkish colleagues, we invited the main regional and international actors to the congress. I am sure that if all of us act in keeping with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 we will be able to launch a sustainable and constructive process, which will allow us to reach the vital agreements for a Syrian settlement, including the constitutional reform and free UN-monitored elections, as it is stipulated in Resolution 2254.

We consider the attempts by some external actors to question the sincerity of our efforts as counterproductive. I believe that our Syrian colleagues are fully aware of the need to eliminate all external geopolitical considerations from the process of implementing the UN Security Council resolution. I am sure that the Syrian people are interested in an agreement to launch this process in Geneva based on Resolution 2254, a process that will be free from unconstructive external influence and will create conditions for launching talks on the entire range of issues related to a Syrian settlement, starting with the construction and preparations for the elections that will be held without any preconditions.

We know that you have come to Moscow following a series of meetings in the capitals on both sides of the Atlantic. We would like to hear your views on the current stage of the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution. I confirm our full commitment to the main principles of this resolution. I hope we will have constructive talks.

I do not want to go now into the details you preferred to spell out in the presence of the media. I hope that you have come here without bias, with a focus on a frank and honest conversation.

Before we thank our friends, the journalists, I just want to address the issue you mentioned that concerns the suffering of the civilian population.

You mentioned Raqqa. We did not hear any concerns publicly expressed by our international partners while that city was being razed to the ground. This is regrettable and suggests double standards in the humanitarian sphere.

As for Eastern Ghouta and Idlib, we are very concerned about what is happening there. For many months now, we have been calling attention to the fact that the shelling of Damascus continues from Eastern Ghouta, from the de-escalation zone, including attacks on the Russian Embassy. Nevertheless, we have achieved an agreement with the Syrian Government on the delivery of several humanitarian convoys, even if not regular deliveries. We must make them more frequent. Most recently, we also started medical evacuation of those who need it.

But most importantly, Jabhat al-Nusra terrorists continue to feel at home in Eastern Ghouta and Idlib. And our Western colleagues, including members of the US-led coalition, somehow manage to shield Jabhat al-Nusra from attacks. This has been happening for several years and certainly causes very serious concern.

If the Jabhat al-Nusra problem had been resolved, if a truly united front had been created against it, including, as I said, the American coalition, I am sure that the humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib and elsewhere in Syria would have been far better.

As for the Congress in Sochi, I have heard the questions that you would like to have answered. During today's talks, we will definitely give these answers. We do not have any controversy with regard to the need to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué. What is important is to approach these documents comprehensively rather than selectively. I am sure that if this is done, we will reach an understanding.

I expect that we will discuss all this in detail once our colleagues, the journalists, leave us. They have already heard so much they will have enough material for a week.