

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference following talks with Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel, Moscow, February 19, 2018

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Ladies and gentlemen,

The talks with my colleague, Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelkader Messahel, were quite productive.

We noted the dynamic development of political, trade, economic and defence industry links in full compliance with the 2001 Strategic Partnership Declaration between Russia and Algeria. An extra impetus to cooperation was given last October during Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Algeria. The visit resulted in a number of documents signed on cooperation in various areas. The two countries agreed to work toward their fulfillment at the ministerial and other government levels.

Algeria is one of our leading trade and economic partners in the Middle East and on the African continent in general. We hold in high regard the work of the Russia-Algeria Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation that convened for the eighth time in Algeria last September. Also that month, another meeting of the Russia-Algeria Business Council took place, a council that helps develop direct contacts between the business communities of the two countries. We are preparing for the regular Russia-Algeria Business Forum on the sidelines of the 2018 Innoprom trade fair held this July in Yekaterinburg.

We evaluated our cooperation within the Gas Exporting Countries Forum as having strong potential. Algeria is creating a special institution under the auspices of the forum. Representatives of Russian businesses and government agencies are interested in providing extensive support to this initiative. Algeria will be joining the International Association of Oil Transporters at our invitation. Foreign Minister Messahel confirmed this today.

We noted our mutual interest in intensifying cultural links and educational exchanges. There are some 20,000 alumni of Russian universities in Algeria. The Russia-Algeria alumni association is deeply involved in this area of bilateral relations.

We noted the good prospects in defence industry cooperation, and devoted special attention to countering terrorism. We are pleased with the fact that Algeria is joining the International Counterterrorism Database developed by Russia's Federal Security Service that collects information on foreign terrorists, militants and their movements. These and other issues related to combating new threats were discussed during Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev's visit to Algeria at the end of January.

Our approaches broadly overlap on many international and regional matters. We are interested in a solely peaceful resolution of the crises in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in all other regions, based on international law and with the United Nations playing the central role.

On this note, we reviewed the situation in Syria. We informed our partners about the outcome of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress which, we are certain, will facilitate more intensive talks between the Syrian Government and representatives of the opposition towards fulfilling UNSC Resolution 2254 under the aegis of the UN.

We have affirmed our high evaluation of Algeria's efforts to promote a durable settlement in Libya. There is no alternative to dialogue between the main actors, specifically, Tripoli and Tobruk that represent the east and the west of the country. We support the corresponding steps taken by the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Libya Ghassan Salame as well as the countries in the region. We believe that, in addition to Algeria that has stated its interest in helping to steer the situation to a constructive path of negotiations, other neighbours such as Tunisia and Egypt are also playing helpful roles. At the same time, we proceed from the premise that all these efforts must be coordinated by the UN. Today we confirmed our interest in supporting these efforts, including through our relations with Algeria in crisis resolution.

We discussed the situation in the Sahara-Sahel region, including in Mali. The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in June 2015 in Algiers, put this country on track for a settlement. We believe that this document should continue to serve as a foundation for further progress. We call on all parties in Mali to honour their commitments. The situation in Libya, still used by foreign fighters as a transit route and for arms trafficking, is having extremely negative ramifications in other parts of the Sahara-Sahel region. We share the view that efforts to resolve the problems the Sahara-Sahel region is facing will be much more effective once the Libyan crisis is settled. Russia has made it a priority to support the initiatives undertaken by African countries themselves, and the international community should be there to lend its support. We will continue assisting countries in the region in strengthening their counter-terrorist potential.

As for Western Sahara, we confirmed the need of a compromise between Morocco and the Polisario Front in keeping with UN Security Council resolutions. We praise the work of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, which includes Russian officers.

We did not fail to note that despite the urgency of the current matters, be it in Syria, Libya or Yemen, or other developments in the region, we must not forget about the long-standing hotbeds of tension, primarily that of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Russia calls for settling this conflict based on the decisions taken by the UN and the Arab Peace Initiative, as was discussed in detail during the recent visits to the Russian Federation made by Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu, President of the State of Palestine Mahmoud Abbas and King Abdullah II of Jordan.

I think that these talks confirmed the high level of mutual trust, and the overall commitment by both countries to strengthen their cooperation and strategic partnership, promote bilateral ties in all areas and step up their coordinated efforts on regional as well as international issues.

Question: Could the Russian Federation benefit from the extensive experience the Algerian army has in combatting terrorism? Are there any mechanisms enabling Russia and Algeria to exchange experience?

Sergey Lavrov: I would like to confirm what my friend has said. Algeria and Russia have a wealth of experience in combatting terrorism. It is unfortunate that this experience was acquired as we hunted down and liquidated organisers and perpetrators of terrorist attacks that claimed the lives of many of our citizens. It is true that we have established cooperation channels not only between our foreign ministries (we discuss the counter-terrorism agenda in this format too), but also between law enforcement agencies and the security councils of our two countries. As I have already said, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Nikolai Patrushev, has recently visited Algeria, where he was received by the President of Algeria Abdelaziz Bouteflika and held talks with his counterparts on specific aspects of further coordinated counter-terrorism efforts. Algeria takes part in international events and forums regularly hosted by the Russian Security Council and Federal Security Service. As I have already said today, Algeria joined the International Counterterrorism Database created by Russia's Federal Security Service. This is yet another step toward closer cooperation in countering the terrorist threat. I totally agree that this is one of the strategic areas of our cooperation that has a bilateral, as well as a multilateral dimension as part of regional as well as global efforts under UN auspices.

Question: The US described the evidence in Friday's report about Russia's alleged meddling in the elections as 'incontrovertible' and raised eyebrows at how Russians fail to recognise obvious facts. You talked about it more than once. What do you think the US is counting on as it continues to blame Russia? What facts, if any, could convince Russia?

Sergey Lavrov: Let's talk specifically. You say the US published some information. What kind of information is it? If I understand correctly, it is a list of names of thirteen persons charged with interference in the internal affairs of the United States; still, I did not see any facts - dates, forms of interference, or any other information that could be correlated with something remotely close to facts. It looks like the charges have been brought, but the evidence is not presented. When our US colleagues say that Russia does not recognise obvious facts, for us, I would say, it is not obvious at all, and these are not facts.

We have repeatedly said we are ready to consider any specific information. We have proposed many times, including at President Vladimir Putin's meeting with US President Donald Trump in Hamburg last July, to resume a professional dialogue, one that goes beyond a propaganda campaign, to address any cyber security concerns. The American side, despite the President's initially positive response, later took back its agreement. Those who opposed it said it would be impossible to establish a dialogue with Russia on the issue that is precisely where Russia has intervened in American affairs. That is a very perverted logic. If the people who use such logic see everything that happens between our countries and in the world from the perspective of Russia's guilt a priori, then no dialogue can probably be expected to take place.

I have already said that I have asked US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to provide what he calls irrefutable evidence of Russia's interference in US elections. He said he does not have to do that because Russian special services are perfectly aware of them. This is not exactly a level of intellectual exchange of opinions, but rather in line with the statements that President Vladimir Putin is trying to re-establish the Soviet Union - the Dutch story, already known at the level of a joke or cartoon, or the British military leaders' statements that they have hardcore evidence of Russia's plans to invade the

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British Isles. Quite frankly, it's hard to take this seriously.

I repeat, for many years now, Russia has been promoting an initiative to establish a mutually respectful professional dialogue on cyber security without double standards. On our initiative, the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions on international information security. A Group of Governmental Experts was established to this effect. Russia, together with its SCO partners, has introduced draft rules of conduct in the information space and a draft international convention on combating cybercrime. This is what we are doing apart from our initiatives to develop bilateral contacts on combating cybercrime in relations with the US and other Western countries that are concerned about this problem. We are equally interested in cyberspace being a field of honest cooperation rather than speculation, which, unfortunately, is still the case.

Question: Yesterday, General Suheil al-Hassan's forces posted a video showing that a large number of heavy weapons were heading toward East Ghouta. An assault is likely, because negotiations with the militants have presumably failed. Don't you think that an assault may entail a lot of civilian casualties? Do you believe that they could use Russia's Aleppo experience?

Sergey Lavrov: Allegations about humanitarian problems in East Ghouta and Idlib are a hot theme at the UN right now. It is contained in a variety of initiatives. Among other things, the UN Security Council is being used to urge the Syrian government army to stop offensive operations there. There is an initiative to call a pause for at least a month in order to bring about some calm and deliver humanitarian aid. What is this problem all about? It is about both Idlib and East Ghouta being controlled by militants belonging to Jabhat al-Nusra, which the UN Security Council designated as terrorist organisations. In keeping with the existing agreements, the fight against terrorism cannot be restricted by anything. It is a matter of grave concern for us that, in effect, the Syrian army and the Russian Aerospace Forces that support it are alone in trying to suppress Jabhat al-Nusra, this terrorist division of Al Qaeda, and those who cooperate with it. The appeals urging the Syrian army to stop its offensive – while our proposals that guarantees should be provided of al-Nusra's simultaneous immobilisation are being turned down – hide the desire to once again let Jabhat al-Nusra avoid the blow.

I agree that any military operations should have regard for possible consequences that they will involve for the humanitarian situation as well as civilians. We hope that all necessary precautions will be taken. The Aleppo experience concerning agreements with militants on their organised withdrawal is quite applicable to East Ghouta. It was a huge effort to reach several agreements on medical evacuation, primarily that of children and others needing urgent medical assistance. However, all subsequent efforts to negotiate a larger-scale civilian exodus met with refusals on the part of Jabhat al-Nusra, which wants to keep these people and use them as a living shield. Let me note that Jabhat al-Nusra is not just based there; it constantly attacks civilian facilities, including residential areas in Damascus. Several of these attacks were directed at the Russian Embassy and quite recently the Russian Trade Mission's building was hit and sustained heavy damage. This is why we ask our Western colleagues, who have leverage to influence Jabhat al-Nusra (they don't deny this), to discipline this terrorist structure before calling for a solution to humanitarian problems. Otherwise it will be destroyed; there should be no doubt about it. However, all the necessary precautions to prevent civilian suffering and minimise these risks must be taken.