

Keynote Speech By
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Sustaining Peace: Current Challenges for Democracy
Theme
Peace Must Grow From Within - But How?

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Mr. Michael Kretschmer, Minister-President of the Free State of Saxony-Dresden and Deputy Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Development and Peace Foundation,

Mr. Frank Richter, Managing Director of Foundation Frauenkirche Dresden,

Dr. Jens Kreuter, Executive Director of Engagement Global in Bonn,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's always a great pleasure to come back to Germany, a country dear to my heart and for which I have fond memories as the Egyptian ambassador a few years ago. It's also an honor to be invited by the Development and Peace Foundation. Such prestigious institution that carries more than 31 years of rich experience in bringing academics, practitioners, civil society and business community together to promote creative reflection on potential solutions and thus to provide guidance and support for decision makers in intergovernmental organizations and states alike.

When the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria received your invitation to this forum, I told my colleagues that Dresden is definitely one of the most appropriate places in the world to reflect on war and peace in Syria. As we all know, next week you will commemorate the 73rd anniversary of Dresden tragic firebombing of 1945.; a dark memory for many of you her tonight and for the rest of the world. With tens of thousands of civilians killed and at least 75,000 houses destroyed in just few days of excessive raids, I can't help comparing Dresden in February 1945 with Syrian cities like Homs, Aleppo and Raqqa in February 2018. As you can see in 2018 Syria there are numerous 1945 Dresden.

Though similarities transcend the scale of death and destruction to questions on the legitimacy of targets and violations of International Humanitarian Law, differences are also stunning. Above all the number of state as well as non-state actors involved in the Syrian crisis is unprecedented on international, regional and internal levels. Just to give you an idea of the scale: about 40 countries were involved in WWI, while about 102 nationalities fought in WWII. In Syria today, at least 81 countries are engaged militarily either directly through armies and militias or indirectly through foreign fighters from as far as Australia.

Borrowing from a well know saying of a major European historic figure one can describe Syria today as a tragedy of aspirations for human dignity, wrapped into mutually exclusive narratives, inside regional rivalries and great power discord. This is what makes Syria crisis a difficult nut to crack. But crack we must. We, the UN we leave no path unexplored to stone unturned. This tragedy has to come to an end, for the sake of the Syrian people, for stability in the region and for peace in the world at large.

At the national level, one of the key obstacles is the absence of a unified opposition. The closest approximation yet to an accepted, broadly inclusive and representative opposition structure is the SNC. However, not all armed opposition groups feel bound by the SNC and other political opposition entities are questioning its claim to be the only opposition. That's why, when you chose "peace from within" as the theme of our discussion today, it triggers a lot of questions on how, when and under which circumstances.

But let me first describe in a nutshell the colossal toll of the brutal and sustained hostilities we are witnessing almost seven years into the Syria conflict. Estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, countless more are missing or detained, and five million have fled to other countries in the Middle East and Beyond. This is a country that welcomed with open arms thousands and thousands of refugees, from Palestine in the 1940s and Lebanon in the 1970s and Iraq in the 1980s. Gross Domestic Product is less than half what it was before the war, and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure and housing will cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Life expectancy dropped from 70 years in 2010 to 55 in 2016. Almost 70 per cent of Syrians inside the country now live in extreme poverty. According to UNICEF, 1.8 million children are estimated to be out of school in Syria and another 1.4 million are at the risk of dropping out. National routine immunization coverage has declined from 90 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent in 2017, triggering several outbreaks. When we reflect on these horrific statistics, we should remember that according to the UNDP Human Development Index, Syria had achieved, during the two decades prior to the crisis, remarkable progress with regards to life expectancy, self-sustainment of medicines, years of schooling and bridging inequalities.

So, what the UN is doing in response to this mounting challenge? Just to put things in perspective let me start with the humanitarian front then we dive into political settlement process.

As we all know, the UN mandate is to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for everyone who needs it, in accordance with the long-established principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality which have been endorsed by all member states of the UN. Thus, people affected by the Syria crisis are entitled to help on the basis of need, regardless of any other considerations.

My colleague Mark Lowcock, the UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs recently mentioned that the United Nation's humanitarian response plan for Syria is one of the world's largest sustained emergency aid efforts. It has been made possible by voluntary donations. They totaled 1.7 billion USD in 2017, with the biggest contributions coming from the US, Germany, the UK, the EU, Canada, Norway, Japan and Denmark. In 2018, the UN humanitarian response plan is seeking 3.5 billion USD

from donors to meet the growing needs of more than 13 million Syrians besieged and in-need in all parts of Syria. This shows you how precarious the situation remains in Syria.

Agencies supported through the UN's humanitarian response plan have reached an average of 7.5 million people across the country each month over the last year. These agencies have provided life-saving food and medical help, as well as support to sustain essential services including water and education. These assistance programs have been implemented by thousands of aid workers. Most of them are Syrians and many are volunteers, working for the organizations of the UN, the Red Cross, NGOs and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. While we pay tribute to their courage and selflessness, we must not forget that many of them have lost their lives because they believed peace and humanity should prevail.

Minister-President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Compared to last year, things are now generally calmer in parts of the country where many people live. However we have witnessed a spike of military activities during the past few weeks where intense fighting continues in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Afrin and in other areas. Two days ago my colleague Assistant Secretary General Panos Moumtzis, the United Nations regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, said: in the past year more than 8,000 people per day have been driven from their homes. Since mid-December, some 300,000 people have fled from their homes, some of them displaced for the second or third time. This is a reminder that humanitarian relief is quite essential but not a solution, area-specific de-escalation zones are important but not enough. What Syria needs is a comprehensive nationwide cease fire coupled with confidence building measures that create a conducive environment for a parallel political settlement process.

As Security Council resolution 2254 indicates, such political settlement should include free and fair elections pursuant to a new constitution, administered under supervision of the UN and held to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the Diaspora, eligible to participate.

To that end, the Office of the UN Special envoy for Syria has conducted, so far, nine rounds of intra-Syrian talks revolving around essential principles and four baskets, or thematic areas, under negotiation. The so-called Living 12 Essential Principles seek to embody end-state commonalities and offer an enduring perspective on the vision of a future that can be shared by all Syrians. One can imagine these principles as the backbone of any permanent or transitional constitution in the future.

Similar to what you have in the German constitution. The four baskets deal with constitution, elections, governance & counter-terrorism and security governance and confidence building measures.

While the UN was able to partially engage both the Government of Syria delegation and the opposition delegation in discussing some of the 12 essential principles, it proved to be extremely difficult to stimulate real negotiations on constitutional reform which is considered to be the natural gateway for any credible elections or meaningful good governance to take place in the future.

This was the environment where two important initiatives were born. First, Russia, supported by the two other guarantors of Astana Process (Iran and Turkey) came up with the idea of convening a congress for Syrian National dialogue in Sochi at the end of January 2018 where almost 1500 participants attended. On the other hand, a small group of five Western and regional countries (namely USA, UK, France, Saudi Arabia and Jordan) came together and generated a non-paper to revive the Syrian political track in Geneva with special focus on the two baskets dealing with constitutional revision and elections.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let us recall that only a UN-brokered process will be seen by the Syrians as impartial and will attract the regional and international legitimacy required. That's why, the UN worked with the Russian Federation to make sure the following three goals were achieved in the Sochi congress just last week:

- First; the Living 12 Essential Principles I described earlier were embodied word-to-word in the final statement adopted by the end of the Congress.
- Second; the final statement also emphasized that any final agreement on constitutional committee is to be reached in the UN-led Geneva process including its mandate, terms of reference, powers, rules of procedures and selection criteria for its composition.
- Third; the constitutional committee, it was agreed in Sochi, would at the very least comprise Government, oppositions representatives in the intra-Syrian talks, Syrian experts, civil society, independents and women. Care would be taken to ensure adequate representation of Syrian ethnic and religious components.

In doing so, the UN had in mind the very same notion this forum is highlighting; peace from within. The UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and his team are very keen to allow all Syrians to define their own future. The Constitutional committee is

going to be, by design, open for all segments of the society inside and outside Syria. UN-administered presidential and parliamentary elections will open new spaces for Syrians to shape the political and socio-economic nature of their country.

Indeed, Syrians from different backgrounds are eager to be a part of these processes, and are not waiting for a peace deal to happen. They are finding ways to meet each other and find common ground on the future. These meetings are taking place across the region, in Europe and in limited spaces in Syria.

The work of the Special Envoy's office is enriched by hearing everyday Syrian voices – humanitarian workers, lawyers, judges, human rights activists, professors, and community leaders. And we have created two important bodies to enable Syrians from all walks of life to share their perspectives on the future of their country: The Civil Society Support Room and the Women's Advisory Board.

At each round of talks, 40 or 50 Syrians come to Geneva to meet with the Special Envoy and me, our team, and importantly, each other. While the parties talk to us about issues related to political transition, the end of tyranny, and terrorism, Syrian civil society bring to us issues that are relevant and have an impact on the lives of all Syrians: first and foremost, we can them say al hudna, al hudna, al hudna (which means ceasefire in Arabic). They raise issues related to humanitarian assistance, detainee and abductee file, women's rights, and the importance of the future role and protection of civil society.

The Special Envoy's office has also created a distinct board of 12 Syrian women who act as advisors to the process and ensure that women's voices are heard. They come from different shades of ethnic, sectarian and political backgrounds. Yet they manage to provide recommendations to me and my team based on consensus. The Women's Advisory Board is also filling an important gap in the political process: the virtual absence of women.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by the same comparison again; Dresden and several Syrian cities: the past, the present and the future. Following the end of the Cold War, Germans were able to unite and rebuild Dresden, not only historic baroque and renaissance architectures were restored but also parks and museums were created to turn Dresden into one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. This is how I dream of Syria few years down the road. A country not haunted by its past and not taken hostage by long lasting grievances, rather, a forward-looking state with development and democracy reinforcing one another.

This time I would like to borrow from a major US diplomatic figure and a German by birth, Henry Kissinger. Decades ago he said you cannot make peace in the Middle East without Syria. I would like to add to this that without a Syria at peace with itself and with its neighbors, stability in the region will remain shaky or even absent. Today, a united, sovereign, democratic and prosperous Syria remains a cornerstone for stability in the Middle East and beyond. Above all, it's what Syrian people deserve and can achieve... With the assistance of the UN and the international community.

Thank you