



**STATEMENT BY SYRIAN NEGOTIATION COMMISSION'S HADI AL BAHRA TO UNITED NATIONS
SECURITY COUNCIL, 12 MARCH**

Your Excellencies,

Thank you to the Permanent Missions of the United Kingdom, Poland, the Netherlands and France for hosting this meeting. We're grateful for the opportunity for Syrians to share our perspective with the Council on a crisis that after all affects us Syrians more than anyone.

Your Excellencies,

For seven years, ordinary Syrians have faced horrors that no human being should have to endure. Oppression, torture, gas, death, bombardment, destruction, loss, continuous grief. Those that make it through one day alive, must face the very real prospect of death the following day. Those that are fortunate enough to escape the country do so having lost everything and have to live as strangers in someone else's land.

Our other speakers have bravely and eloquently articulated the situation in Eastern Ghouta, including the continuous violations of the cessation established by resolution 2401. I will not repeat them. I will only say that what has been happening in Eastern Ghouta over the past month is brutal. But it is not new. It is not even unprecedented. It is part of the same pattern of abuse and terrorization by the Assad regime that we have witnessed across Syria throughout the past seven years.

For the most part, the regime's illegal war on civilians has gone unchallenged. And so – like any abuser who faces no consequences for his actions – Assad continues and escalates, safe in the knowledge that his military strategy is his best option. That is what Eastern Ghouta is to the regime – the latest front in an illegal, indiscriminate, disproportionate and misguided military strategy. And active support and involvement of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah only reinforces Assad's confidence in a military solution.

I am sorry to say, Your Excellencies, with all due respect, that the international approach so far has been deeply ineffective. Piecemeal policies have been aimed at symptoms, not causes. Weakness in the face of tyranny has only resulted in ever more determined tyranny.

Resolution 2401 was a step in the right direction for the Security Council. But it will only contribute to peace if the cessation is enforced. On the other hand, failure to enforce it will guarantee that its effect will be to contribute to future cycles of escalation and to the prolonging of the conflict.

We often hear that the crisis in Syria is too complicated. That there are too many actors. That there are no solutions. We reject this defeatist and inaccurate assessment. The dynamics are not so complicated.

First, the regime is the primary driver of the continued conflict in Syria, and its global consequences – the terror threat and refugee crisis. The regime responded to peaceful protests in 2011 with violence. Over the past seven years, it has been responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths. And it still is, albeit with the help of its backers. The appearance of extremism in Syria is not welcome by the vast majority of Syrians – including the opposition. But any notion that the regime's actions are a response to terrorism ignores the abundant evidence of the regime's deliberate failure to target extremism over the past seven years.

In fact, the regime's actions are the root causes of extremism, the main driver of the never-ending cycle of terror, and both are consequences of the regime's actions. If this regime is permitted to continue committing crimes against its own people, with no consequences, there will be no stability in the region and no end to the cycle of terror. The international community has left the Syrian people alone for seven years, struggling against the atrocities of Assad's tyrant regime and burdened with the largest share of the cost of the fight against terror. These atrocities have caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, millions of refugees and internally displaced people, and the destruction of our cities and infrastructure.

These facts matter. It is not an issue of many sides, and equal blame. Scale does matter. Cause and effect do matter. If you want a ceasefire, and if you want to begin to tackle extremism, you must first prevent the overwhelming cause of killing: the regime.

For our part, the armed groups committed to comply with resolution 2401, and offered to facilitate the exit of Nusra fighters even though this is not their responsibility. Russia has ignored this offer.

Second, negotiation is the answer to lasting peace in Syria. But the process will not work unless the regime is compelled to negotiate. We in the opposition are committed to the political process. We have engaged constructively, while the regime has refused – I am sure that Mr. De Mistura confirmed this to the Council when he briefed you last week. We will continue to engage. We do so even when it results in justifiable criticism from our communities of Syrians who can't understand why we continue when the bombs are falling.

We do so because we believe that negotiation is the only answer. But we are not naïve. Nor should you be. If you want negotiations to work, you must prevent the regime from relying on its military strategy. As long as bombing is an option, it will not negotiate.

Third, relying on Russia to restrain the regime is not a strategic policy. It is a tactic – a wishful one at that. The evidence of the past seven years is that Russia is mostly unable to control its client. The regime, not Russia, is in charge. The regime even snubs Russia on its own turf, rejecting the Sochi outcomes. The regime listened to Russia twice – in 2013 after it killed over 1,700 people with Sarin. It listened to Russia only because some of the Members of this Council threatened military action. The second time was after the US strikes last year, when it curtailed the use of chemical weapons. But once it was confident that there would be no further strikes, chlorine use became regular once again.

Russia should be pressed to deliver regime compliance with what I believe the Russian Permanent Representative called in private during your session last week a “utopian” ceasefire. But you will need to do more than that to achieve the result.

Finally, Iran’s role cannot be ignored. It continues to practice its destructive policies in Syria and the region by spreading terror, inflaming sectarianism, and igniting conflicts throughout the region. Iran is the main backer and shareholder of the Assad regime, and should be held accountable for the crimes committed by its forces and Iranian-backed militias in Syria. Otherwise, it will be impossible to achieve peace, security and stabilization in Syria and the region.

Your Excellencies,

Members of the Security Council have a choice. Continue with a piecemeal approach to this conflict. Watch helplessly as it continues. Repeatedly deal with and suffer its consequences in your own countries.

Or, you can finally take a strategic approach to this conflict. Enforce resolution 2401, ensure a cessation, use that – as we would like – to achieve a longer-term cessation that will create a more viable context for peace talks.

We believe that the Council must take Chapter VII measures and use all the tools at its disposal.

But if Russia is unwilling to allow the Council to be effective, there is no clearer cut example of the need for action outside the Council to uphold and enforce its resolutions. For some of you, that will mean revisiting sanctions and trade measures against the regime and its backers, pursuing accountability through domestic jurisdictions, and supporting the establishment of an international tribunal through the General Assembly.

But this is not enough. Like other conflicts such as Bosnia, stopping the violence and making a peace process viable will require deliberate action by those with the means to do so. We urge those Member States to act to deter violations of the cessation – all violations, not just chemical weapon use – by the threat, and if necessary use, of limited military action. It is feasible. It is necessary. And it is overdue.

Thank you, Your Excellencies.