



Brussels, 1. February 2015

Dear High Representative/Vice-President,

On 8- 11 January 2015 we unofficially visited together with MEP Marietje Schaake and MEP Cornelia Ernst the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. The main purpose of the trip was to assess the humanitarian situation on the ground, as well as the overall political and military context. We met with the representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), members of the local parliament, representatives of the Christian, Yazidi and Shabak minorities, women who were kidnapped, abused and held as sex slaves by the terrorist Daesh and we visited (in)formal refugees camps in the region like Xanke, serving among 90.000 Yazidi Refugees and also the Christian and Yazidi villages in Northern Iraq.

Here are our main findings:

1. The presence of the terrorist Daesh is at the root of the destabilisation and humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and Syria. While the KRG and other anti-ISIL/Daesh forces in Iraq, assisted by the US and allied airstrikes, managed to contain the further expansion of the Daesh, the terrorist organisation keeps holding the territories under its control, with little signs of resistance from the local population. During our meetings we were told that Daesh should not merely be contained, but expelled from the territories it now controls. Our official interlocutors insisted on the need to deliver heavy weaponry to the Kurdish defence forces (*peshmergas*). Iraqi army is in the process of rebuilding itself. There is an expectation that a joint offensive may be launched by the Iraqi army and *peshmergas* to retake Mosul in coming weeks or months.
2. Even if a military action against Daesh succeeds in liberating the territories, eradicating the Daesh would require a genuine effort at reconciliation in the Iraqi society across sectarian, ethnic and political lines. As long as Iraq's disgruntled Sunnis do not feel they have a stake in the future of Iraq, any effort at stabilisation is doomed. All of our interlocutors were sharply critical of the former Prime-Minister Nuri al-Maliki's policies widely seen as marginalising Sunnis and equating them with terrorists. Maliki's successor Haidar al-Abadi is seen as a more consensual, inclusive and less

revenge-driven figure, but the concern is that the sectarianism has taken too deep a root and is pervasive at all levels of public administration, including security agencies. Additional challenge to the prospect of reconciliation is the fact that the surviving members of minorities, such as Christian, Yazidi and Shabak, who were uprooted during the Daesh offensive, are willing to return to their towns and villages once they are liberated from Daesh, but see no possibility of living side-by-side with their former Sunni Arab neighbours, seen as taking advantage of the terrorist assault, plundering their properties etc.

3. The humanitarian crisis on the ground continues to deteriorate: according to the UN, 5.2 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Iraq, including 2,1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Iraq also hosts 230.000 Syrian refugees. An estimated 3, 6 million people cannot be reached as in conflict areas they are out of reach of international organizations.

We met with a highly professional and dedicated ECHO team in Erbil.

We came out of this visit with the conviction that the EU needs to integrate political, military and humanitarian dimensions in a cohesive approach in addressing the crisis in Iraq, prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable people. In particular, this includes raising the level of preparedness for possible new waves of IDPs within Iraq and refugee movements from Syria, better civilian-military coordination and communication in order to avoid humanitarian relief efforts being involuntarily trapped in the midst of military operations, better coordination between DEVCO and ECHO to ensure the coherence of emergency relief and development assistance.

We visited a number of IDPs camps with mainly Christian and Yazidi population forced to flee the Daesh-controlled areas. We were shocked by the conditions in the camps, with lack of sanitary facilities and schooling for children. The prolongation of this situation may lead to an emergence of a lost generation, with profoundly destabilising effects on the whole society. Most IDPs told us they saw no future for them in Iraq and that they want to come to Europe. This is opposed by the political and religious leadership of the Christians, in particular, who stress this is a fight for the survival of the pre-Islamic cultures in Iraq also, and, therefore, they press for adequate support for humanitarian and rebuilding needs, when the time comes to resettle people in original towns and villages. And that is also the reason why they do not see as helpful, programmes by EU governments facilitating visas to Christian refugees from Iraq.

We also met with a number of women who were held by Daesh as sex slaves and hostages.

Based on these findings, we would like to make the following suggestions:

1. Since the KRG peshmergas seem to be one of the few reliable boots on the ground against Daesh, we would support the delivery of heavy weapons to them. But a better coordination is needed between the Member States. It is also essential to raise with our partners in the KRG the necessity of accelerating the security sector reform: *peshmergas* should move from being militias associated with the main Kurdish parties to a proper army, with a united chain of command, system of promotions etc.;
2. To address the humanitarian needs, we believe that the funding should be increased to ECHO and better coordination ensured between ECHO and DEVCO, as well as between civilian and military dimensions of the effort to confront Daesh and address the humanitarian needs of the population of the affected areas;
3. The needs of Yazidi women who are/were held as sex slaves by Daesh need to be specifically addressed; we recall the Parliament's resolution of 26 November 2014 on the kidnapping and mistreating of women in Iraq, which calls on the Commission, the European External Action Service and the Member States to establish a mechanism to enable traumatised women from Syria and Iraq to receive special post-traumatic treatment and counselling tailored to their needs, including in the EU Member States; we also believe that more pressure should be applied to those countries, to which some of these women have been moved, such as Saudi Arabia, in order to release them;
4. We welcome your intention to consider opening the EU office in Erbil. We believe that such an office should be opened as soon as possible. This would be a major step towards enabling the EU to gather information on the ground, improve our engagement with local actors, better assess and coordinate humanitarian response and improve the EU visibility in the region;
5. More broadly, in the context of the EU counter-terrorism strategy, and following your remarks on the subject during the Council meeting this week, we would like to emphasise that de-radicalisation and prevention measures are of equal importance to counter the jihadist threat as the law enforcement measures. In this context, we are convinced of the necessity to engage, on the European level, in meaningful dialogue with credible and representative members of Europe's Muslim communities.

We would like to thank you for your visit of Erbil in December 2014 and your continued engagement.

Looking forward to receiving your answer.

Yours sincerely,

MEP Josef Weidenholzer

MEP Ana Gomes