

Update on situation in northeastern Syria, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

Two reports: by Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova and by Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, **Oct 17, 2019**, published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation

1. Excerpt from weekly briefing by Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova, October 17, 2019

In recent days, a major escalation of tension has taken place east of the Euphrates River, an area which is not controlled by Damascus. On October 9-10, the Turkish armed forces launched Operation Peace Spring in the vicinity of the Syria-Turkey border. The Turkish army units entered Syria and launched an assault on border towns and villages. They are carrying out air and artillery attacks on Kurdish targets in northeastern Syria. According to reports, people were killed and wounded on both sides. Also reported are casualties among civilians, many of whom were forced to leave their homes and move deeper into Syria.

In addition, the terrorists took advantage of the surge of tension and activated their sleeper cells. In this regard, the level of guarding ISIS prisoners in prisons located south of the Euphrates River and their families in IDP camps, including the 70,000-strong Al-Hawl, is of great concern. After all, they pose a threat not only to Syria, but other countries of the region and beyond as well.

With this in mind, we urge all parties on the ground to exercise restraint and carefully consider their actions in order to prevent a further escalation of tension. We are convinced that achieving sustainable and long-term stabilisation and security in this region of Syria, that country and the region in general is possible only on the basis of restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity. This means the ultimate transfer of all national territories, including the border with Turkey, under control of the legitimate Syrian Government. In this regard, we can only welcome Damascus and the Kurds reaching the appropriate agreements.

However, we remain convinced that the escalation of tension in northeastern Syria should not stop us from continuing and even upscaling efforts to advance the political process in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. We are making energetic efforts in cooperation with the Syrian stakeholders, our Astana format partners and in coordination with the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Syria Geir Pedersen to prepare for convening the Constitutional Committee in Geneva in late October. Please note that Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov spoke in detail on this account today. We consider the launch of the Constitutional Committee and its productive work an extremely important step forward which will allow us to start a direct dialogue between the Syrians, in particular, to discuss in detail the future of their country, as was decided by the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. We believe that everything is ready for the first meeting of the committee, and all candidates have been invited and are preparing to come to Geneva.

I would like to point out the assessments of the situation which were made by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov yesterday during a news conference in Sochi. The transcript is posted on the Foreign Ministry's official website.

2. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to questions by Russia's Interfax news agency, Oct 17, 2019 (excerpt)

... Question: Can you comment on the statement by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that Russia has allegedly promised to secure the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the Turkish borders?

Sergey Lavrov: I have not seen such a statement. He said that he appreciates our position that recognises the existence of the Turkish Republic's legitimate concerns and that implies a settlement under the agreements between the parties concerned. This is true. We are prepared for and will try to make the Adana Agreement of 1998 work. To this end we will help establish contact between the parties to that agreement, which so far have yet to be established. We will stand for the Kurdish problem to be resolved within the framework of Syrian territorial integrity and sovereignty through a dialogue between the Kurdish leaders and the legitimate authorities in Damascus.

I will emphasise this again, these steps can only be taken if they are based on the understanding, in principle, that it results in the complete reinstatement of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, within the framework of which both the Kurds and other ethnic and confessional groups will live in the Syrian Arab Republic. This will be settled so that Turkey can realise the security of its borders. This is a complicated process, given the accumulated contradictions in this part of the Middle East, but it is realistic. We will assist in every way we can to make it become a success.

Question: Did we promise Turkey, as Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has said, that we would provide support for the withdrawal of Kurdish forces?

Sergey Lavrov: We will assist by promoting a dialogue that will result in the establishment of a reality on the ground that provides for Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as Turkish security interests.

Question: There is currently the problem of ISIS militants escaping camps in the country's northeast due to Turkey's operation. Given that there are both our military police and Syrian forces in the area, are we ready, together with the Syrians, to 'seal' these camps and prevent the militants from scattering?

Sergey Lavrov: There are no Russian military police or Syrian forces on those territories. This problem exists. It was acknowledged yesterday by the UN Security Council, which expressed serious concern that ISIS members could spread throughout Syria and the neighbouring countries. Nobody knows how far they can go. Such things happen; ISIS militants spring up in Afghanistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and other countries of Southeast Asia. This is a serious problem. We hear statements that these camps are being guarded properly, but there are no

guarantees that the ISIS militants would not escape. There is information, through unconfirmed, that some of them have already escaped, and we do not know where these people are headed.

I would like to again point out that currently our Western, first of all, European colleagues proclaim loudly that it is vitally important to prevent ISIS members in these camps from dispersing all around the region, from escaping to other countries, thus threatening Europe. Such statements are made mostly by representatives of the countries that, in the entire period that these camps have existed, flatly refused to bring their own citizens to their countries to render justice. These people were granted European citizenship at some point, but somehow Europeans do not want to see them in Europe now. I have already spoken about it. I am confident that those who gave shelter to people who later became terrorists should bear responsibility for them...