

Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security / Vice President of the European Commission: Statement at the European Parliament debate on the Middle East Peace Process, Strasbourg, 15.12.2009:

The Council adopted very substantive conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process last week. These set out our principled position on a number of crucial issues in a clear and determined manner. I will not dwell on the conclusions or repeat what the Presidency has said. Suffice to say that in reaffirming our principles I hope we may have helped restore some Palestinian confidence and willingness to enter into the peace process. The conclusions will also be of great help in providing me with a clear steer for months to come.

You have invited me here today to talk about our political work but also about the situation in East Jerusalem. This is an area of deep concern for us. East Jerusalem is occupied territory, together with the rest of the West Bank. The EU is opposed to the demolition of Palestinian homes, the eviction of Palestinian families, the construction of Israeli settlements and the route of the "separation barrier". The EU is addressing these issues at political level, through diplomatic channels and in our public statements. We are also addressing the situation through practical assistance aimed at supporting the Palestinian population in East Jerusalem. For example, there is a lack of 1200 classrooms for the Palestinian children in the city, so we are helping to reinforce education facilities. In addition we enable Palestinian hospitals in East Jerusalem to remain viable and we do a lot of work with Palestinian young people in the city, who suffer from high rates of unemployment and psychological problems. To date in East Jerusalem the EU is implementing activities costing EUR 4.6 million.

Another aspect of concern for us is of course the situation in Gaza. The EU has consistently called for the flow of aid, trade and persons. We are deeply concerned about the daily living conditions of the Gazan people: since the January conflict donors have not been able to do reconstruction work and serious issues persist like the lack of clean drinking water. Israel

should re-open the crossings without delay, which would allow a revival of private sector and a reduction of Gaza's aid dependency.

It is now time to move to action and put the Council conclusions into practice. We now need to think about how we can re-engage a political process. The two sides appear to have strayed further apart in terms of engaging on an end game. I will be travelling to the region shortly. My main objective will be to meet the main actors and see first hand how the EU can be a force for change. I think we all share the overall and overriding priority of a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Not negotiations for negotiations sake but negotiations to achieve a peace deal and turn the page. We cannot, and nor, I doubt can the region tolerate another round of fruitless negotiations. Negotiations have taken place on and off for several years starting with the Oslo Declaration of Principles signed in September 1993. That was sixteen years ago. Negotiations should be based on international law and respect previous agreements. All issues should be on the table including the status of Jerusalem as the future shared capital.

They should also take place within an agreed time-frame with effective mediation. We need to see a serious commitment and the political will from both Israel and Palestine to engage in serious and genuine negotiations. The EU is there to help both parties take that engagement and offer them support in the difficult road of negotiations. I am here to make sure Europe works effectively and harmoniously.

The EU has consistently supported both Israel and the Palestinians by giving them the time and space to negotiate bilaterally. EU assistance has enabled the Palestinian Authority to build the institutions of the future State of Palestine, so that it can deliver services to its people and be a reliable neighbour in this region. Today, however, the Palestinians are divided both politically and physically. Credible negotiations require a strong and united Palestinian partner. Israel stands to gain, not lose from a strong Palestinian partner.

Israel has taken a first step with its temporary and partial settlement freeze. We hope this will contribute towards a resumption of meaningful negotiations.

The US remains an indispensable and crucial actor in the Middle East. Conditions for an effective EU-US partnership on the Middle East have rarely been as good. It is time to turn this into a reality by closely coordinating our positions and strategy. The EU will continue to support and work closely with the US via the Quartet. The Quartet needs reinvigoration. The current stalemate in the peace process demands it. The Quartet can provide the careful yet dynamic mediation that is required.

Peace in the Middle East requires a comprehensive solution. Both Syria and Lebanon have an important role to play. We also look forward to the implementation of the Arab Peace Initiative. They should be part of the solution. Our approach should be regional and inclusive. A multilateral framework could complement the Israeli-Palestinian bilateral framework.

In the coming months I intend to remain in close contact with the Parliament on all these issues. I am aware that the Parliament plays an active role in this area, not least in its capacity as the Budgetary Authority. At political level, the EP Delegations work directly with the Israeli Knesset and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Last week the Delegation to the PLC visited the occupied Palestinian territories and reported with concern about the situation on the ground.

Finally, I welcome the continuation of the Parliament's working group on the peace process which will meet again this week.
