

Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council

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Check against delivery!

First of all, as you have noticed, we started our day welcoming, after 22 years, the Prime Minister of Israel [Benjamin Netanyahu] in a moment of particular tension in Jerusalem and in the region - very timely following the recent developments and the US announcement on Jerusalem. Our exchange focused mainly on the situation in Jerusalem and the Middle East Peace Process, even if we touched upon the other two points we decided to discuss with Prime Minister Netanyahu, the bilateral relations between the European Union and Israel and regional developments. But obviously, the situation in Jerusalem and the perspectives of the Middle East Peace Process have been the main points of our exchange. After the US announcement we see the need for an even stronger engagement for peace, with the parties and international and regional partners.

During the exchange we had with the Prime Minister, for almost two hours, myself and the 28 Foreign Ministers underlined that a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians remains a top priority for the European Union, and we have a consolidated and very much united position. I have to say that Prime Minister Netanyahu realised, I think, from the Ministers themselves that there is full EU unity on this: that the only realistic solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine is based on two States, with Jerusalem as the capital of both the State of Israel and the State of Palestine. The European Union and its Member States will continue to respect the international consensus on Jerusalem until the final status of the Holy City is resolved through direct negotiations between the parties. This was a clear and united message that all the 28 Foreign Ministers conveyed to the Prime Minister.

We also stressed strongly the importance of the Holy Sites of Jerusalem for the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and our strong support by all the 28 Member States and the European Union institutions to Jordan and the key role that his Majesty the King [Abdullah II] of Jordan is playing as a custodian of the Holy Places - as I could also reiterate to the Jordanian Foreign Minister [Ayman Al Safadi] last Friday. So, the message was clear. But we also gave a clear message of willingness from the European Union side to help in all possible manners to find or re-find the key to start the engine of the peace process. This is, first of all, in the security interest of Israel and this is why we will continue to work with both sides, Israelis and Palestinians.

We will receive [Palestinian] President [Mahmoud] Abbas at the next Foreign Affairs Council in January for similar talks. We will also continue our work together with our international partners, starting from the United States within the Quartet [on the Middle

East], with Russia and the United Nations, and with important partners we have in the region - starting from Jordan and Egypt. We have seen an important meeting of the Ministers of the League of Arab States on Saturday that reiterated the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for their engagement. We very much share that view and we will work together with the group they have established to explore all possible ways to restart the process and accompany it.

To sum up, because I have heard that some are talking about a European Union initiative or proposals: we are not looking at multiplying initiatives. We are looking at playing our role at full, as usual, as determined, quiet, rational, cooperative convening power, as always, reliable and predictable. We will try to help finding solutions, avoiding any dangerous vacuum that could only strengthen radical positions or extremist positions which is something we do not want to see, neither in the region nor elsewhere.

We then met with the Ministers only for our proper Foreign Affairs Council. It was quite a natural continuation of the conversation because the main point on our agenda was the wider Middle East. We recognise the connections that are there in the many different crises areas in the region. We had a sort of tour d'horizon with the Ministers of all the different hotspots of the region, checking where we are as European Union and what we can do further. I have to say also that in these other files, we have registered a remarkable level of unity and determination by the Member States.

First of all, I will mention Yemen where we have played so far a major humanitarian role and we have worked on initiatives on the political and diplomatic sides. We have expressed the willingness together with the EU Member States to play more of a political role to try and facilitate a political solution of a crisis that we see is spiralling into something awful. We need to avoid that this becomes the spark of a broader confrontation in the region.

On Lebanon, our objective is to ensure that the country keeps focusing on its internal priorities. After the return of Prime Minister [Saad] Hariri to Beirut, that we welcome very much, we see a renewed willingness to the full respect of the dissociation policy of the country, that we support very much. I will visit myself Beirut next week on the 19 December to show the European Union support to the Prime Minister [Saad Hariri], the government, the institutions of a country that needs to be accompanied and supported and the European Union is there for that, together with all our international partners.

On Syria, we are preparing the second Brussels Conference in spring that will give us the opportunity to put on the table some positive leverages that the UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura can use to incentivise a political agreement in Geneva. I have had the opportunity to say it several times in the last couple of weeks, we believe that on the Syria crisis all roads need to lead to Geneva. I am from Rome; I took the freedom of distorting a bit the usual saying for a good purpose, because we believe that the only credible framework for a political solution and a political negotiation can be guaranteed by the United Nations and we hope to see steps forward and a solution there.

The conflict is still ongoing even if some wish to pretend it is over. We know very well that on the ground the fighting is still going on, civilians are still attacked and we see that with our humanitarian support every single day inside Syria. The assumption that the war is over and things can go back to normal, unfortunately, has no real ground. We wish it could become the reality in the coming months and we are ready to support any positive developments, both on the de-escalation zones implementation and on the political negotiations with concrete action, with concrete support, including economic support. But what is clear is that the European money will come for reconstruction only once a political agreement is reached in Geneva under UN auspices and with the right guarantees of credibility.

I would say only a last word on Iraq, because we are preparing the new European Union Strategy to support the country in this critical moment. We are seeing good developments on the defeat of Da'esh on the ground; we believe that this is not the time to forget about Iraq. On the contrary - this is the time to increase our work with the country. We will work to preserve Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, help with including minorities and keeping diversity of the society through better inclusiveness and governance. We are working on strengthening institutions, including with our new mission that has started last 22 November, to help on the security sector reform. And obviously, as always, we are also working to support the role of civil society, women and young people in the difficult phase the country is facing now. Our work to support Iraq will increase in the coming months, in particular also to make sure that relations between Baghdad and Erbil get on a cooperative tone and the country manages to avoid mistakes that in the past were done - underestimating problems that then developed into something major that we all had to face.

I believe I went around the whole set of issues we discussed with the [Foreign] Ministers and I presented to you somehow the conclusions that we reached as the common ground for the European Union and its Member States' action in the next months on this. Also to mention, we welcome the fact that the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] Summit took place, even if we would expect more steps in the direction of re-finding in that format a way for the countries of the Gulf to cooperate among themselves and with others, including the European Union. We have always valued enormously the bilateral relation between the European Union and the GCC as a forum, and we have supported, and we continue to support very much the work that, in particular, the Emir of Kuwait [Shiekh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah] is carrying on to save and re-launch this format that we believe is essential for cooperation around the Gulf.

Now, the Foreign Affairs Council will continue with other important points. One is the lunch we will have now. We will have the Foreign Ministers of the G5 Sahel countries with us to discuss together our common work on security but also on development, together with the African Union and the United Nations. This is a work that we started several years ago; I started myself the format of Ministerial Meetings between the five Foreign Ministers of the G5 Sahel countries and myself regularly. We meet at least once a year - actually much more often now, as our common challenges increase and our cooperation also increases. We will have a discussion with them on how to support the Joint Force

they have put in place. The European Union has dedicated already 50 million euros to the implementation of that Joint Force and we will have, at the beginning of next year, our Heads of State or Government meeting between the European Union and the G5 Sahel and other international players to support that work.

Then, we will continue with another important point with the Foreign Ministers and the Development Ministers together. We will have a point on the follow-up of the African Union-European Union Summit that we had in Abidjan last month, just a couple of weeks ago. And, in particular, I will update the Ministers on the common work we are preparing with the established Task Force between the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations, in particular with the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] to work together to save migrants stranded along the route, in particular inside Libya. We will have a first meeting of the Task Force on Thursday here in Brussels, with the African Union, UNHCR, IOM and myself to operationalise this common work.

We will continue afterwards with the Development Ministers only, with other points, among which trade and development.

Q&A

Q. First of all, what was the European response - if there was any - to [Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin] Netanyahu's request for help to contain Iran in Syria, particularly on the Israeli border. Secondly, I know your words saying we want to avoid multiple peace initiatives, but I do sense there is some impatience in Europe with how long Washington is taking to advance what it wants to do , what it is thinking. How long are you willing to wait for the vacuum - as you call it - to be filled?

On this point, I can say very clearly that there is no initiative, no peace initiative, no attempt to restart peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians that can happen without an engagement from the United States. But there can be no illusion from the United States' side that the United States' initiative alone would be successful, because there is the need of an international and regional framework to accompany the beginning, hopefully, of re-negotiations, which seem very far away at the moment.

Also because, in order to restart negotiations, you have to define the horizon and the framework. And that for the moment - even if I talk very frequently with our American friends, I spoke with [Senior Advisor to the US President, Jared] Kushner just the other day - both the horizon and the framework appear still to be determined - let us put it this way. On top of that, it is a European concern that we shared with our American friends - with [Rex] Tillerson [Secretary of State of the United States] last week - but also with Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu today: we do not want to see a discredited US administration when it comes to negotiations in the Middle East. We want to continue to work within the Quartet [on the Middle-East] with the United States, with Russia, and the United Nations, and we possibly want to enlarge this format to Jordan, Egypt - to name two.

But also there are other friends in the international community that can help us defining the horizon and the framework. I was mentioning in the last days the Norwegians as those who have worked so much and so well in the past to determine a framework and horizon for a different era. Now, we need to have a collective thinking and most of all, we need to unite forces, forces of reason, and be determined to find the solution. Because the real danger that we shared with Prime Minister [of Israel, Benjamin] Netanyahu – all of us, and again I can tell you that the unity we have shown today, the Ministers have shown today, has been remarkable – is that this move could open more space for radical forces on all sides and in the region. And this is a development we do not want to see.

So, we are not working on a specific European Union initiative. We are not simply sitting in a waiting-for-Godot attitude but we are working actively, with our partners, including the United States, including the actors in the region, on a clear horizon which is the two states and with a clear framework of direct negotiations and an international and regional framework to accompany that.

On Syria, yes, we discussed briefly about that, because – as I told you – the news of the week brought us to discuss mainly Jerusalem and the Middle East Peace Process and that is only fair. We discussed briefly also the situation in Syria and the approach we have as Europeans of guaranteeing that – as I said – the solution for Syria is a negotiated one, a political one, that gives space to Syrians with a Syrian-own process that recognizes all identities of the different Syrian society, and that does not put Syria neither under one or another or split the country into different areas of influence. This has always been the European position and this continues to be the European position.

Q. About Mr. Netanyahu saying that the peace is always built on reality, while you are saying that the only real solution is two states. Until which limit are you going to support the two-state solution's horizon? Second, about Lebanon, you said in Rome that Lebanon has nine souls – you are visiting Lebanon. What is your advice for the Lebanese and what do they need to do to reserve some souls for darker times, maybe? Which new means can the EU bring on the table?

The European Union is supporting Lebanon in many different ways, from the humanitarian aid to the development cooperation, to the economic support, to the security point of view - and I am sure that we can share all the details about the ongoing support and the upcoming support. I have always been impressed by and admired – if I can say so – the way in which the Lebanese people live with resilience their complicated life, country and region. I believe the main message I would bring next week in Beirut is “you are finally up, even if you are probably not yet up and running, but you are finally up and walking. And Lebanese people are asking their institutions to focus on the needs of the Lebanese citizens, and we are there to support you in doing this.”

I have been visiting Lebanon regularly in the last three, four years and we have always shared the struggling and the suffering due to a lack of institutional full-speed work - to use an euphemism. Be it Cabinet meetings that were not happening, be it the President who was not managed to be elected, be it a Parliament that was blocked: now, finally, the

country has institutions that function, has a President, has a Prime Minister, has a Cabinet that meets regularly, has a Parliament that produces legislative acts, has introduced a new electoral law, has approved the budget. It is working.

“Focus on what you need to do for your country; try to keep distance from regional conflicts, and we will be at your side both, on the security, on the economic, on the internal challenges you are facing to make sure that Lebanon manages not only to survive but also to live well – as, I know, Lebanese people love to do and manage to do actually pretty well.”

On your other question on the two-state solution, reality is also about perception. I have not heard, by anyone and from anyone, not only in the last weeks but also in the last decades, any other idea than the two-states to preserve the Israeli security and the Palestinians need to have their own country and their own authority. We always say, the two-state solution is the only realistic one. It is not out of idealism or the fact that we like the ideas of the past. It is that one state – we know very well – would not guarantee, for demographic trends, Israel identity to continue to exist or would not allow the rights of the Palestinians to exist as full citizens. You want three states, four, five, ten? Two states are the only viable and realistic option and, so far, I have not heard any other idea that is more realistic than this one, from anyone. The point is one State of Israel recognised with Jerusalem in the 1967 lines as its capital, one State of Palestine with Jerusalem in the 1967 lines recognised as its capital. It is the only way to go. If others have other ideas, I have not heard them. This is where the European Union stands and its Member States stand.

I would like to add one thing. I did not say it proactively so far but I would do it now, especially after the round of talks we had with the Ministers and with the Prime Minister [of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu]. I know that Prime Minister [of Israel, Benjamin] Netanyahu mentioned a couple of times that he expects others to follow President [of the United States, Donald] Trump's decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem. He can keep his expectations for others because from the European Union Member States' side this move will not come.

Link to the opening remarks: <https://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I148213>

Link to the Q&A: <http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I148214>.