

Remarks by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following her meetings on the latest tensions in the Middle East

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I am happy to debrief you on my meetings today here in Berlin, indeed a diplomatic capital of the day. I have started with a meeting with Minister Steinmeier, where we coordinated messages. First of all we spoke about our recent visits. He has been in crucial visit to the Middle East and it was agreed among us that he would have debriefed me coming back, namely from his talks in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, mainly on the Syrian crisis. I told him about my recent Africa trips, focused on the migration and refugee crises, which was relevant to share; I was in Addis Ababa, meeting the African Union just at the beginning of the week. So first of all we exchanged notes and coordinated messages in view of the meetings today on the Middle East Peace Process and on Syria. We had a press conference earlier today so I will not repeat what we already said.

My next meeting was with Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. The last time we met was in New York, just a few weeks ago, and since then we have had several telephone conversations as the situation was escalating on the ground, in Jerusalem and elsewhere. I passed him a message of the need to explore together ways to stop violence, to calm down the situation, to show leadership and restraint, also on the rhetoric, and make sure that there are not additional people losing their lives. Too many people have lost their lives already in this new wave of violence on both sides, both Israelis and Palestinians. I have stressed the need to do that, not only for the sake of the people in the region, on the ground, but also given the regional and global responsibility that the two leaderships have as the conflict concentrates on the holy sites. This risks inflaming the situation regionally and even potentially globally - whenever a conflict overlaps with the regional dimension, with an identity dimension, that turns very easily into something very dangerous for the international community as such. This means that showing leadership and acting with a certain degree of restraint is not only a responsibility the two leaderships have to their own people, but also to the regional and the international communities.

We discussed concrete ways to deescalate the situation on the ground and to guarantee the status quo in the holy sites. I had from him the clear commitment reaffirming that he wants to guarantee the status quo in the holy sites and this is something I am going to discuss in detail with the Jordanian Foreign Minister tomorrow in Vienna. As you know Jordan has a key role to play in guaranteeing the status quo of the holy sites. We also discussed concrete steps to implement on the ground - consistent with prior agreements - that could move the situation on the ground, especially in Gaza and West Bank, in Jerusalem, both on the economic and on the security level. These are things we have discussed already in New York the last Quartet meeting we had, in the margins of General Assembly. These are things we have discussed with PM Netanyahu and with President Abbas, I discussed personally with them, in New York, it's only two weeks ago, but it seems decades ago in terms of situation on the ground. We remain convinced - and this is the message I passed to him - that while we find ways or we look for ways to deescalate violence on the ground we have to start implementing measures on the ground, consistent with prior agreements, to have improvements for the population, both the Israeli and the Palestinian.

This could be part of a political process that needs to be re-started. At the same time as we look for concrete ways to de-escalate, we have to give perspectives on the political process. It is not phase one and phase two, the two have to go together even more now than before. Without a political horizon, the situation is not going to calm down. This is something we will further discuss tomorrow in Vienna, where we will have a Quartet Principals' meeting, as a follow-up to the New York one. So, with me, Secretary Kerry, Minister Lavrov and the Secretary General of the United Nations will join us most likely through video conference, or his Special Envoy will represent him.

Let me add that I will have a similar meeting with President Abbas on Monday evening in Brussels and obviously I will raise with him the same kind of issues. And I believe the meeting of the Quartet tomorrow will be a very important moment for us to indicate the unity of the international community to work together with the parties to find concrete ways to de-escalate and contain the situation and at the same time re-launch the process.

Finally, last but not least, I had a meeting with John Kerry, US Secretary of State, to somehow compare notes of our respective meetings. On one side, on the Middle East Peace Process, preparing also the Quartet of tomorrow, and coordinating actions we can have on the ground. And also on Syria, in preparation of the meeting he will have tomorrow in Vienna with Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. I exchanged with him the main results, or findings or thoughts after the work I have done in the last weeks on the Syrian crisis, mainly with our counterparts in Iran, also in Turkey and in the Gulf. I will have tomorrow a meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov also discussing this, both Middle East and Syria.

But with John Kerry we also discussed the situation in Libya. That is something that concerns us Europeans very much and also our American friends. I called today the Prime Minister Designate for an exchange of views on the situation in this moment. Strong push for the HOR and the GNC to endorse the agreement, and I guaranteed to the Prime Minister Designate the European Union's support in his difficult work. He will have the Europeans at his side, in all the ways in which the future Libyan Government will decide it is needed. So, in full partnership, in full coordination, but they have to know from now that we are ready to help, to support, to accompany on an agenda that they will have to define. Obviously, the situation is not there yet, we don't have the agreement yet, but the Prime Minister Designate has already a responsibility to reach out to the Libyans, to the parties, to start planning and building the possible future of the country while talks go on. We are fully engaged through our people on the ground in Tunis, working side by side with Bernardino León and with the others of the international community to push for an agreement to be finalised and the Government of National Accord to start work. So, I had a very good first exchange with the Prime Minister Designate on the way forward, and I am looking forward to be able to meet him as soon as possible.

Questions and Answers

Q: Do you think that the Iran contact group is the right format to discuss and solve the crisis in Syria as well? The second one is on Assad, after he has been invited to Moscow and returned do you think it is now the time, the right step to offer him asylum?

The format for Syria. First of all, let me say that the format we used for Iran talks was a very useful one and was a format that allowed us to gather the whole international community, united, and created also a certain sense of confidence and trust among the negotiators, which is not something easy to do, but it was a relevant part of the process. And the role of the European Union in dealing with the Syrian crisis somehow has to do with the role that we have played, and I have personally played, in the last months with Iran, in the sense that we have a channel that is open with Iran that is unique. We have opened the channel of dialogue, not yet of friendship probably, but of understanding - of mutual understanding - and a certain degree of trust in the negotiations that we have put at the disposal of the international community. This is quite unique, I say, because again having led negotiations for so long, in the European Union there is a sense of confidence that we have already used. In these last weeks while I was receiving in Brussels an Iranian delegation, a High Level Delegation, that spent one whole day in Brussels discussing with us possible ways out of the Syrian crisis.

Obviously, Iran is one of the actors relevant to solve the crisis in Syria. It's not the only one, but it's a relevant one: for the contacts it has with the regime, for the presence it has

and for the regional dimension of the crisis. So for sure, the role that the European Union is playing in trying to solve the crisis in Syria passes also through our role in the dialogue with Iran.

On the format itself, this is in the hands of the United Nations, as you know, negotiations are formally led by the UN Special Envoy Staffan De Mistura. It will be in their hands to define a format when the time will come, to have a format in place. My impression is that at the moment it is not really the time for focussing on the format, but rather on the content of a possible framework for negotiations. And very much on having a political process starting, while at this moment we see mainly the military side of the activities going on. Our efforts as the European Union in these weeks are focused on the push and the need to have a political process, a political transition starting as soon as possible.

On the possibility for Assad to have a life somewhere else in the world, this is not for me neither to comment nor to foresee options. What we are working at is a political transition, this is very much based on the Geneva communiqué that was foreseeing a Syrian-led transition, an inclusive one. Because I think we have learnt from the Iraqi lessons that we need to guarantee that political processes and transitions need to guarantee not only the safety, but also the inclusiveness of all components of societies in the process. And this is what we are working at, so a transition where for sure Assad is and will be part of the starting point. This is the reality we are facing in these days. And this is also the reality that the Geneva communiqué that everybody is accepting as a starting point foresees. But obviously, the name itself, a political transition, foresees a move from one kind of governance to a different one. And this is what we are working at.

Q: I have two questions: The first is that Steinmeier was very specific about Syria and the role of Russia and said that the role of Russia and Syria has worsened the situation of the refugees. I wonder if you share this opinion. And, the second question is on Israel. You spoke this morning and now about the awareness that we need have to have from the leaders in Israel that this is a very inflammable region. Do you have this impression, speaking with Netanyahu as he came here yesterday to Berlin and after he said those things about the Holocaust and the responsibility of Palestine?

I have the impression that Prime Minister Netanyahu has the awareness of how inflammable the situation is; of how inflammable the situation is not only in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in Gaza, all around in the region - as I said this morning in the press conference with Minister Steinmeier, also worldwide, but also inside Israel. So, yes, I have found him very much aware of this, very much worried about this and open to find ways of trying to de-escalate the situation, calm down the situation, contain the situation and

start having positive steps. And let me recognize that in some aspects, he is showing leadership, also respect, to his internal political situation, in for instance resisting in these times to the request that he is having from parts of the political system in Israel to announce new settlements in response to the circle of violence. I think that he is aware of the fact that there is the need to show leadership and restraint and calm down the situation.

On the Russian role, I agree with Minister Steinmeier on the fact that the military, let's say, the step up of the military activities on the ground might have and might lead to a worsened situation for the people inside Syria and more waves of refugees coming out of Syria. On the other side, we also agree with Minister Steinmeier on the fact that the military part of the fight against Da'esh is something essential, given that it is coordinated and really targeted against Da'esh and actually a precondition somehow for having a stabilized and peaceful Syria. We have Syrian refugees coming out of Syria for two main reasons: we can argue for a long time which one is the first one but everybody agrees on the fact that there are two components of the crisis. Obviously, the attacks of the Syrian regime itself against their own people, but also the activities of Da'esh against the population, the Syrian population. So, the military component is for sure one part of it, if it is one part and the only part of it and not coordinated with the rest of the international community. Obviously this is a dangerous situation. But let me say that we also shared with Minister Steinmeier today the fact that if Russia engages the regime - as well as the Iranians can do - pushing them to start or be part of the political process, be ready to participate in the beginning of a political process or political transition, this is going to be positive.

Q: Thank you. You have already answered my question. You share what Kerry said that he showed optimism about the solution after his dialogue with Netanyahu?

I am very well known for being always an optimist in my approach. In this case optimism is maybe a little bit too much. But I found, as I said, a high level of awareness of how serious and dangerous the situation is. First of all, for Israel and the Israeli citizens. And so, a will to engage in the efforts to find a solution and contribute to getting things solved. And again, starting from the most critical issue today, which is the situation of the holy sites. That is why I believe it is going to be key and crucial for us to have talks with the Jordanians in these coming hours and days at different levels. I think it is extremely good that today we had the chance to coordinate messages because we were also joking with the Prime Minister Netanyahu today that we are the same people meeting the same people. What we have done today is a very good exercise of coordinating messages and also a sort of labour division of who is going to do what with whom. So in the end of the day, we have a complete picture that puts the international community in the position to push in the

same direction. Optimism is too much, but I don't go away from Berlin with a sense of negative meetings at all. On the contrary, with some hope that we can work on something positive. I will see if this hope is realistic also in the talks I will have tomorrow in Vienna and then on Monday with Abbas.

Q: I want to ask something about Sunday. There were some criticisms that not all EU countries have been invited for this Balkan refugee, not summit, but meeting on refugees. Do you have a problem with that? Do you see that there is a danger of splitting the EU in tackling the refugee crisis?

Here I put my hat of Vice-President of the Commission, as you know it's President Juncker's initiative to call to Brussels some of the leaders, not only of the European Union, but also non-European Union leaders with a very precise and limited point on the agenda which is the management of the flows through the Western Balkans. It is quite evident that we have – let's say – some difficulties in managing especially the borders and I know this is the focus of the meeting to have the relevant players concerned by the management of the borders and the flows across the Western Balkans and the Western Balkan route sitting around the same table, with the European agencies responsible for that, EASO and Frontex, and with the UNHCR when it comes to the protection of the refugees and the standards for the protection for refugees.

I think it is in President Juncker's intention to have the players involved - those whose borders are concerned. This is my reading of the format, which is not creating precedents, which is not a Summit, as you said. And in fact, it is called by the President of the Commission, not of the Council, because this is work on which the Commission has engaged, and has institutional responsibilities. It has very much to do with Schengen/non-Schengen functioning and I think it is only pragmatic to have the countries involved in the border management sitting around the table to look - this is something we are preparing in these hours - at ways to manage the flow across the borders in a proper, coordinated way. We had the European Council just one week ago, and we discussed this point together with the rest of the preparation we are doing for the Malta Summit, for instance on the Southern route and our relationship and partnership with Africa. We are having our discussions with Turkey and other players, all together, because these are issues that are relevant for 28 Member States and for the European institutions as a whole, but when it comes to border management of some particular cases I believe that is the reading you should get. It is not about discussing with some subjects that relate to all, it's getting the relevant players that have some difficulties around the table with the relevant agencies of the European Union, finding ways to solve the problems where they occur, that's it.

And the Balkans, we know very well it's concrete and practical, but it is also another easily inflammable place. So there is a specific European Commission responsibility, also

looking at the enlargement negotiations and the use of our instruments in the region, to make sure that the situation doesn't get out of control and manages to be managed in a cooperative spirit - the EU and non-EU states, because you know some non-EU states will be sitting around the table as well.

Q: Has there been a lack of leadership during the last weeks (regarding Netanyahu and Abbas)?

I think that both PM Netanyahu and President Abbas - and they don't like me referring to both in this way, because the situation in the societies is very different - have one thing in common, which is that they both have extremely difficult or challenging, complex situations, domestic and political situations, and violence doesn't make easy. The starting point, even without violence, is internally domestically complex, for completely different reasons. But the starting point is this - political domestic environment for both is challenging for different reasons. And I believe that especially in the Middle East, where the final solution, the final setting of the crisis has been discussed for decades, it's not so much about that, but it's more political leadership and conditions on the ground to exercise that leadership, political space in their respective public opinions to bring the agenda, once we would have set the peace agenda, forward. I believe that the international community and our European role in particular, is to help and to support the two leaderships in re-creating or creating the internal conditions in their own public opinions to exercise leadership and bring the societies to a point where they invest in a process again. These conditions are not there today. So, I think they have a very difficult job in showing leadership and exercising leadership. With some significant gaps, particularly sometimes on the rhetoric, but they are both trying, I think, to show restraint and calm. But I would not go for the blame and shame, I would rather go for the encouragement, because I believe we all understand very well that their conditions, especially with violence rising, are extremely difficult. The role of Europe for sure is to help and support a process that can make public opinions, both on the Palestinian side and on the Israeli side wanting to re-engage in a process.

Thanks

Watch the video:

<http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=I110919>.