Israel: remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the joint press conference with Minister for Foreign Affairs Gideon Sa’ar

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Thank you. Foreign Minister Sa’ar, dear Gideon, it is important to be in Israel today – although I wish it would have been under different circumstances.

Let me start by condemning yesterday's attacks on a Rabbi in France. There is no place for anti-semitism in Europe.

We met exactly one month ago, after the EU-Israeli association Council in Brussels, and it is clear that we are very good partners. Israel is a very relevant trade and investment partner for the European Union, and also a major player in the growing tech sector.

Unfortunately, my visit comes at a difficult time. The breakdown of ceasefire has caused an appalling loss of life. This morning, I also met the families of the hostages, and listening to the stories is always very hard. I again condemn strongly Hamas’ violence. It is never easy to meet the families, who have lost their loved ones or do not know the fate of their loved ones [that have been] for so many weeks in captivity.

The European Union stands in solidarity with Israel and its people, following the horrible attacks on the 7th of October 2023. I reiterate now what I said this morning: resuming negotiations is the only feasible way to end the suffering on all sides.

Violence feeds more violence. What we are witnessing now is a dangerous escalation. It is causing unbearable uncertainty for the hostages and their families, and it is likewise causing horror and death for the Palestinian people.

Mr. Sa’ar, as I underlined when we met a month ago, the security of Israel is extremely important to the European Union. Israelis must be able to feel safe in their own homes. Israel has the right of self-defence against terror attacks, whether from Hamas, the Houthis or Hezbollah.

However, military actions must be proportionate. Israeli strikes into Syria and Lebanon risk further escalation. The fundamental steps here are restating the ceasefire; ensuring the

release of all hostages and resume the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza – with the goal of a permanent ceasefire.

The European Union can help, whether through restating our Rafah border crossing mission or providing more humanitarian assistance. We had a very frank discussion, and I thank you for this. It is hard to look forward when bombs fall, but we need to keep the hope alive. The European Union welcomes the Arab plan for reconstruction of Gaza. I discussed yesterday in Cairo with the Foreign Minister Abdelatty and the Arab Islamic Ministerial Committee. More work needs to be done on issues, such as cost sharing and the future of governance of Gaza, but we see it as a good basis moving forward. I also raised the European Union's concerns regarding the situation in the West Bank.

And finally on Iran, we agree the immense threat Iran poses to the region and global stability. Iran is a threat also supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. Iran must never be allowed to acquire or build a nuclear weapon, and the EU supports all diplomatic efforts to that effect.

Foreign Minister Sa'ar, dear Gideon, thank you again for hosting me today.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-269743

Q&A.

Q. Given everything else that is going on in Europe, in Ukraine and so on, do you see Europe having the capacity, and frankly the political interest, in taking a leading role in helping to shape the future of Gaza after the war?

Our neighbors' problems today are our problems tomorrow. Therefore, what is happening in Gaza and what is happening in Israel is very important to us. And of course, we see no role for Hamas in the future governance of Gaza. We definitely need to discuss how the governance of Gaza is foreseen, how the future is – and the European Union is ready to participate in those discussions so that, we would prevent these problems happening in the future. It is clear that the European Union is supporting the fight [against] terrorism, the security of Israel is very important to the European Union, but also the rights of Palestinians need to be respected.

Q. When you speak about what should happen in Gaza you do not talk about Israeli victory or Hamas' defeat, you say "negotiations should start, violence causes more violence". Would those same principles apply to the war between Russia and Ukraine in Europe?

Yes, the same principles apply. Russia has attacked brutally Ukraine and went [against] their, territorial integrity, [the] sovereignty of another state. If they stop killing people in Ukraine, the war will stop – because the war is not on Russian soil.

Q. Israel, and specifically Minister Sa'ar, have a very strong negative stance regarding the interim government in Syria and Mr. Al-Sharaa. They warn the West and the EU not to be

charmed by the jihadist in suits – and are interested in Russian bases staying in Syria. What do you think of this stance and what is your position regarding Israel's occupation of the buffer zone and the call to demilitarize Syria’s south of Damascus?

Okay. I have a longer answer. On your question on the interim government in Syria: Of course, our worries is are the same. They say the right things; but will they do the right things? We have discussed this in the European Union, amongst all the member States. Our view is that we need a stable Syria. The Syrian people have suffered a lot. Syria is a very diverse country with different groups, so these need to be taken into [account by the new] government in Syria. Why are we moving ahead with lifting the sanctions? In order to build Syria, the people need access to services. If the people have access to services, the companies can establish themselves, have jobs, pay salaries, so that the people also have hope. And if they have hope, then there are less clashes and less chaos because they can see that there is a future. That is our approach right now. Yes, we are looking at this step-for-step approach. We want to see, and we have the pressure on them to also do the right things, not only to say the right things. We are also in constant contact with the Syrian civil society, because they are giving us a fair and honest feedback on what is going on. So, I think we have this small opportunity window to get this on the right track and we need to use it because we do not really have other options. Thank you.

Q. Did you discuss what Israel was doing in this regard? Do you have a position in mind?

Yes, of course, we discussed this, Israel’s actions, and we feel that these things are unnecessary, because Syria is right now not attacking Israel. And that feeds more radicalization that is also against Israel, which [is something] we do not want to see because, like I said, the security of Israel is also very important to us.

Link to the video: https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/video/I-269744

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