Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Middle East Peace Process, Syria and Iran

2013-10-08

The Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a Statement on the Middle East Peace Process, Syria and Iran. On all of these matters there have been important diplomatic developments over the last few weeks, and I wanted to inform the House of them at the earliest opportunity.

It is impossible to overstate the challenges and the gravity of the threats in the region if current openings and opportunities are not brought to fruition. But on each of these subjects there has been some progress, and it is important that we build on that as rapidly and decisively as possible.

Whatever the pressure of other issues, we must never lose sight of the importance and centrality of the Middle East Peace Process, to the lives of millions of Israelis and Palestinians and to international peace and security. I pay tribute to the leadership of US Secretary of State John Kerry, Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas for the progress that has been made, including the resumption of negotiations in July.

The United States has confirmed that there have been seven rounds of direct bilateral negotiations since then. Both sides have now agreed to intensify the pace of the discussions and increase American participation in them, with the goal of reaching a permanent status agreement within nine months.

During the UN General Assembly Ministerial week in New York, my Right Honourable Friend the Deputy Prime Minister met President Abbas in New York, while I held talks with Israeli Minister of International Relations Yuval Steinitz. We reiterated the United Kingdom’s unequivocal support for a two-state solution based on 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital, and a just and agreed settlement for refugees. With our European Union partners we are ready to provide major practical support to both sides in taking the bold steps that are needed.

This includes our bilateral assistance to the Palestinian economy and the institutions of their future State. The UK is one of the largest donors to the Palestinians, providing £349 million for Palestinian development over four years.

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for International Development attended the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee established to oversee Palestinian state building and development. She recommitted the UK to provide predictable, long term assistance aligned with the priorities of the Palestinian National Authority: building strong institutions, promoting private sector growth and humanitarian aid.

We are also supporting the Palestinian Economic Initiative which the US and Quartet are developing. DFID will shortly be launching a new £15m Palestinian Market Development Programme to help Palestinian SMEs enter new markets and to help mobilise investment. Economic progress can never be a substitute for a political settlement, but it is vital that the Palestinian people see tangible improvements in their daily lives.

Mr Speaker, the situation in Syria remains catastrophic. More than 100,000 people have been killed, and the number of Syrian refugees has grown by more than 1.8 million in just twelve months, to over two million. We must always be clear that we will not have succeeded in our work until this violence has been brought to a stop, but nevertheless we were able to make some diplomatic progress in New York on our objectives, namely to prevent the further use of chemical weapons, to alleviate humanitarian suffering, and to promote a political settlement to the conflict.

On the first of those, I attended the meeting of the United Nations Security Council on 27th September, which adopted the first Resolution on Syria in 17 months. Security Council Resolution 2118 requires the full implementation of the near-simultaneous decision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which sets out how Syria’s chemical weapons must be verifiably eliminated within the first half of 2014.

For the first time, the Security Council Resolution imposes binding and enforceable obligations on the Syrian regime to comply, with the threat of action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter if it does not. It also stipulates that those responsible for any use of chemical weapons must be held accountable. I announced in New York £2 million in funding in order to enable the OPCW to deploy to Syria last week.

They have reported early progress in identifying and destroying chemical weapons. Under their supervision Syrian personnel have commenced the destruction or disabling of missile warheads, aerial bombs and mixing and filling equipment, and are carrying out work to assess the accuracy and completeness of the information provided by the regime.

British nationals who work for the OPCW are already deployed in Syria as part of the new destruction mission, and we stand ready to provide further support as necessary - such as personnel, technical expertise and information. The House should be in no doubt that the voluntary destruction of a deadly arsenal of weapons that until recently the Assad regime

denied it possessed is an important step forward, and a vindication of the threat of military action by the United States of America.

Second, hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians continue to suffer atrociously from the regime's use of conventional weapons. The UK is leading the way in alleviating desperate humanitarian suffering. In the UK's annual address to the

General Assembly the Deputy Prime Minister confirmed an additional £100 million in UK assistance, bringing our total humanitarian contribution to date to £500 million - the largest ever British response to a single crisis.

The Prime Minister's campaign begun at the G20 and followed up by our Embassies worldwide has helped to secure more than $1 billion in new international pledges of humanitarian assistance since the start of September, and we look to other countries to do more to meet the level of suffering and instability caused by such an unprecedented number of people in need.

Throughout the General Assembly and particularly in the two meetings I had with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, I pressed the case for a Security Council Presidential Statement urging the Syrian Government to allow unhindered access to people in need, including across borders, and calling on all parties to agree on humanitarian pauses in the fighting to allow the delivery of aid. This statement was subsequently agreed on 2nd October. With our encouragement, the UN Secretary General has announced his intention to convene a new pledging conference in January 2014.

The House will know that the stability of Jordan and Lebanon is high among our priorities, and in that regard I attended with the P5 Foreign Ministers the creation of a new International Support Group for Lebanon during the General Assembly. The UK is now providing £69 million to help Lebanon cope with the refugee crisis. In addition we are providing £11 million of non-lethal assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces. And we are helping Jordan with £87 million of UK aid for Syrian refugees and host communities.

Third, on the political process, UN Security Council Resolution 2118 also formally endorsed the Geneva Communiqué of June last year for the first time, calling for the establishment of a transitional governing body exercising full executive powers, which could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups, formed on the basis of mutual consent. The Resolution calls for the convening of an international conference on Syria to implement the Geneva Communiqué.

As Foreign Ministers we agreed with the UN Secretary-General that we should aim to convene the Conference in Geneva by mid-November this year. An intensive period of preparation will be required, led by UN and Arab League Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi.

I met Syrian National Coalition President Ahmed Al-Jarba in New York, who assured me the Coalition remains committed to an inclusive and democratic Syria; that they reject extremism; and that they are committed to the Geneva Communiqué. There can be no peaceful and political settlement in Syria without the participation of the moderate opposition, and we are providing more than £20 million in non-lethal support to the moderate opposition and will do more in the coming months.

I discussed the conflict in Syria with the new Foreign Minister of Iran, who I met twice in New York, including with the E3+3 Foreign Ministers. And I also had further discussions with him by telephone yesterday.

It is clear that the new President and Ministers in Iran are presenting themselves and their country in a much more positive way than in the recent past. There is no doubt that the tone of the meetings with them is different.

We have agreed to resume negotiations on their nuclear programme in Geneva next week on 15 and 16 October. We are looking forward to seeing serious proposals from Iran to follow up on their stated desire to make rapid progress with negotiations. It will be very important for Iran's relations with the international community for the marked change of presentation and statements to be accompanied by concrete actions and a viable approach to negotiations.

We must not forget for one moment that as things stand today, Iran remains in defiance of six UN Security Council Resolutions and of multiple Resolutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors, and is installing more centrifuges in its nuclear facilities. In the absence of change to these policies we will continue to maintain strong sanctions. A substantial change in British or Western policies on the Iranian nuclear programme requires a substantive change in that programme.

However we must test the Iranian Government's sincerity to the full, and it is important that our channels of communication are open for that.

Mr Zarif the Foreign Minister and I discussed how to improve the functioning of the UK-Iran bilateral relationship. Our diplomatic relations suffered a severe setback when our Embassy compounds in Tehran were overrun in 2011 and the Vienna Conventions flouted, and when the Iranian Majles voted to downgrade relations with the UK.

It is understood on both sides that given this history, progress in our bilateral relationship needs to proceed on a step-by-step and reciprocal basis. The Foreign Minister and I agreed our officials would meet to discuss this. The first such meeting has taken place already, and will be followed by a further meeting in Geneva next week. This includes discussion of numbers of and conditions for locally-engaged staff in the Embassy premises of each country and visits to inspect these premises.

I have made very clear to Mr Zarif that we are open to more direct contact and further improvements in our bilateral relationship.

We have therefore agreed that both our countries will now appoint a non-resident Chargé d'affaires tasked with implementing the building of relations, including interim steps on the way towards eventual re-opening of both our Embassies, as well as dialogue on other issues of mutual concern.

We must not underestimate the difficulties ahead. Iran has a complex power structure, there are voices in Iran who do not agree with their Government's stated desire to see progress on nuclear negotiations and a rapprochement with the West, and improvements in our bilateral relations will require confidence on both sides that those improvements can be sustained. But to be open to such improvements is consistent with our desire to finding a peaceful resolution to the nuclear dispute and the fact that we have no quarrel with the people of Iran.

The House will be conscious that on all of these issues the coming months may be unusually significant, and replete with dangers but also with opportunities. Her Majesty's Government will spare no effort to promote a peaceful resolution of each of these conflicts and crises, working closely with our allies at all times, and taking full advantage of every diplomatic opening, never starry-eyed but always pursuing progress through resolute diplomacy.

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