Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

EU-Arab League Ministerial meeting

2012-11-13

The Foreign Secretary said:

“I am very grateful to the Government of Egypt for hosting this meeting.

“European and Arab nations are working more closely together in foreign policy than ever before, in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya.

“Now we must extend this partnership in Syria, where hundreds of thousands of lives are at stake.

“We recognise that Syria’s neighbours are bearing a heavy burden, and the United Kingdom stands particularly with the people of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, as well as with the Syrian people in their hour of desperate need.

“I congratulate the Governments of Qatar and Turkey for their success in helping Syrian opposition groups to form a new National Coalition.

“That Coalition gives the opportunity for a united, inclusive and credible political alternative to the Assad regime. We urge them to set out a detailed platform for a political transition to a democratic Syria, and to demonstrate that they are acting on behalf of all Syria’s communities. The more progress the Coalition makes towards those goals, the greater practical support it will have from the United Kingdom.

“We are very grateful for, and support, all the work that Mr Brahimi is doing. He suggests that we try again at the UN Security Council. We are prepared to try again, but our efforts to embody the Geneva consensus and to encourage the UNSC to take on its responsibilities have been vetoed by Russia and China. There is no indication that the outcome now would be different. In the absence of such progress, we will increase our support to Syrian opposition groups.

“As the EU and Arab League, we need to develop plans to increase and coordinate assistance to Syrian civil society and human rights groups, and intensify our planning for Syria after Assad.

“And I also believe all of us together need to urge the world to do far more to address the humanitarian crisis. The winter cold and rain will heap further misery on soaring numbers of

Syrian refugees and displaced people. The UN has warned of “critically low” support for its operations, with just 35% percent of the funding that they have requested. I hope EU and Arab League nations together can set a lead in giving generously and calling on others to do the same, as the United Kingdom has done with over £50 million of assistance so far.

“It is also time to inject new urgency into the Middle East Peace Process. The two state solution could disappear completely as an option very soon, not least due to continued settlement building. We are in danger of sleep walking into a serious crisis.

“We believe that there is a responsibility and an opportunity for the United States to lead a major revived diplomatic effort to restart negotiations over the coming months, and an obligation on all of us to support them in doing so. We believe that this could and should be backed by a more energetic and distinctive European Union role.

“We should not make it harder for the United States to lead a new effort. We understand and recognise the pressure on President Abbas to turn to an UNGA resolution if there is no progress. But an effort to make that progress should be tested first. We advise against symbolic gestures, and urge all parties to keep their eyes on the prize of a negotiated end to the conflict.

“These two challenges - the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the violence in Syria - make 2013 a critical year in the Middle East. But when we add to them the continuing crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme, we see that we need to act to prevent a perfect storm of crises converging next year.

“We are committed to negotiations with Iran. There is still time for a negotiated solution, but the onus remains on Iran to negotiate seriously and to take urgent, concrete steps to build international confidence about its nuclear intentions. Iran’s leaders face a choice: they can choose to meet their international obligations, or to face further pressure from increasing sanctions.

“The background to our discussions remains the dramatic changes brought in by the Arab Spring. In the United Kingdom we remain optimistic about the Arab Spring, and confident in the ability of the people of this great region to forge a more prosperous and stable future in all their countries, in accordance with their traditions, culture and history. There will no doubt be crises and difficulties ahead, but in the UK we will be a reliable ally in supporting steps towards more open societies and economies, as well as tackling the urgent foreign policy crises that we all face.

“Thank you very much.”

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/eu-arab-league-ministerial-meeting