

## **Europe's role in the Middle East: Model or mediator?**

ARI SYRQUIN , THE JERUSALEM POST

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Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, is the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Secretary-General of both the Council of the European Union (EU) and the Western European Union (WEU). He was named Secretary General of the 10 permanent members of the Western European Union in November 1999. Solana is a physicist who later became a politician, serving as a minister in Spain for 13 years under Felipe González before serving as Secretary General of NATO from 1995 to 1999.

Since October 1999, Javier Solana has served as the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In 2004, Solana had been designated to become the EU's Minister for Foreign Affairs for when the European Constitution was to come into force in 2009, but it was not ratified and his position has been renamed under the Treaty of Lisbon.

Here are Solana's e-mail responses to questions sent to him by this columnist:

The EU (in its early version as a common market) came about as an attempt to bring a halt to hostilities among European countries, especially France and Germany. How relevant is this experience for the current Middle East situation, and what role could the EU play in facilitating similar developments?

It is true that the driving force behind European integration from its very beginning was a clear desire of the then European leaders to overcome old differences and assure a peaceful development of Europe for future generations of our continent. This idea of peace is still very much relevant today - but not only for us, Europeans - it represents a condition sine qua non for the development and a successful future of all the peoples of the Middle Eastern region.

As The High Representative of the European Union for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, both in my EU capacity and within the framework of the international Quartet, I strongly and consistently keep advocating a comprehensive and peaceful solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict in general and Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. It is indeed a strategic priority for the European Union. I continue to be convinced that despite all difficulties we can achieve the goals set most recently at the Annapolis meeting and the Paris donors' conference organized at the end of 2007.

How could the EU help Israeli and Arab companies pursue business joint ventures through the auspices of the European Union?

Any effort, any initiative to promote economic cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians and conducive to building trust between them is to be supported. But we cannot forget that peace and security are fundamental for economic development and in order to create the conditions for such initiatives to be viable. I think that it is evident to everybody that economic normalization goes hand-in-hand with desirable normalization of political relations.

The EU will continue relentlessly to help Israelis and Palestinians in finding a lasting solution to

their conflict - through political and diplomatic efforts but also through economic cooperation. Within this context, I recognize the crucial role that Arab states play in support of the Middle East peace process and I stress in this respect the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002.

We also hope very much that the access and movement agreement will be implemented without delay since this will allow Palestinians to rebuild their economy and be an important step on the path of normalization. Overcoming old antagonisms and resolving current disputes is necessary to confront the new challenges we are all facing today.

Do you believe there is interest from Arab business sectors in different countries to strengthen economic ties with Israel?

I strongly believe that not only the business community, but all people in the Middle East are tired of a decades-long Israeli-Arab conflict, and deserve to have normal relations including, of course, ever stronger and mutually profitable economic relations.

Do you as EU High Representative see it as part of your agenda to promote a Free Trade Area or other economic cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors?

It was our own European experience which led us to launching the Barcelona process in 1995 and offering our Mediterranean partners, including Israel, a much needed multilateral approach. The European Neighborhood Policy was designed later to develop the Barcelona process and assists us further in this effort. I can just confirm that Israel plays a very important role in this Partnership, where our main objective is to create a common area of peace, stability and prosperity, including the creation of a Free Trade Area by 2010.

The EU could afford to concentrate on first economic matters and then deeper integration thanks to the defense umbrella provided by the US during the cold war. Could the EU play a similar role today for the Middle East?

In my view, any historical comparison or simplification is very risky. The situation in Europe after the Second World War was very complex and definitely influenced by the antagonism of the two major superpowers. Today we are trying to build a new world, where a multilateral approach to our common problems and challenges would be predominant.

It is absolutely clear that Europe should play a significant role in this process and match its major economic potential with an adequate political role. We can witness that the European Union is taking this responsibility seriously, for instance through our many European Security and Defense Policy missions, of which the first two operate in the Middle East.

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