

**HR Solana interview  
for Okaz (Saudi Arabia)  
17 October 2008**

**1. Mr. Solana, you are starting a trip to several Countries in the Gulf region, what messages are you carrying for this trip?**

The Gulf region is an important partner for the European Union and we have frequent contacts at various levels. I think this is a timely moment to visit the region. The general international situation requires us to consult with our partners, particularly the financial crisis which could see the emergence of new scenarios. The countries of this region have been particularly active in encouraging peace and co-operation in the region. Among these I would note the role played by Saudi Arabia in fostering reconciliation in Palestine, its consistent interest in Lebanon and its leadership in Arab affairs in general. I also have much appreciation for the efforts being made by Saudi Arabia in encouraging dialogue and reconciliation in Afghanistan. This is yet another important challenge which gives great credit to the Kingdom.

The European Union values this role and is keen to offer its support to these efforts. I am very much interested to hear the latest views from leaders in this region on the various issues that are effecting the region, in particular the Middle East Peace Process, events in Lebanon and Syria as well as the Iranian nuclear program.

**2. In Saudi Arabia you will be meeting Prince Saud Al Faisal the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, what will be the issue, and what are you expecting from Saudi Arabia?**

We will be discussing some of the important issues that are relevant for the region in general and to the European Union and Saudi Arabia in particular. We are both very interested in contributing to peace in the region, and I very much welcome the efforts made by Saudi Arabia and Prince Saud Al-Faisal himself in this respect. Both the European Union and Saudi Arabia have a strong, common interest in working together, and not just on trade and economy. These are important issues, but we need to get closer and see what else we can do. Challenges like climate change, the global financial crisis, energy co-operation and the fight against terrorism are in my opinion areas where we can only win if we work closer together.

**3. King Abdullah Ibn Abdel Aziz of Saudi Arabia was hosting last week the summit of Jeddah with the President of Libanon Michel Soliman, how to you see the effort of Saudi Arabia to solve the Lebanon Issue?**

The events of recent months in Lebanon give us scope for hope. Remember that only in May, that is five months ago, Lebanon was in a very deep crisis. The efforts of a number of Lebanese leaders as well as of Lebanon's friends in the region and beyond, helped to get out of the impasse. Saudi Arabia has played an important role in Lebanon for several years. Its own initiatives as well as others through the Arab League are clear evidence of this concern. Lebanon still has many challenges ahead, so it is still in need of support, both political and financial.

#### **4. Can we expect in the next time a meeting of the Quartet?**

We had a good meeting of the Quartet last month in New York, where we agreed that it was vital to ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian final status negotiations do not stall in the months ahead. The Quartet has a particularly important role to play in providing international support for the parties' efforts in the months ahead. In this context it will be crucial to work closely with the parties themselves and the Israelis and Palestinians will be invited to the next Quartet meeting accordingly. We hope the next Quartet meeting will take place by the end of the year in the region.

#### **5. And what is the issue for your visit to Damascus?**

Our difficult relations with Syria are progressively changing and we very much want to create the conditions for deeper relations with Syria. This will not be unconditional. It should be noted that while certain aspects of the relationship were suspended, the European Union maintained lines of communication on several levels, not least through the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. The presence of President Assad at the Paris Summit in July 2008 and the visit of President Sarkozy to Damascus in September 2008 can be viewed as important steps in ties with the European Union.

The European Union has consistently called on Syria to play a more constructive role within the region. There has been a shift in recent months, including the establishment of diplomatic relations with Lebanon. There is some evidence of a more independent role vis-à-vis Iran and it may have reined in some support to militant groups. The indirect talks with Israel are promising.

My visit to Damascus can be seen as comprising two main elements. On the one hand it is a recognition of the fact that some things have changed. We have called for certain actions and some of those have been fulfilled. Not all, of course, and we will continue to maintain our line. But some positive steps have been made. We should recognize this.

#### **6. The security of the gulf region is one of the most important issue, how to you see the progress of the relations with Iran including its nuclear program?**

You know the importance we attach to security in the region and how much attention we dedicate to Iran's nuclear program. The double track approach followed by the European Union and the international community as a whole remains valid: willingness to solve the issue through dialogue, on the one hand, but on the other hand, also keeping pressure on Iran until it complies with its international obligations.

#### **7. The Gulf Cooperation Countries are expecting that the EU will sign the Free Trade Agreement with the GCC and the EU. When will this matter be reality?**

I hope the Gulf Co-operation Countries and the European Union will sign the agreement very soon. The European Union really wants the agreement to be concluded as soon as possible. There are still some small issues, which need to be sorted out before the negotiations can conclude. The Agreement, which we have negotiated, is not just a Trade Agreement, as you

will know. It is a modern agreement, which includes areas of future co-operation as well as commitments to respect various international conventions on important issues such as non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, human rights and counter-terrorism. I am myself looking very much forward to the signature of the agreement. I think it will have a political as well as an economic significance for both of our regions, and I know that the European Commission, who negotiates on behalf of the European Union, is doing its best to make the negotiations come to an end. They have the support of all 27 EU Member States.

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