



EUROPEAN UNION

A 36/10

**Speech by HR Catherine Ashton,
at the League of Arab States**

A Commitment to Peace – the European Union and the Middle East

Cairo, 15 March 2010

I am delighted to be in Egypt and to give this speech in Cairo, the "Victorious City", right at the beginning of my trip to the Middle East. Egypt is a key partner in the region and so it is fitting that I start here.

I have come to the region early in my mandate, as I want to underline the great importance the European Union attaches to the wider Mediterranean and Arab world.

I am especially pleased to be here at the headquarters of the Arab League. For Europe and the Arab world share a common history and, I believe, a common destiny.

Our relations go back a long way. The footprints of your culture are scattered throughout Europe: literature and science, words and music, and of course our food.

We understand each other well. We know our respective strengths and weaknesses. We are inextricably tied together. And we know that our future path lies in co-operation and mutual understanding.

A good example of our ability to cooperate is our work through the European Neighbourhood Policy. We have developed multiple programmes and structures that are shaping a better future for our peoples. A future centred around sustainable development, education and integration into the new world economic system.

I would also like to highlight the Union for the Mediterranean, co-chaired by Egypt, and mention our growing co-operation with the Arab League, with programmes that are aimed at bringing us closer together.

We want to make a difference on the ground and to engage our citizens through tangible projects in key areas such as the decontamination of the Mediterranean or the Mediterranean solar energy plan.

These initiatives and many others are not bureaucratic exercises but the expression of our joint determination to face the challenges of our fast-changing world.

P R E S S

FOR FURTHER DETAILS:

Lutz Guellner - Spokesperson for the High Representative
+32 498/964 641 - +32 2 296 46 41 e-mail: COMM-SPP-HRVP-ASHTON@ec.europa.eu
www.eas.europa.eu

One of the key challenges that we remain deeply concerned about is Iranian unwillingness to engage in serious talks on the nuclear question.

There is respect in Europe for Iran as a country with an impressive history and sophisticated people. But there is also a deficit in trust when it comes to Iran's nuclear activities.

Our double track approach remains valid and we stand ready for dialogue. But the EU also fully supports the UN Security Council process on additional measures if, as is the case today, Iran continues to refuse to meet its international obligations.

Our position is based on the firm belief that an Iran with nuclear weapons risks triggering a proliferation cascade throughout the Middle East. This is the last thing that this region needs. A nuclear weapons free Middle East remains a European goal.

As you know, the primary purpose of my visit is to show the continued importance that the European Union attaches to the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is a vital European interest and is central to the solution of other problems in the region.

This region does not need more conflict. It needs peace. Peace based on international law. Peace now because any delay will only make it harder to achieve.

Solving the conflict would herald a new era for the Middle East, opening up many possibilities for regional integration and international cooperation.

My message to you today is that by working together, with determination and partnership there can be peace. A comprehensive peace, including Syria, Lebanon and the implementation of the offer in the Arab Peace Initiative. A deal that provides sustainable security for everyone.

We know that peace is about more than signing agreements on borders and security arrangements. It is about compromise and reconciliation; about co-operation across borders and shared security. We must aim for a comprehensive peace in which all people in the region can share.

Everyone has to make their contribution and take their responsibility. As the European Union we have a firm commitment to the security of Israel; and we stand up for a deal that delivers justice, freedom and dignity to the Palestinians.

The parameters of a negotiated settlement are well known. A two-state solution with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security.

Our aim is a viable State of Palestine in the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza strip, on the basis of the 1967 lines.

If there is to be a genuine peace a way must be found to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of Israel and Palestine. And we need a just solution of the refugee issue.

The possibility now before us of proximity talks could be the beginning of a new opportunity to find a solution.

But we have to be clear: talks not for the sake of talks. We want results and genuine commitment, not a re-stating of well-known positions. We need a process that leads to outcomes.

Recent Israeli decisions to build new housing units in East Jerusalem have endangered and undermined the tentative agreement to begin proximity talks.

The EU position on settlements is clear. Settlements are illegal, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-state solution impossible. A solution that the Israeli Prime Minister says he supports. He is right, and these talks are urgent.

Urgent because I fear for the future. Urgent, because Israel has a popular Prime Minister who owes it to his people to move to the solution he supports. Urgent, because the Palestinians, despite everything, and with your and our support, are willing to engage.

But there are many obstacles. The decision to list cultural and religious sites based in the occupied Palestinian territory as Israeli is counter-productive.

The blockade of Gaza is unacceptable. It has created enormous human suffering and greatly harms the potential to move forward.

I will travel to Gaza myself to meet with the population and at the same time assess how our support is working on the ground.

The Palestinians too of course have responsibilities. First however I want to commend President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad for showing us that they can build the institutions of a future Palestinian State.

But the Palestinians must get their house in order. Continued Palestinian divisions do not serve their interests.

The political and physical separation between Gaza and the West Bank is dangerous. Palestinian reconciliation is more crucial than ever.

The PLO must take its responsibilities in this regard, and face the challenge of renewal and reform.

The Arab world too has responsibilities. I congratulate the Arab League for taking the decision to support these talks despite the difficulties of which to are only too aware. As you know, the European Union is a strong supporter of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Europe is also ready to take its responsibility. The European Union will continue to support Palestinian institution building. But this must not come at the expense of the peace process.

Institution building must facilitate the peace process and not replace it. We are working in partnership with the Palestinian Authority to build the institutions they will need to have when the State is established.

The European Union is ready to step up its involvement by offering support in four areas.

Firstly, it is ready to support the parties in their negotiations. Our position was set out clearly in our statement of principles last December.

This could serve as the terms of reference for negotiations – for example, a Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with agreed changes, including with regard to Jerusalem.

Secondly, the European Union is ready to extend its package of assistance. Such a commitment, however, will not be open-ended. We expect to see urgent progress by the parties towards the creation of a Palestinian state, along the lines I have already mentioned.

Thirdly, the European Union is ready to consider providing further political, financial and security guarantees to facilitate the peace process.

For example we contribute to security missions in the occupied Palestinian territory, in the Sinai and in southern Lebanon. We are the largest single donor to the UN agency working with refugees. And we have a range of activities supporting civil society in East Jerusalem.

Last but not least, the EU wants to develop a closer partnership with those that are key to the talks, including with the United States and a reinvigorated Quartet.

The current level of mistrust and animosity between the parties is high. The euphoria that surrounded the Oslo accords has largely disappeared. Scepticism and doubt are all-pervading.

We want to work with all of the countries in this region to translate peace into genuine regional integration that brings more growth, more trade, more investment and more security and better standards of living for your citizens.

The international community including our Arab partners should offer guarantees to the parties so they can take the necessary steps towards peace. In this context, I would like to salute the leadership of Secretary General Amre Moussa in forging Arab unity on key regional issues.

When I leave the region I will head to Moscow for the Quartet meeting. This will be my first meeting and it is my ambition that these should be regular meetings designed to support and monitor the peace process.

We need to give impetus to frame strong terms of reference for the negotiations to set benchmarks for progress, and assess Roadmap compliance.

We know that active and impartial mediation will be essential. I believe that US efforts will be reinforced by support from Quartet partners and the Arab League's Follow-up Committee, and that we can help the process move forward. We need momentum if we are to succeed.

I believe we know the elements that will take us to a successful peace. We need to move from conflict management to conflict resolution, involving the whole region. I hope this week will see the beginning of proximity talks that will take us to negotiations and a settlement that will bring peace to the people of Palestine and Israel.

Peace is necessary, it is urgent and it is achievable. I am here standing before you to add the full weight of the European Union to reaching this goal

Thank you.
