



**COUNCIL OF
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**Javier SOLANA,
EU High Representative for the CFSP,
addresses the European Parliament
on the Middle East**

Javier SOLANA, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) made the following statement on the Middle East to the European Parliament on Wednesday, 18 February 2009:

"Mr President, this is the first time that I have appeared before you this year, 2009. It is a great pleasure to be here and I hope that the good cooperation we have had in the past will continue this year.

The war in Gaza ended a month ago, on 18 January, and I think you would agree with me that it feels like yesterday. The scale of the suffering and destruction was immense and it has left us all with a bitter taste in our mouths. The humanitarian situation today remains heart-breaking. We need to find urgent solutions to get aid in and to reduce the level of suffering of the people.

At the same time, we need to do all we can to end the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians and between Israel and the Arab world. In fact, Mr President, the parameters of the solution are well known, and have been known for some time. What matters now is the political will to implement it among Israelis and Palestinians, among Arabs and the wider international community.

The European vocation for peace in the Middle East remains as strong as ever. Our commitment to the creation of a viable and independent Palestinian state, living side by side with Israel, is total. It is at the heart of our Middle East policy. All our actions have this strategic objective in mind. We will give our firm backing to all who want a peaceful solution to the many challenges across the Middle East region.

This House – Parliament – knows just how difficult and how intractable the situation may seem. Too often the region has been plagued by cycles of violence, rising extremism and economic hardship. At the same time, the conditions for Europeans and Americans to work together in the search for peace in the Middle East are probably better than ever. I have just returned from Washington where I had good discussions with a number of people there in the Obama administration. I have the assurance from them that the strong commitment that has been expressed is a reality. We are willing and ready to work with them towards achieving success in this conflict.

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The appointment of Senator Mitchell as US envoy has given the people in the Middle East and his friends renewed hope. We know him. We have worked with him. I had the privilege of working with him in 2001 on the famous report and, just recently, I have had the opportunity to work with him in the region.

I hope very much that these changes will lead to a new approach, one that provides the parties with a greater say in how they manage their affairs. We know that solutions and proposals should be locally inspired. But, at the same time, deeper international engagement remains essential.

This is why the Arab Peace Initiative is so crucial. This initiative is the collective expression of the Arab world on how they could help to end their conflict with Israel. It is their response to the issue that has held back their development and their integration into our global world. It remains, and should remain, on the table.

We have just had important elections in Israel. Of course, it is for the Israeli people, their political leaders, to decide on the composition of their new government. From our side, we hope that the new prime minister and government will be solid interlocutors for peace talks.

Needless to say, the same applies to the Palestinians. They, too, have to get their house in order, including through reconciliation. As everybody knows, we strongly encourage intra-Palestinian reconciliation behind President Abbas and all the efforts by Egypt and the Arab League in that direction. This will be a key to peace, stability and development.

As I said, I know that this Parliament has been deeply preoccupied with the crisis in Gaza, and so have we all. Let me use this occasion to highlight some of the most important international efforts, which focused on trying to end the violence and easing the plight of all civilian populations.

Egypt's role in resolving the situation in Gaza, and indeed with the Palestinians themselves, remains crucial. We hope their efforts will soon lead to a durable and sustainable ceasefire, to the opening of the crossings for all goods and persons, and some sort of intra-Palestinian agreement. Without this, it will be difficult – not to say impossible – to rebuild Gaza.

We are looking forward to welcoming positive announcements on the ceasefire. The day before yesterday there were good meetings, and let us hope that they will continue today and in the future so that a ceasefire may be called, without delay. As you know, Egypt will also host an important conference on reconstruction on 2 March and we expect all the international community to make a commitment there. The European Union, too, played its role. We immediately expressed our willingness to contribute in concrete ways to a durable ceasefire. We also stated our readiness to re-dispatch our monitors to the Rafah crossing-point, in accordance with the agreement that we signed in 2005. We are ready to operate at Rafah, or at any other crossing-points where help is needed or requested.

Several European countries also expressed their readiness to help the interdiction of illegal trafficking, in particular arms smuggling, into Gaza. The activities of the European Parliament in response to the crisis have been significant and are part and parcel of the European Union's overall reaction to the crisis.

As far as the United Nations is concerned, we can warmly commend UNRWA for its work and perseverance and underline that the European Union will continue to support all its efforts.

But it is clear that no single country or organisation can tackle the conflicts in the Middle East alone. The very nature of the difficulties demands multilateral solutions. The Quartet will have a crucial role to play in the months ahead. The new US Administration, in cooperation with us, has confirmed its intention to make full use of the Quartet.

The terrible events in Gaza should also force us to take a more strategic and long-term look at Gaza. The Gaza Strip constitutes an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967 and, without any doubt, will be part of a Palestinian state. Gaza needs to become economically and politically viable. Gaza needs to become part of a political solution.

The immediate priority remains to secure a durable and fully respected ceasefire and to allow for the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid. We need to see the opening of the crossings for humanitarian assistance, for commercial goods and for people, on a regular and predictable basis.

As you know, the diplomatic fall-out of the Gaza conflict in the wider region has been very significant: indirect talks between Syria and Israel have been suspended; Mauritania and Qatar have suspended ties with Israel; a withdrawal of the Arab Peace Initiative was threatened.

Arab divisions, as you know, have deepened. Without Arab unity it will be very difficult to make progress in Gaza and in the wider Middle East peace process. Peace in the Middle East requires a united Arab world. The upcoming Arab League summit will be crucial to restore Arab unity, in particular behind the Arab Peace Initiative.

In the coming months, we will also have elections in Iran and in Lebanon. On 12 June, the Iranians will vote for a new President. We have repeatedly stated our deep respect for Iran and our desire to forge a completely different kind of relationship with this country. This is clearly in everyone's interests. But to achieve that, we need trust and that trust must be restored.

Let me conclude by saying that 2009 will be critical for the Middle East. We are possibly at a threshold. We can choose to pursue the same policies in the same manner, knowing that they will lead to the same results – the results that we know today. On the other hand, we can try to work with energy, with determination, to adjust our policies, to adjust the way we set about achieving results.

We have to work on both crisis management and conflict resolution – there is no doubt about that. However, the time has come to focus decisively on conflict resolution. It is the only way to end this endless sequence of death and destruction.

Mr President, thank you very much."