REMARKS

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the press point with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Khalid Al-Sabah, during her visit to the Gulf countries

"First of all can I begin by saying what a pleasure it is, Your Highness, to be in Kuwait. I have had the privilege of meeting you and discussing with you many issues on a number of occasions, but this is the first time I’ve been able to visit you here.

Kuwait is a very important and enduring partner for the European Union. We have long historic ties. And we have steadfast support for your stability and your territorial integrity. The fact that we have seventeen Member States represented here is a demonstration of the importance of the relationship that we have.

You also lead the way in the many developments in this region. I think of your parliament, the oldest elected parliament in the Gulf, and we have been watching with great interest all of the political developments here under the wise leadership of His Highness, Sheikh Sabah. The elections in June of last year were further proof in our view of the maturity of the system of Kuwait. And we look forward to seeing the Parliament here working fully for the future.
As you have said, Your Highness, this was an opportunity for us to share our views on a number of issues. First of all, the importance of the bilateral connection between us and the ways in which we can enhance and develop those over time. The work of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the chairmanship that Kuwait will have at the GCC, such an important way of operating together, two groups of nations finding ways of collaborating economically and politically and we want to see that develop further in the course of this year.

And then the challenges of the region. We are neighbours and we see very much the operation together of how we deal with the challenges that we face. I was very pleased to be able to debrief you further on the E3 + 3 talks with Iran which I have led and the implementation of the agreement that we reached in November. I look forward very much to continuing our talks with Iran into the future.

We have talked about the situation in Syria. I pay tribute to you and to Kuwait for the role that you have played in supporting the people of Syria, with humanitarian aid and the conference that you will host here and which will be of enormous importance.

And then the work that we do together on supporting John Kerry’s efforts in the Middle East Peace Process and our support to find a lasting solution for the people of that region. And above everything, the collaboration on all the issues that are of mutual importance to us, from Yemen, the situation in Iraq to the area directly around us where we see some of the challenges for the future.

And I hope that this visit will be yet further proof of the strength of the relationship that we have between us and I thank you again.”

Question and answer session:

Question on Iran

First of all, I have read with interest the invitation to visit Teheran and it is my intention to do so in the course of the next weeks. In term of the implementation of the agreement: the way that we have set up the implementation is that we will verify the actions on both sides. It is extremely important that political agreement now translates into practical things that need to be done. And the technical discussions which were inevitably quite complex have enabled us to be able to do so. The International Atomic Energy Agency will be responsible for monitoring. They are comfortable with the mandate they have and they will do their work. We will also, as you saw, in the agreement have ways in which we can show that we, on both sides, do what we said we will do. It is an important agreement and I hope that this will now give us an opportunity to move forward and to look at a more comprehensive agreement shortly.
Question on free trade talks with GCC

I am not the Trade Commissioner so you will understand if I am more general than the Trade Commissioner and those directly engaged would be. But I was the Trade Commissioner. We have resolved really all of the issues. There is one outstanding economic issue that needs to be resolved and in my discussions here I hope there will be an opportunity to see whether we can finally resolve that economic issue. If we can, it will provide all of us with a greater chance to benefit economically from this partnership. I am sure that we can do better in our economic relations, so as I discussed with His Highness, I hope that in the course of these next months we will have a chance to reflect again and see if we can find the solution for this economic issue.

Question on visa discussions with Kuwait

I think His Highness pointed out that Kuwait was hoping to make some proposals on the issue of visas shortly. We look forward to seeing these proposals.

Question on the Kuwaiti parliament

This question requires a longer answer than probably we have time for. I think first of all I would underline the recognition we have of the important role the Parliament plays here. Secondly, that the relationship between the European Parliament and the Parliament of Kuwait is an important one. Your speaker was recently in Brussels and had a very successful series of meetings which I think is to the benefit of both. And I think certainly that the opportunity for the Parliament as it runs its course to play a strong and active role in the life of Kuwait, is a very obvious one for us all to see. So my assessment would be this is a very important model and a good partnership between the European Parliament and the Kuwaiti Parliament and is for the benefit of both.

Question on Syria

I think His Highness is better able to describe than me the importance of the donors’ conference and again I pay tribute to Kuwait for its continuing efforts in support of the people of Syria. The European Union will be here ready and willing to continue to play the strongest possible role in support of the people of Syria. We think, as this winter goes on, of the incredibly difficult circumstances for many families and especially for the children both inside and outside of the country.

For Geneva 2 next week I think Lakhdar Brahimi has made it clear that the purpose of this event is to look at what was agreed in what we call Geneva 1 and to now move forward with what has been agreed. I wish him every possible success in doing that and we will be there to support those efforts. I hope it will be the beginning of what may be a difficult process, but such a necessary one, to find peace.
Question on Egypt

I am very pleased to see that the referendum is taking place and we have from the European Union observers who are helping to ensure the process goes forward. It is an important part of the roadmap that has been very carefully set out and which I think you and I both agree needs to be followed in order to see Egypt go forward on the democratic track. So we look forward to the announcement for the elections both parliamentary and presidential. These are important moments and milestones in that development. I visited Egypt many times and I do so because it is a country and a people that we want to see succeed and to have the future that they deserve.

The audio-visual coverage is available on the EbS website, via the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/ebs/schedule.cfm