Remarks by HR Catherine Ashton upon arrival to FAC,
Brussels, 27 February 2012

Good morning. This morning's Foreign Affairs Council, as you'd expect, will begin its discussions on the subject of Syria. Many of us were in Tunisia on Friday for the Friends of Syria meeting and the evening before I brought together the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss the humanitarian question. The Friday meeting was brilliantly organized by the Tunisian government. I have to pay tribute to them, a country that in the space of a year is quite different, transformed. They did a brilliant job.

The real issue, of course, is how to put the pressure on to stop the violence in Syria. I very much support the appointment of Kofi Annan as the envoy for the UN and the Arab League. I wish him speedy success in his discussions. In the meantime, we continue our work to support the International Red Cross, Red Crescent with resources to enable them to get help and support out to people.

You know that the United Nations and the Arab League have been in discussion about how to monitor the situation. There are a number of different issues on the ground. One is how to support humanitarian organizations to do their jobs. And Baroness Amos as you know is on her way. She's in Lebanon now, heading towards Syria waiting to be let in, to try and establish how the humanitarian work can go on, and that is the vital, critical, number one issue.

Secondly the questions of whether there is to be a ceasefire that lasts, how that is monitored and supported, and that's been discussed between the United Nations and the Arab League. We've been supporting the Arab League, as you'd expect us to do. We have a lot of experience in monitoring and supporting them, we've made that offer to support them.

I don't have to tell members of the media who've suffered your own losses in recent days just how difficult and how concerning this whole situation is. But we will continue to look at what we can do, of course looking especially today at sanctions.
We've been in constant contacts with colleagues across the world, including those in the Security Council. I've made it perfectly clear that Security Council members need to assume their responsibilities. If there is no unity of purpose, that sends the wrong signal to Assad and we need to stick together.

We've said that the Syrian National Council is an important interlocutor and that's the way that I'll approach this meeting. We've talked to a number of different groups in Syria and we've been saying to them: come together and try to form a group together to be able to represent as many people as possible. Inclusivity would enable everyone to feel they have a future. We want to see a united opposition, that's so important, if they are going to be able to reach out to all the people because one issue for Syria must be that everybody in Syria feels that the future is for all of them, that this is about a united and inclusive country. This is their country, it's for their people to decide how to do it, but it's important that we are working together as closely as we can.

And then we will also talk of about the situation in Egypt. We are concerned about what's happening with civil society organizations, but are looking too to the future of Egypt. I was talking to the Foreign Minister of Egypt last week in London. I said to him that it's very clear they need to sort out the issue of civil society organisations. It's obviously within the responsibility of the government to ensure that there is a proper framework in which these organizations are allowed to work. There is no doubt about the work that has been going on with many civil society organizations supported by the European Union, the United States and others. It's of great benefit to the country. And this really does need to be dealt with properly and swiftly and people need to be released.

I will also report back on the long travels I've been doing across the world, including to the EU-Jordan Task Force which enabled us to put together a package for Jordan of up to 3 billion Euros. And we will talk about the Middle East Peace Process to consider what more we can do to support that.

We will also talk about Serbia and Kosovo. The Foreign Affairs Council will make its view ready for the General Affairs Council tomorrow in order to deliberate on the questions that come from the very successful work that has been done to bring together Serbia and Kosovo in the latest agreements. You will know that they've discussed integrated border management as part of the implementation of the agreements that they've already finalised and you'll know that they're looking at regional cooperation. I'm very pleased that they were able to reach agreements on those two issues. It was incredibly difficult for President Tadic and Prime Minister Thaci to actually do that, because they have to be brave, they have to show leadership. The great news is that they did and I pay real tribute to both of them for the work that they have done personally and for responding to the many calls that I personally have made to them in doing this.

I hope that today we'll have a good discussion about the potential candidacy for Serbia and I'll be at the General Affairs Council tomorrow to play my part in that. In the end it's the Member States who decide, but the Member States set out the things that they are most concerned about and I think the agreements demonstrate the commitment to deal with those, so I'm optimistic. You know that our ambition is one day to see these countries as part of the European Union.
Furthermore there is going to be a discussion on the Southern Caucasus and I always take the view we should have a broad discussion. As you know I've been to Azerbaijan, to Armenia, to Georgia in recent weeks to have discussions with all of them about both their relationship to the European Union and of course, in the case of Azerbaijan and Armenia, my great concern for what is happening in Nagorno-Karabach. You'll probably hear from France as it is involved with the Minsk group and I have a special representative working down there. We have a very strong relationship with Georgia and want to play a strong and solid role with Armenia and Azerbaijan to be able to help and support this very difficult conflict. This needs to be resolved.

On Belarus, the discussions are ongoing this morning. The situation in Belarus again is of enormous concern, when we think of what's happening to individuals there, people who are imprisoned. I'm really saddened to see Belarus fail to respond to what could be a really strong and important relationship with the European Union economically and politically. We continue to send out a very strong message and we continue to make it clear that we find the situation intolerable and today will be another opportunity to decide what we should do on that.

And finally on Iran, which is formally not on the agenda of FAC today: a few weeks ago I've received a letter from Dr Jalili who is my counterpart. It's a short letter, but a letter that does talk about the nuclear programme and it suggests that we should consider getting in to talks. What happens now is that on behalf of the E3+3, my political director is working with those political directors to look at whether we think this is sufficient to get into talks and I'm cautiously optimistic about that. And then all the things that come from that: where we're going to talk, what the talks will consist of, what work needs to be done technically to understand the situation as it currently is, and what we need to do, what steps we need to take to move forward. So that is being discussed now, the political directors will meet with me very shortly in order to tell me the results of those discussions and then we'll move forward from there. I'll be in touch then with Iran.