Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation ministerial, Djibouti, 16 November 2012

Secretary General, Ministers,

Thank you for this invitation to be with you today. Can I begin by congratulating the Chair and the colleagues in Djibouti for the organization of this event. I am really honoured to have been invited here to the 39th session of the Council of the Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. It is indeed an honour especially to wish you a very Happy Islamic New Year. If I might I would particularly like to thank the Secretary General, Dr. Ihsanoglu, and commend him on the leadership he has shown in advancing your goals and our mutual goals and in deepening the cooperation between us.

Today's challenges are global and they require global responses. Cooperation between international organisations like yours and the one I represent has never been more important. This platform - representing 550 million people in the European Union and more than 1.5 billion people on your side - provides a unique opportunity to advance our shared interests.

Your organisation is characterised by diversity, both in terms of the nations that it is made up of, which represent all regions of the world, but also the different cultural traditions of each of these societies.

But I would say what brings you together is a common faith and, flowing from that, shared values, principles and convictions.
I think that gives you a special responsibility: In a world that is confronted by more and more crises and violence, many of which are within perhaps your sphere of influence, your role and your actions take on a particular importance in our common efforts to ensure stability and peace.

We in the European Union know the value of such efforts to promote stability. Our institutions were built after the Second World War on the ruins of a continent torn apart by divisions and violence that could have destroyed our civilizations.

I know that the structure of the European Union is not always easy to understand. But the project is set up, has endured and is growing. In today's globalised world, being part of a group of 27 countries – soon to be 28 – like-minded countries makes sense given the challenges we all face.

As Europeans we are only too conscious of our histories. We have experienced the danger that comes from intolerance and the refusal to engage in dialogue. The resulting tensions and conflicts caused misery and suffering.

Today both the European Union and the OIC share a joint responsibility: promoting dialogue and tolerance in pursuit of a common path towards reconciliation and peace.

To advance these aims, we all need to protect a common belief in the principles and values of justice, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.

The desire to embed these principles in society is the driving force behind the changes we are witnessing in the Arab world today: everywhere people are calling for the respect for fundamental rights; everywhere men and women are asking for the right to political participation as well as a better life in terms of jobs, sustainable income and education. And we are here today to support them.

I delivered the same message earlier this week when I co-chaired the European Union-League of Arab States Ministerial meeting. And I reaffirmed the same goals when I chaired with the Egyptian government the first European Union-Egypt Task Force designed to support the achievements of the new Egypt made so far and to help support Egypt's political and economic needs.

We have to share the strong conviction that freedom and dignity for everyone should be respected and protected and that these fundamental rights should be the main source of inspiration for our societies.

Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right that needs to be protected everywhere for everyone. It is an essential pillar of safe and prosperous societies. The freedom to exercise your faith plays a key part in reinforcing economic development and democratic stability. Its absence, in turn, breeds distrust and uncertainty and undermines economic and political viability.

A global look at the state of religious freedom today presents us with a gloomy picture. Many people still live under governments that restrict or deny them the right to exercise their faith freely. At the same time, several countries with different religious communities have been successfully transitioning towards democracy and in doing this they are faced with the challenge of how to protect and guarantee religious freedom whilst they shape their new societies.

This is why it is our responsibility as political leaders to assure that everyone can practice their faith freely and equally. In doing so we honour our shared humanity.
My message today is very simple: together we must seek common ground and common language to demonstrate that extremism and intolerance have no place in our societies. Freedom and shared prosperity, human rights and human dignity are overarching values for us all.

There is no doubt the world we live in today is complex, uncertain and unstable. More than ever it falls to us to make a special effort to understand each other better and to be able to better analyse the new realities that confront us.

A more intensive engagement between the European Union and the OIC can help us achieve these common goals, even if differences remain. We must work together. To overcome divisions between and within our societies and religions. To mobilise a common effort.

We have done so already in the context of recent events in the Arab world, developing a shared effort with your organisation as well as the League of Arab States and the African Union.

On Libya, through our common engagement, we have worked to try and put this country on the right course. I hope that on Syria too we will cooperate successfully to stop the violence and the bloodshed.

We are united in our aim to bring lasting peace in the Middle East. Unfortunately we are witnessing a new spiral of violence around Gaza. I am gravely concerned about this serious situation and the risk of an escalation which is in nobody's interest. I have called on everybody to avoid action which risks civilian casualties. Targeting civilians is totally unacceptable, everywhere.

The recent crisis underlines once more the urgent need for progress towards a two state solution which allows Israelis and Palestinians to live alongside each other in peace and security.

We have always upheld the right of self-determination of the Palestinian people and believe it is best done through their own state. We have worked with the Palestinian Authority to build up the institutions of a future democratic, independent and viable Palestinian State. We will continue to support the Palestinian people towards this aim. More than ever, we need to pursue and further develop our joint engagement based on three principles:

1. Mutual respect and acceptance of each other’s differences. To do that we have to make a real effort and not to judge each other without knowing or understanding the other side.
2. To have a true commitment to dialogue, tolerance and patience.
3. And to put in a long term effort. We cannot overcome the misunderstandings that separate us without serious and lasting engagement.

It is our responsibility as political leaders to embark on a course of mutual understanding and cooperation.

I am really confident that the European Union/OIC relationship can contribute to that goal. I am determined to intensify the collaboration between us and to reinforce the spirit of mutual understanding and support.

Thank you.