Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
upon arrival at Foreign Affairs Council, Brussels, 31 January 2013

Today's Foreign Affairs Council will deal with a number of different issues. It will first of all look at our Southern Neighbourhood. You know that the European Council will also be discussing this next week and this will be an opportunity for us to prepare for that, but also to take stock especially of the situation in Egypt, which we're following hour by hour, and of course what's happening in the tragedy unfolding in Syria.

We are very mindful of Mr Brahimi and his speech to the Security Council and things that he's been saying that need to happen. This will be an opportunity for the Foreign Affairs Council to consider this alongside the broader issues on the unfolding events across our Southern Neighbourhood.

In terms of Syria we're very interested in what Mr Brahimi has been saying to the Security Council. We're trying to support him in every way that we can as he has a very difficult challenge. The discussion today will focus I think on what more we can do and how we can take what's been said at the Security Council, and try and address those challenges and issues.

Obviously we're quite concerned about events that are taking place in Egypt at the present time and we're in constant touch through our delegation with President Morsi and others, including some of the opposition groups, to actually try and support the moves to democracy. It's very important to us that Egypt is stable, that the economic issues are addressed which are extremely important and that we see political moves forward, and that really is the fundamental aspect to what the European Union wants to see happen.

Of course we will also have with us today the President of Somalia. I met with him yesterday to talk about a number of different issues: to welcome him on his first visit to Europe, to Brussels, and to talk with him about not only the way in which the European Union has been involved with Somalia for twenty years, but our continuing engagement, and working with him to plan a conference here later in the year which will be about the long term development of Somalia. I know that Foreign Ministers will find it very useful to have an exchange with him at lunch, where they can talk about developments on the ground.
And of course we will discuss Mali where, having had the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council, we are pleased to see the roadmap being put forward. On the training mission, we'll be able to report back on the work that has been done so far by General Lecointre who has been out in Bamako. Kristalina Georgieva has also been there to gauge what needs to happen in terms of humanitarian support as well. And Foreign Ministers will be able to look now at what further we should and will be doing.

We're in constant touch with Paris and have been throughout to make sure that we're able to do what the European Union does best, which is to develop a strategic approach for the Sahel, which we have in place and which enables us to engage on all of the issues that confront the people in the Sahel. This includes humanitarian aid through to development, support for this training mission which is so vital to get the Malian army to be able to do what it needs to do, and helping develop the institutions so that there is a road to elections and the potential for the government to be able to address some of the underlying issues that clearly need to be addressed. And so in doing that we're working very closely with our colleagues in Paris.

On Iran, the issues that we've been seeking to address with Iran you know very well and we'll continue to try and persuade Iran that it needs to discuss the issues of the nuclear programme and our concerns about that.

We're in discussion with Iran about the next round of negotiations and there are a lots of discussions that go on between the formal meetings. You know that I met with Dr Jalili in the autumn to discuss with him how we go forward. You know that we're in touch with the Iranians to try to organise properly our negotiations and discussions. So I don't think that we should see this as anything other than a process. It's going to be very important, it needs to be done properly and we need to move forward on that. So we've been saying to the Iranians that we want to propose dates and venues in order that we can get the discussions moving as quickly as possible. I am confident there will be a meeting soon.