Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton
on arrival at the Foreign Affairs Council

Good morning.

It's a very important Foreign Affairs Council today. We will be talking about the Middle East Peace Process and the incredible work that John Kerry has done in getting the negotiators to come together and begin a process, that I hope will be successful for the people of Palestine and the people of Israel. We wish them every possible success and we will be looking at ways in which we can support them.

I will be talking too about the visit I have made to Egypt last week, the meetings I had with the Muslim Brotherhood, with the Tamarod group, with the President, Vice President, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. We are looking to make sure that we see Egypt go back on to the path of deep democracy, ensuring that the stability and security of Egypt is certain and of course making sure too that the economic situation improves.

In the last few weeks and months we have been to Egypt several times, not least our special representative Bernardino Leon, who spent many weeks there to try and help support the importance of an inclusive approach to the problems and issues in Egypt. You can't build a democracy in 5 minutes and you need to build it deep and that means you need to look at the role of those in power, the response of the people and the role of those in opposition. And trying to work with everyone to ensure there is a greater stability and the greatest possibility that Egypt can have a really dynamic future. We have been doing that for a long time. We are willing to help in any way possible. It's the Egyptian people's country and they must take it forward into the future, but if we can help we will.
We will also be discussing Lebanon. When I was in Lebanon a few weeks ago, I went to see the troops who are helping to support stability in the south. I have talked with them as I have talked with everybody about the situation in Lebanon, the importance of people being able to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. First of all, our thoughts are with people in terms of the fragility of the country and the concerns in the country about how to deal with the growing numbers of refugees who need to be properly cared for and I pay tribute to all those in Lebanon who are working to do that. But there are growing concerns about the role of Hezbollah. And today I have put forward a proposal. It is for Member States to decide on the basis of my proposal.

I have been in touch with Ban Ki-Moon, the Secretary General of the UN, to talk about the current situation in Syria. It may not be quite the top of the headlines but the situation is dreadful. The number of refugees according to UN estimations, internally and externally, is many millions. Apart from trying to support in every way possible what has become known as Geneva II process, we are also thinking about the country's future and ensuring we have a plan to try and help rebuild it. However, all I can say is that Lakhdar Brahimi has our full support in all the efforts he is making and we have been talking with Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov too about the work they are doing. The sooner the political process begins to end this crisis, the sooner the people will receive support.

And later on today we have the Eastern Partnership meeting, where the Foreign Ministers from our Eastern partners will join us for an important session as we look forward to the summit in Vilnius. And then we will of course discuss parts of the African continent that we need to consider carefully: Mali and Somalia and the Great Lakes region.