

SPEECH OF EU REPRESENTATIVE, RALPH TARRAF
ON THE OCCASION OF EUROPE DAY 2016
09 MAY 2016 - JERUSALEM

Governor, Your Excellencies, Dear Colleagues and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to extend a very warm welcome to you tonight on the occasion of Europe Day, on behalf of myself and on behalf on my wife Brigitte.

I am very touched to see so many of you here tonight to celebrate Europe Day together with us.

Allow me to take this opportunity to thank all of you, in particular our Palestinian friends, for having welcomed Brigitte and myself to our new home with such warmth, generosity and hospitality.

Brigitte and I arrived in Jerusalem 8 months ago. I can say, without exaggeration, that these 8 months have been the most challenging and the most frustrating, but at the same time the most inspiring and the most moving, and, above all, the most humbling professional experience I have ever been through.

It was and it continues to be not easy to adapt to life in Jerusalem. You live here. You know better than anybody else what I'm talking about.

Every day brings a new challenge, every visit outside the office adds a new perception to things, every encounter with people of this land brings a new angle, every file I work on brings a new layer of knowledge. Every aspect of my professional and social life here is about learning, understanding, putting into perspective. As I said, frustrating, inspiring and humbling all at the same time.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues and Friends,

The Representative of the European Union residing in Jerusalem has the pleasure to celebrate Europe Day three times each year:

I just came back from Ramallah, where we had a wonderful event this afternoon.

Yesterday, I was supposed to be in Gaza, to celebrate Europe Day there. Much to my regret, we had to postpone this event, out of respect for the families of 3 children who tragically lost their lives in a fire and of other casualties inflicted by the latest round of violence. The loss of lives once more highlights how untenable the situation in the Gaza strip has become and the urgent need to address the root causes of the dysfunctional and inhumane political and security regime imposed on the people of Gaza.

Celebrating Europe Day three times each is of course not necessarily a pleasant duty.

It is a reflection of a very sad reality, the continued territorial fragmentation of Palestine.

Ordinary Palestinians are ever increasingly subject to fragmented political and security regimes imposed on ever smaller and disconnected parcels of territory - Gaza, Jerusalem, the West Bank, and within the West Bank Areas A, B, C.

As far as I can see, this fragmentation has devastating consequences for the social fabric and the sense of national unity amongst the Palestinians. Palestinians are ever more disconnected from each other, politically, socially, economically. Their lives are ever more determined by the need to cope with very real problems existing in smaller and smaller enclaves of land. Housing, schooling, job opportunities, the access to electricity and water and basic social services are challenges for all Palestinians. But it makes a difference, and this difference is becoming bigger and bigger, whether you are, as a Palestinian, boxed in Jerusalem, in Gaza City, or in Ramallah or other parts of the West Bank, separated by walls and a distinct set of rules you have to play along with.

It should not come as a surprise that this territorial fragmentation of Palestine goes hand in hand with a growing fragmentation of the political system in Palestine. Factional politics, local politics, normal in any kind of open political system, are becoming increasingly entrenched, while the sense of common purpose and destiny is eroding.

It is my firm belief that we need to address this territorial and political fragmentation of Palestine as a matter of urgency. We need to do more to work towards reclaiming the integrity of the territorial and political space in Palestine.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues and Friends,

Reclaiming the integrity of a common political space in Palestine is essential.

But the most important task currently is to re-establish a political horizon for a final resolution of the Israeli - Palestinian conflict.

The position of the European Union is clear.

The Foreign Affairs Council reiterated in January this year that the EU is united in its commitment to achieving a two-state solution that meets Israeli and Palestinian security needs and Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty, ends the occupation that began in 1967, and resolves all permanent status issues in order to end the conflict. We want to see, and have reiterated that numerous times, the State of Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous, sovereign and viable State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security and mutual recognition. We want to see an agreement on the borders of the two states based on 4 June 1967 lines. We will recognize changes to the pre-1967 borders only when agreed by the parties. We want to see negotiations to resolve the status of Jerusalem as the future capital of both states. And we want to see a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the refugee question.

The European Union has invested a great deal to help implement this vision during the last decades.

We have spared no effort to build up Palestinian institutions for statehood. We have worked with others to build a sustainable Palestinian economy. And we have gone a long way to achieve that goal. „Ready for Statehood“ was the slogan already a couple of years ago. „Ready for Statehood“ - in principle, it must be said.

Because the political context for statehood, a negotiated solution for the main contentious issues, is still lacking.

On this, on bringing about a negotiated solution for the main contentious issues, we have failed. We have failed collectively. Israelis, Palestinians and Arabs, Americans and Europeans. We have failed the Palestinian people. We have failed all the people of this region who deserve and who have the right to live in peace, security and prosperity.

But we will continue trying. And we shall never give up hope that we will succeed one day.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It has become common currency in policy debates that the Israel - Palestinian Conflict is nowadays of reduced relevance and importance for European leaders who have to cope with the double challenge of migration and of jihadi terrorism. Despite the fact that the conflict remains unresolved, so the assumption goes in some quarters, its spill over effects on Europe is for the time being rather limited, compared to other challenges.

So we can afford to put the issue on the backburner. Let me assure you that neither I personally nor decision makers back in Brussels subscribe to this school of thought.

Having lived here for 8 months, the biggest revelation for me was to see how deeply entrenched Europe and European Nations are in this territory - for better and for worse.

Of course we all recall how this part of the world was chosen by European Powers as a theatre for their own rivalries and conflicts in the late 19th and early 20th century - a period shaping whatever came after in the Levant. The Sykes-Picot agreement was signed exactly 100 years ago, on 16 May 1916, and the Balfour Declaration a year later. German engineers supported the Ottoman Empire during that same period in its attempt to build the Hijaz Railway, a strategic railway to connect the heartland of the Ottoman Empire with the provinces. Traces of that project can be found in Palestine until today. And the creation of the State of Israel would very probably not have occurred if it had not been happening in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

But there is more to it than meets the eye immediately. This, I discovered only gradually.

I learnt, I have to admit not without some envy, that my French, Italian, Spanish and Belgian

colleagues have had, for centuries, a reserved front row seat at the Christmas Mass in Bethlehem. My Greek colleague has a reserved place together with Ministers of the Greek government during the ceremony of the Holy Fire celebrated at Easter at the Holy Sepulchre. I discovered that German Templers built Colonies in Jerusalem and Haifa, driven by a vocation to settle in the Holy Land. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, German Protestants built the Church of the Redeemer in the Old City of Jerusalem. Europeans built schools in the Holy Land, very often underpinning their colonial aspirations. Being German myself, the German names Schneller and Schmidt strike a very familiar chord.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Europe is part and parcel of this land, its past and its future.

Undoubtedly for the past.

But also for the future. Certainly not in the form of some neo-colonialist project. Europe has learnt its lesson, once and for all. But we cannot simply erase our European history in this part of the world and simply walk away.

Palestine is part of our common space, *mare nostrum* as the Latins called it. Today, we have different projects trying to build on this premise of a shared space. Union for the Mediterranean and the European Neighbourhood Policy are the most prominent examples.

Borders between us still exist. But they have become less marked. Europeans live and work here, in Palestine, in numbers, and Arabs and Palestinians live in numbers in Europe today. We are coming closer. And the unresolved Israeli - Palestinian conflict, the injustice, the desperation, the violence, emotional and physical, which come with it, is a common challenge and affects us all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I would like to conclude my speech by expressing my deep appreciation for all the members of my team at the Office of the EU Representative in Jerusalem.

I would also like to thank my fellow colleagues from the European Union Member States who did not spare any effort to promote our common cause and to help me with invaluable advise and orientation, which was at times badly needed. It is an honour and privilege to work with you.