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Remarks

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council

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Q. On the Association Agreement idea with Palestine, are you in favor? Is there a consensus in the Council for an Association Agreement with Palestine?

This is an issue that we did not discuss with [Palestinian] President [Mahmoud] Abbas today. There has been discussions among [EU] Member States in the recent days and weeks on the possibility of launching negotiations for an Association Agreement. And we have discussed this with the ministers and we will continue the conversation on this possibility in the coming weeks. This is not the last time that the issue of our bilateral relations but also our role in the Middle East Peace Process is on the agenda. But this was not an issue we discussed with President Abbas. This was not, I would say, the major issue of our conversation today. The main point was the EU role in helping relaunching an international framework for direct negotiations between Israel and Palestine. And with President Abbas we recommitted ourselves to our united consolidated position in favor of a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the capital of both.

We reaffirmed – and I was glad to see that the Palestinian side was agreeing with that – our conviction that the framework has to be multilateral. We will continue to work within the [Middle East] Quartet – which means with our partners: the United States, the United Nations, and Russia –, enlarging this to a few Arab countries, and possibly to Norway. And it seems to me clear that the Palestinian President was perfectly fine with this idea of not having the United States as the only interlocutor for a peace process, but having a multilateral framework in which the European Union has a central role; that is

together with others including, as I said, our partners in the Quartet, including the United States. I think this is a very important development and we will follow up on this in the coming weeks already. As you might know, we will convene an extraordinary Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee meeting together with Norway, here in Brussels on 31 January. And that will be the first opportunity for all the parties, but also all the relevant players on the Middle East Peace Process, to convene around the same table after the Jerusalem announcement by President [of the United States, Donald] Trump.

We are trying to use our convening power as the European Union to bring all the relevant actors around the table. We want to play an important role as European Union, including on the political process. But we want to do this with our friends and partners in the region and the international community.

Q. You said that the European Union will continue to financially support the Palestinians and UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East]. But are the Europeans, the European Union and its Member States prepared to step in for funds that are no longer coming from the United States?

We have been, we continue to be and we will continue to be a strong - probably the strongest - supporter, financially, of the Palestinian Authority and also of the work of UNRWA. Because we believe this is essential to individuals - which is for us a must - but it is also essential for the stability in the region. We are talking about millions of people, many of them extremely young, many of them children that count on UNRWA for essential services like schooling, education, health services, in Gaza but also in countries that are hosting large numbers of refugees like Jordan and Lebanon. Reducing the activities of UNRWA would cause instability, security threats, I believe, and it would also damage the credibility of any political peace process. We do this because we believe it is in our self-interest to do this and also because we recognise this as a moral duty towards individuals, starting with children.

We have already increased our support in the recent times. We are looking at ways in which we can do more. But obviously we expect our friends in the United States to fulfill their commitments to UNRWA, again, because it is in our collective, including their collective self-interest. Think of what could happen again to countries that are close friends and allies like Jordan, if the situation of the Palestinian refugees were to deteriorate further. I expect that the U.S. administration will take wise moves on this. What is clear is that the European Union and its Member States are doing all we can to avoid repercussions, but again it is not possible to imagine that we cover for choices or step-backs from others that have been contributing significantly to the budget of UNRWA.

Q.: I have a question on the Turkish operations in the enclave in Afrin against the YPG. How do you see the recent developments, also with regards to the situation of the population on the ground?

I am extremely worried. We discussed this today with the Ministers at the opening of our meeting. I am extremely worried and I will discuss this, among other things, with our Turkish interlocutors - the Minister for European Affairs, Mr. [Ömer] Çelik, is visiting Brussels in the coming days and I will try to set up a meeting with him, even if at short notice.

I am extremely worried for two main reasons, I believe along the lines you have seen in declarations from Member States - I don't see differences here in the European Union. One side is the humanitarian one: we need to make sure that humanitarian access is guaranteed and that the civilian population and people are not suffering from military activities on the ground. We also need to make sure that any military activity is focused at anti-Da'esh, in terms of strategy. And the other thing that worries me and us a lot is the fact that this, among other things, including military activities from

others in Syria, can undermine seriously the resumption of talks in Geneva, which is what, we believe, could really bring sustainable peace and security for Syria with a political transition. This requires the situation on the ground to be as calm as possible and the regime in Damascus to commit to political negotiations under U.N. auspices.

Q.: A couple of questions. One on Israel/Palestine - I am a little bit confused. You said the other month you do not want the U.S. to go [in] it alone. You said just now that the US should not be the only interlocutor. Are you saying that the U.S. should not come out with its own peace proposals and that that should only be done through the Quartet? You've talked in the past about conversations with Kushner, you know the U.S. is working on its own plan. Are you saying they should not go ahead alone with its proposals and there should only be a collective effort? A second quick question on Iran. Secretary of State [of the United States of America, Rex] Tillerson was in London today with Boris Johnson and he talked about starting working group discussions on what Trump and he have called a side agreement in addition to the JCPOA focused on missiles in the region. Is talk of a side agreement, not re-negotiating the JCPOA, but the talk of a side agreement realistic to you?

You know my rule, you ask two questions I choose which one I answer to. No exception today, sorry for that. I will pick up the first one, as it was the main subject of the meeting today.

What I am saying is that it is quite clear by now - something that for us Europeans has always been clear, always, for decades and in particular in these last years - namely that no credible talks and negotiation between the Israelis and the Palestinians will happen if it is imagined as U.S. only effort, but also that no effort will ever bring the two sides at the table if the international multilateral framework does not include the United States. The United States alone would not make it, the international community without the United States would not make it. We need to join forces.

We discussed this at length with Palestinian President [Mahmoud] Abbas, because we believe it is time for both the Israelis and the Palestinians to engage in direct negotiations, accompanied by a framework that is international and regional, that includes the United States but that is not only provided for by the United States. And this is the [Middle East] Quartet, yes indeed, and this is the Quartet plus, we believe: some of the Arab countries that have been working enormously in these months to keep the situation as much as possible under control, that have been working in recent years for instance on the Arab Peace Initiative and that have some leverage in the region, as we do have some leverage, as the Americans have some leverage, and so on and so forth. So in this complicated framework we have - and you're not the only one being confused about the Middle East Peace Process, I think that generations of politicians and journalists might have been confused from time to time, about a process that has been going on forever and with not many results. We could try to turn a crisis into an opportunity and put together joint forces and try to deliver some results to direct negotiations. And this requires a common effort.

I am not suggesting any specific timing or format for a US plan that nobody has seen so far. My impression is also that the US administration in these days might be busy with something different than that. But the point I make is that it was positive that the Quartet [Envoys] met last week - we wanted that meeting to happen. We think it is important that we continue to work as one in the Quartet, the four of us, and that we manage to involve others in this work. This is why, again, I am happy to see that with Norway we are going to have this meeting here in Brussels in 10 days from now. We need to bring forces together. It is not about who does it, the point is that one without the other, we won't make it and we need to do it together.

Q. On the very day that you have met [Palestinian] President [Mahmoud] Abbas and delivered the message that you just delivered, Vice-President [of the United States of America, Mike] Pence has said that the US embassy will not only be moved to Jerusalem - which we knew - but that it will be done by the end of next year. That is a bit of a slap in the face of the EU, is it not?

Why? This is a very well-known position as is my position that I expressed today was very well known already before. 2019 is a long time, and before that the administration had never indicated a date anyway. This to say that first of all I would never imagine that Vice-President Pence sets his travelling agenda on the dates and content of the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Union. This goes in parallel and contacts with our friends in the United States are constant and respective positions are very well known. We discussed about this with Vice-President Pence several times, both here in Europe and in Washington, before the decision was taken. We discussed this with Secretary of State [of the United States of America, Rex] Tillerson here in Brussels in December, few days before the decision was taken, and we were very open and adamant on both sides; on the differences in the approaches but also on the common points.

Again, I would like now to stress the common points, because the fact that we are sitting together in the Quartet, the fact that we are both looking for ways to restart the engine of negotiations, and the fact that we are both aware of the leverage that we have on the parties, all indicate that there is a space for a common effort. I believe this could be done in the coming months, if again, as I stressed, we join forces. Again, I see the time coincidence as a coincidence and I believe this should be interpreted as such. The consistency of the messages we are delivering is there. We passed today messages to [Palestinian] President [Mahmoud] Abbas that reflect in a fully consistent way the messages we delivered to Prime Minister [of Israel, Benjamin] Netanyahu in December, and that we say publicly and that we represent in a united manner.

This is not a surprise because, this is the consolidated position of the European Union since years, and it is based on the Oslo Agreements that we discussed with President Abbas today and on all the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. So, no surprise from our side, no slaps in the face, neither on one side nor the other - simply a very clear position, a very united position and an effort on both sides, for sure on our side, to bring the two parties to the table, with the help and the support of us, together with the United States, together with Russia, together the United Nations, and together with our Arab partners. By the way I would like to stress here again, we have decided to organise in one of the next meetings - hopefully already in February - a meeting with the six Foreign Ministers of the League of Arab States [Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the Palestinians and headed by Jordan] follow-up committee that are following the issue of the Middle East Peace Process to create a close link with the region.

Link to the video:

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