EU Statement - United Nations Security Council: Debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

Mr President,

The situation in the Occupied Palestinian territory continues to deteriorate and 'the perspective of a two-State solution for Israel and Palestine continues to be dismantled piece by piece', as mentioned by the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the 3rd Regional Forum of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona on 8 October. The EU is deeply concerned by the situation in Gaza. Gaza is home to 2 million people who struggle to have access to basic services, sufficient water and electricity supply.

In the past few weeks, as living conditions continue to worsen, the ongoing protests and violence at the Gaza border fence, fuelled by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, have intensified and expanded in nature; they have further worsened the already volatile situation in and around the Strip. Launching of incendiary kites and balloons has now continued for over half a year. It has caused severe damages in Israeli communities near Gaza and must stop. During the same period more than 200 Palestinians have been killed and over 21,000 have been injured, most injuries coming from live ammunition and gas inhalation.

We expect the de-facto authorities in Gaza to do their utmost to prevent further escalation. The EU urges all actors concerned to act with utmost restraint to avoid further loss of life, to prevent any escalation, to not encourage resort to violence, and to not exploit the demonstrations for other means. While recalling Israel’s right to self-defense, we expect the Israeli authorities to respect the principle of necessity and proportionality in its use of force. Serious questions have risen about the proportionate use of force which must be addressed through independent and transparent investigations. The European Union takes note of the Fact-Finding Assessment Mechanism established by the Israel Defence Forces to review its own actions and specific incidents that have taken place on the Israeli-Gaza border since 30 March 2018. Facts must also be established regarding reports about violent attacks against Israel under the guise of the protests.

The European Union will continue its support for the work undertaken by UN Special Coordinator for the Peace process, Nickolay Mladenov. We commend his efforts to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, including the fuel-delivery deal reached last week thanks to his engagement. We call upon the parties to cooperate with the Special Coordinator as well as on the wider international community to support the Special Coordinator in the operationalisation of the proposed humanitarian and economic interventions for Gaza, in continued close coordination with the Palestinian Authority to secure and coordinate amongst others, the provision of lifesaving healthcare needs, to increase the access to clean water and energy supplies, to improve the overall economic conditions and to improve conditions that enable intra-Palestinian unity. The immediate priority must be to reduce the tensions and avoid another conflict in Gaza. The return of the PA to the Gaza strip is indispensable to improve durably the conditions and the humanitarian situation.

Additional financial efforts by the international community are needed. But to ensure lasting results, a fundamental change of the situation in Gaza is crucial. This should include an end to the closure and the full opening of crossing points, while addressing Israel’s legitimate security concerns. In this light, we welcome the continued opening of the Rafah crossing. In the meantime, the EU will continue to support UN and Egyptian efforts towards the reunification of Gaza and the West Bank under one single and legitimate Palestinian Authority. The EU will continue to work towards that end with our partners, the Israelis and the Palestinians, with regional actors, and with our partners within the Middle East Quartet to that end. We hope that the US peace plan for the Middle East will be another contribution in this regard.
Mr President,

Indispensable humanitarian assistance must overtake political divisions. Stopping UNRWA’s important activities could well cause instability and create a vacuum that would only serve the extremists.

That is why the European Union and its Member States are collectively the largest contributors to UNRWA's budget. We are and will continue to be strong, reliable and predictable supporters of the Agency. Just a few weeks ago the EU has increased its financial support to UNRWA by 40 million euro, whereby raising the total contribution to the Agency to 146 million euro since the beginning of this year.

In the ministerial meeting that the EU co-chaired along with the two EUMS Sweden and Germany, and other partners on 27 September 2018, participants underlined the importance of fully supporting the ability of UNRWA to implement its mandate effectively in assisting and protecting Palestine refugees while continuing to ensure transparency and accountability in its programmes.

Next year will be an even tougher year for UNRWA. In this context we need to stress, once again, the crucial importance for UNRWA and donors to intensify efforts to put the agency on stable financial footing while maintaining focus on its mandate. We will continue to do our utmost to ensure that UNRWA and its dedicated staff continue to operate until a just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the plight of Palestine refugees is finally reached.

Mr President,

Twenty five years after the signing of the Oslo Agreements, a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians is still sorely missing. While Oslo has not accomplished its overall goal, one of its major achievements is that Palestinian institutions are in place. It is in the interest of both the Palestinians and the Israelis that their stability is preserved.

The EU will continue to urge both parties to refrain from unilateral actions that undermine the relaunch of the negotiations or imperil the viability of the two-state solution. There is no justification for incitement and violence. We follow with great concern the situation on the ground, in particular the pending demolition of the Bedouin village of Khan al-Ahmar, including its school, in a location of strategic interest for preserving the contiguity of a future Palestinian state, as well as the decision taken Sunday by the Israeli authorities to advance plans of settlement expansion in Hebron. The EU has repeatedly urged Israel not to execute its decision to demolish the community or to displace its citizens and reiterates its strong opposition to Israel’s settlement policy and actions taken in this context, including demolitions, and confiscation - including of EU funded projects -, evictions, and forced transfers. Settlements are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two State solution impossible.

We must work together to reverse the current negative developments on the ground that lead us away from a negotiated two-state solution with Jerusalem as the future capital of both states. A two-state solution based on the 1967 borders that meets Israeli and Palestinian security needs and Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty, ends the occupation and resolves all final status issues remains the only viable and realistic way to end the conflict and achieve just and lasting peace. The EU will continue to work towards that end with both parties, and its regional and international partners, starting from the Middle East Quartet.

***
The conflict in Syria has continued for more than seven years and has caused immense suffering. Millions of people have been forced to find refuge in other countries, or have faced starvation, sieges and armed offensives inside Syria along with blatant and ongoing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, in particular by the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime bears the overwhelming responsibility for the catastrophic humanitarian situation and the suffering of the Syrian people.

The EU acknowledges the signing of the memorandum to establish a ceasefire on Idlib and calls on the Astana guarantors to ensure that this ceasefire is upheld and to safeguard the last remaining de-escalation zone in Syria.

The EU expects that they will follow through on their commitment and also guarantee the protection of civilian lives and infrastructure, as well as safe, unhindered and sustained humanitarian access across Syria.

The EU expresses its full support for the mandate and efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Syria to establish a constitutional committee that will be the first step towards an inclusive, credible and sustainable political solution in Syria in accordance with UNSCR 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué. The EU commits to remain at the forefront of the international efforts for accountability and justice in Syria. All those responsible for breaches of international law and human rights law, some of which may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity must be held accountable. We reiterate our condemnation of the repeated use of chemical weapons in Syria by the Syrian regime and Daesh as confirmed by the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism. We are deeply concerned by continuing reports by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission pointing to the use of chemical weapons in different locations in Syria in recent months.

The EU welcomes the recent decision by the CWC Conference of States Parties to enhance the OPCW’s capacity to identify the perpetrators of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The EU has imposed restrictive measures on Syrian high-level officials and scientists and adopted a new global sanctions regime for the use of chemical weapons.

In the meantime, we reiterate our calls upon all parties in conflict and those actors with influence over them, especially the Syrian regime and its allies, to ensure unhindered sustained humanitarian access and medical evacuations to all Syrians in need. The situation in Rukhban camp is particularly appalling. The EU calls on all stakeholders to facilitate immediate humanitarian access.

The EU supports the rights of Syrians to return to their homes voluntarily, in safety and dignity in line with international humanitarian law, when conditions allow. The EU calls for safe and equal access to civil documentation, housing and property rights to ensure that the rights of Syrians are preserved and that those displaced are provided the basic conditions to be able to return to their homes in a dignified, safe and voluntary way when conditions allow. However, the EU agrees with the UNHCR assessment that conditions for non-coercive and safe repatriation are not in place. It is critical that work undertaken to build those conditions is well coordinated with all relevant actors in particular the UNHCR. The EU will organise a third Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in the last week of March 2019 to support the UN-led political process for a solution to the conflict, provide a platform for the voices of Syrian civil society and seek pledges by EU member states and international donors.

The EU reiterates that it will be ready to assist in the reconstruction of Syria only when a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties in the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, is firmly under way.