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**Address to the European Parliament on
the United Nations General Assembly,
the Middle East Peace Process and the
Arab spring**

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament

Strasbourg, 27 September 2011

Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament

This year's UN General Assembly took place at a time of huge change and growing tension in the world. The combination of the economic crisis, the Arab spring and the stalled Middle East peace process creates a volatile mix. Europe must respond to the challenge - both at home and abroad.

Today - at your request - I will focus on two issues: Middle East peace process and the Arab spring. However, I would just notify honourable members that during the week in NY I met with ministers from our strategic partners - Russia, China, USA, Brazil, India, Mexico and participated in a number of key events - counter terrorism forum and jointly with UN Women an event highlighting the role of women, led by the President of Brazil.

Turning first to the Middle East peace process

I have visited the region 7 times this year, each time with a single purpose - to promote a negotiated settlement of the conflict and to demonstrate the importance of Europe's role. Over the summer period I have worked with Quartet envoys, with the Arab League and been in discussion with the Prime Minister of Israel and President of the Palestinian Authority together with Prime Minister Fayyad.

It is clear, honourable members, that these efforts have succeeded in demonstrating the EU role - a player and a payer. Our financial commitment matched by our political strength - For too long the EU has been on the sidelines of the Peace Process. I have worked to achieve a greater EU role as I believe we are ideally placed as a friend of both parties.

I've said before that my vision of the European External Action Service is a conflict prevention and resolution approach - we need now to put this vision into practice. The dividends of peace are crucial for the future stability and prosperity of our neighbourhood.

Prior to the UN discussions I had participated in Cairo in the Arab League follow up committee discussions as we considered how best to support our objective - two states - peace and security for all.

Exploratory talks with Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian leaders at the end of August led me to believe that the way forward was to put together a package of various actions with the objective of getting Israelis and Palestinians together in talks. During my September visit in the region it became clear that a Quartet statement and possibly a GA resolution in addition to what President Abbas is seeking to do would be part of such a package.

In my meetings with many Arab leaders I was impressed by the stated desire to end the conflict and the wish to bring stability and normality against the backdrop of potential unrest sparked by a lack of progress. I believe this is also understood by the Israeli leaders who see their country surrounded by uncertainty, and fear for their country's security.

I have impressed on all those I have met in the region that now is the time to seek peace between Israelis and Palestinians on the basis of a negotiated agreement that will lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State as a core element of the peace agreement, and will end the occupation that is so detrimental to the development of both peoples.

The UN speeches of President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu differed in rhetoric but shared a desire for peace. Both speeches focused on the need to go to negotiations and the wish to end the conflict.

At my instigation, the Quartet responded to this immediately by calling on both parties to enter into negotiations within four weeks, to agree on the issues of territory and security within three months, to have made substantial progress within six months, and to reach an agreement by the end of next year.

We expect both sides to agree to come to negotiations within four weeks. I believe that the EU, including this Parliament, should play a central role in that process. We are well placed and I will stay personally involved.

The Quartet has called the parties to refrain from provocative actions if negotiations are to resume and be effective. It is therefore with deep regret that I have learnt today about the decision to advance settlement expansion in East Jerusalem with new housing units in Gilo. This plan should be reversed. Settlement activity threatens the viability of an agreed two-state solution and runs contrary to the Israeli stated commitment to resume negotiations.

We have also called for a Donors Conference to support further the impressive achievements of the Palestinian Authority's state-building, and will consult on additional steps that will quickly lead to greater independence and sovereignty for the Palestinians over their affairs. Facilitating Palestinian trade is essential to support state-building and develop the Palestinian economy. We have proposed concrete action to open our markets to Palestinian agricultural and fishery products and I am glad that earlier today the European Parliament voted in favour of this important agreement.

Gaza also remains a priority. As I have always said, the crossings must be opened to allow the flow of humanitarian aid, imports, exports and people. We need to enable children to go to school and ordinary people, and the younger generation in particular, to get on with and build their lives.

I will continue to work to allow the economic recovery of Gaza while addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns.

My second issue today is the Arab Spring.

Since the popular demonstrations in Tunisia, the Arab Spring has touched every Arab state in the region. It is an event of truly historic proportions that will shape not only the future of the Arab World but our own future too. It is a revolution based on values: justice, dignity, freedom. Europe's response to these events will speak more than any form of rhetoric about its real commitment to democratic principles.

We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to build deep and lasting democracy and prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean – doing so will require vision, perseverance and a team effort from all of Europe's institutions. We need to stay focussed and committed. The scale of the challenge requires a joined-up EU response – what we do on trade and mobility are as important to the overall success of our strategy as what we do on election monitoring and supporting development.

Six months on we still need to match words with delivery. That is why I believe it is time to re-energise the process.

Last May, I set out here my vision for North Africa and the Middle East – a vision of deep-rooted democracy, and the benefits of the development which will come with it.

My priority is delivery. After the revolutions we face a growing sense of impatience and uncertainty. It is vital that we translate our good intentions into results and assistance on the ground. The process of change was never going to be easy or fast. Real change takes time and will be measured in years, not seasons. Our response – which began in our Commission Communication of 8 March – is built on the need to acknowledge past mistakes and listen without imposing. We are doing exactly that and it requires perseverance and sustained commitment. Success should translate into what I have called "deep Democracy".

Political transformation will only succeed with economic opportunity. In the short term, the uprisings were motivated by economic hardship and have made those hardships more severe. There is no single template for our support, no one size fits all approach.

We have to develop tailor made policies in response to the needs identified by each country. Engagement with Arab partners (and the Arab League in particular) is essential – "we are working with them, not at them" which is why I was a prime mover in the establishment of the Cairo Group.

But we are in a new era where dialogue between governments is not enough: success requires engagement with and between societies. Here the European Parliament is unique in what it can offer to those in search of democracy, in Tunisia and beyond, particularly now that Constituent assemblies will become the key institutional actors. Building and sustaining political parties is essential – the experience in the EP is unmatched.

In New York I participated in a high level event on women in politics. I firmly believe that the continued central role of women in the Arab Spring is a key test of the strength and extent of the changes.

Women, as well as the younger generation, were instrumental in the protests that toppled the repressive regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and they must remain central to shaping the reforms that follow. Deep and lasting democracy must be for all of the people – not just one gender.

We had an encouraging signal on Sunday from the most unexpected place, Saudi Arabia, when King Abdullah announced that women, as from next year, will be appointed to the Shura Council. They will also be able to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections in four years' time.

Many of us would have hoped to see women voting in this Thursday's ballot. But this decision – if properly implemented – marks an initial step in advancing women's participation in the political, economic and social life of the country.

The future of the Arab Spring depends on Tunisia and Egypt becoming success stories. What happens there as they move to elections and build a system of civil rights and democratic values, will send vital messages elsewhere.

Time is of the essence: expectations are high, and we need to see visible results.

Tomorrow I travel to Tunisia, to set up a new EU task force for that country – It takes place in a key moment to show our support, just three weeks ahead of the first truly democratic elections of 23 October. An EU Election Observation Mission is already deployed on the ground. Given the highly political nature of the event and the key contribution from the EP to support the countries in transition, I have invited a delegation from this House to join me in Tunis. I hope this will be a model for the future.

The Task-Force will focus on some of the key issues which will have a direct impact on the lives of Tunisians: business, investment and the economy; social development and democracy.

The Task-Force is unique in bringing around the table not only our Tunisian partners but also the international financing institutions and private sector representatives. It will be the occasion to send a very strong political message with the opening of negotiations for a new privileged partnership that reflects our shared ambitions. It will be also an opportunity to better coordinate European and international efforts to focus on faster and more effective support. This tailor made approach, based on decentralized and coordinated use of all our instruments, will be then used with other countries in transition to better identify needs and accelerate support.

In Egypt, where we expect that the interim authorities will confirm soon the date for the elections, it is urgent that the ruling military council continues to engage with political representatives and civil society to get a new electoral law for the new democratic era.

The Egyptian authorities have declined European and other international offers of involvement in direct election observation, but we will be working with them on other urgent measures, through the Instrument for Stability, to enhance the capacity of Egypt's High Electoral Commission (HEC), and help judges and poll workers to manage and effectively oversee these first free and fair democratic elections in Egypt, as well as laying the basis for the organisation of future elections. I know many in this House are working to support the strengthening of political parties in Egypt and I pay tribute to their work.

In some other countries in the region, the authorities have sought to respond to calls for greater freedoms by intensifying reform processes which were already underway before the Arab Spring.

In Morocco a new Constitution was developed and approved overwhelmingly by referendum. This promises increased separation of powers and greater public accountability as well as improved respect for human rights. Now fast and sustained implementation is key.

In Jordan the Lower House endorsed on 24th September, numerous (41) constitutional amendments which included the establishment of a constitutional court and the creation of an independent commission overseeing elections. The new elections law and the political parties' law, which should ensure genuine political pluralism, will be debated by the Parliament in October.

Implementation is essential to keep the momentum and credibility of the process: these reforms should lead to the consolidation of the institutions safeguarding democracy and the rule of law, the enhancement of the independence of the judiciary and the empowerment of the political parties.

In the case of Morocco and Jordan we will continue to build on the Advanced Status. In Morocco we are developing a new Action Plan focusing on the reform agenda. We will shortly launch a Mobility Partnership. And we will step up technical and financial cooperation. We also look to Parliament to play its part.

We want to accelerate ongoing trade negotiations and prepare mandates for deep and comprehensive free trade agreements with Morocco, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia.

Approval by Parliament of the EU-Morocco Agreement on Liberalization Measures on Agricultural Products, Fish and Fishery Products, will send a signal of our desire to deepen our relationship in practical ways to the benefit of both the Moroccan people and EU citizens.

Fighting continues in Sirte, Bani Walid and a few other pockets of resistance, but Libya is transitioning fast from a crisis situation to the creation of a democracy. Last week I took part in a Friends of Libya meeting in New York, where we were able to deliver a message of strong continuing commitment to the new Libya.

President Jalil has pledged to build a society based on tolerance and reconciliation and to uphold the principles of human rights. The NTC and the international community must also establish control over the large stocks of weapons amassed by the previous regime to prevent them falling into the wrong hands. All this is essential for a successful transition.

In addition to our office in Benghazi, our new EU office in Tripoli is working closely with other partners, under UN coordination, to determine the needs there.

Libya is a rich country: our know-how and technical assistance matters more than the size of our cooperation programmes. This is, I believe, also the recommendation from those of you who have visited Tripoli. Libyans want to improve trade links with Europe, and need our help to develop a civil society that deserves that name. We are already preparing projects to support civil society and women in particular.

I have also taken note of Ana Gomes' excellent suggestion to organise a visit of Libyan officials and civil society to the upcoming Spanish elections.

In Syria and Yemen we still face crisis situations.

In Syria, a brutal regime remains unwilling to listen to its people and to change. We are pursuing a double track approach: by stepping up measures designed to undermine the regime's support and by achieving a further isolation of the Syrian leadership.

Since the beginning of unrest in mid-March, and in view of the continuing fierce campaign by the Syrian regime against its own population, we suspended our cooperation and have progressively ratcheted up sanctions including an embargo on any Syrian oil coming into the EU. Our message to the Syrian people is clear - and so was your resolution adopted last 15 September: our sanctions are designed to have maximum impact on those supporting the Syrian regime, while minimizing any potential negative impact on the Syrian population.

In Yemen, too, we have strongly supported the initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which has worked tirelessly in support of political agreement. This weekend saw a carefully coordinated sequence of diplomatic responses and action on the ground to President Saleh's unexpected return on Friday, with the GCC, Arab League, EU, US and now the UN Security Council all calling for cessation of violence, and a very rapid and concrete transfer of power. No-one will be satisfied with just another open-ended promise.

We will continue to work together. I look forward to your resolution. I continue to thank the European Parliament for its support, its constructive criticism and its advice, as the EU moves forward, armed with a clear strategy in uncertain times, and hoping for real and sustained progress both in Israel and Palestine, and across North Africa and the wider Middle East. Further steps were taken in New York last week: we must work together so that we will have real cause for celebration when the UN General Assembly next convenes in September 2012.