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New challenges for NATO and the EU

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For Europe, the Middle East is our immediate neighbourhood. Many factors tie us together: history, economic links, shared interests and close personal relationships. EU engagement with the region is deep and has a long history. For years, including the most difficult periods, we have actively supported the search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. This year, we will celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Barcelona process. And we are fast expanding our relationship with the Gulf Co-operation Council.

The reason for this engagement is simple: security in the Middle East has a direct impact on security in Europe. Our fates are tied together. Moreover, the Middle East is increasingly present in our city centres, not just on the other side of the Mediterranean. Violence and instability in the Middle East has knock-on effects on the streets of Europe.

Politics is about changing things, not merely managing the status quo. We need to tackle both new and old challenges. It is clear that there are no quick fixes to the many problems of the Middle East. But equally that is no reason for procrastination.

The agenda for action is clear. We need to proceed on four tracks:

1. The Middle East Peace Process.
2. Iraq.
3. Iran.
4. Regional co-operation.

1. The Middle East Peace Process

The success of the Shann al-Shdkh summit has highlighted that this is indeed a moment of opportunity. The watchwords of the Palestinian Presidential elections were dignity and hope. We also have a new Israeli government. And a formal ceasefire is now in place. Both sides are taking brave decisions, and both peoples are yearning for peace. But many challenges still remain:

Israel's disengagement from Gaza will be a huge challenge. Palestinian militants and settlers can be expected to become more active as the implementation of Gaza disengagement approaches. Israelis need reassurance on security. Palestinians need reassurance that Gaza first does not become Gaza only, which would seriously weaken President Abbas and his agenda of peace and reform.

Everyone - Israelis, Palestinians, Europeans, Americans and the Arab neighbours - has a shared interest in making Gaza disengagement a success. This means hard work by all of us on security and law and order. But there must be an equal effort on how we can improve the catastrophic economic and social situation across the Palestinian territories. We therefore need rapid progress on jobs, social services and rebuilding of infrastructure.

Moreover, for the Gaza disengagement plan to work, we need to give a political perspective to the Palestinians. They need to know that our collective aim remains the same: a negotiated two-state solution, ending the occupation that began in 1967.

It is probably too soon to jump-start final status negotiations. But at minimum both sides must refrain from unilateral actions which prejudice the outcome of these negotiations, as Secretary of State Condolcezza Rice said again last weekend.

2. Iraq

I am very pleased that we have entered a new and more positive phase - both for Iraq itself and for US-European relations. The images of the Iraqi elections were moving and encouraging. There is a lot more work to do, but the elections were an important step forward. The task ahead is for all Iraqis to get a greater sense of ownership of their country's future. Freedom and democracy are the aim, but they require mutual trust and political compromise.

In the current situation, the best and indeed only option is to continue the process set out in UN Security Council

resolution 1546. The political process plus the on-going strengthening of Iraqi security services will hopefully lead to reduction of violence. We Europeans, must and will deepen our engagement collectively i.e. through the EU.

Concretely, we are preparing a package of integrated and tailor-made measures: plans to train around 800 senior Iraqi judges, police and other officials. Any successful, functioning state requires a cadre of professionals to run it. Our training efforts will be accompanied by an additional aid package of €200 million, on top of the €350 million already committed - and spent - by the European "Union in 2003. For their part, individual member-states have already pledged some €2.2 billion for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Perhaps the most promising area where the European Union can play a role is in providing assistance with the drafting of the Constitution and, more generally, in promoting national reconciliation. The danger of political fragmentation in Iraq remains real. To prevent that, you will see "more Europe" in Iraq in months ahead, helping the Iraqis to run their own country.

3. Iran.

All countries are difficult to understand. Iran is one of the most difficult. It has a fantastic history. Potentially it has a fantastic future too. And it could have an important role in a stable and democratic Middle East. Iran has a strong national identity and many talented people in business, politics and the arts. Its more recent history has in many ways been tragic. It is therefore not surprising that, in the light of that history, many Iranians have a profound suspicion of the outside world. And it is not surprising either that many other countries have a profound suspicion of Iran.

Iran is a sophisticated but complicated country and it is not easy for others to deal with. No doubt they think the same about us.

In the middle of all this one thing is clear. We need to stop nuclear proliferation, especially in the unstable Middle East. Even if Iranian intentions are peaceful, it would be dangerous for others even to suspect Iran of having a nuclear weapons programme. That alone could trigger a nuclear arms race. More nuclear weapons in this volatile region is the last thing we want. At this point the whole of the NPT regime would be more or less in tatters.

The Iranians should not be surprised if others are suspicious of them. They have conducted a whole range of nuclear activities and experiments without declaring them - as they are obliged to do - to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran, like every other signatory of the NPT, has every right to a peaceful nuclear programme. But we need to be convinced that it is peaceful.

Because of their past behaviour, the Iranians have got to make up a lot of ground. That is why we in Europe, in dialogue with Iran, are seeking objective guarantees of the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme.

Iran has taken some very positive and important steps. First of all it has signed the Additional Protocol to the NPT - and it is implementing it. This gives IAEA inspectors full access to facilities in Iran. Second, it has agreed to suspend its enrichment programme while we continue negotiations to try and reach a broader solution.

That broader solution is what we are looking for. There are two alternative courses ahead of us. If we can achieve a lasting understanding on the nuclear question, there is potential for a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationship between Europe and Iran. I hope that this would have an impact not just in the nuclear areas but in other questions that concern us: the human rights situation in Iran, its attitude to the Middle East Peace Process, and its connections to terrorist organisations.

If we are able to move forward in these areas, then it is possible to imagine Iran as one of the important pillars not just of the Middle East but of the wider Eurasian community. With a modern economy, Iran would be a respected and constructive partner in security, an exporter of stability and energy - not just oil and gas but of human energy and ideas.

The other course takes us into a downward spiral of suspicion, isolation, poverty - perhaps even danger. It would be bad for us, bad for the Middle East, and bad for Iran.

We are absolutely committed to the first course and to a diplomatic solution. We are in the early stages, but together we have already made a small breakthrough. Now we need to widen this breach so that we both gain more confidence and more mutual advantages. One day, it might even become a door that others could go through too. Surely a concerted international approach has the greatest chance to consolidate this progress and turn it into a genuine success?

4. Regional co-operation

Let me finish by making two points about regional co-operation. In Europe we have learned the hard way that sustainable peace and security require regional co-operation and integration. Managing crises is not the same as building security. And building a zone of co-operative security is exactly what we are trying to do with our Mediterranean partners through the Barcelona process. That process has achieved much in the past ten years, not least because we are focusing on top political priorities and because our efforts are backed by annual funds of around €1 bn a year in grants and €2 bn in soft loans.

The second version of regional co-operation relates to what the countries in a region do amongst themselves. In Europe, as you know, peace is secured through institutional integration, the spread of democracy and a strong legal order. Clearly, there can be no simple export of this European 'model'. But it is notable and encouraging that many other regions in the world are embarking on similar paths. Just look at the African Union, Mercosur and ASEAN.

Security, democracy and regional co-operation all reinforce each other - as both Europe and the Middle East demonstrate, in different ways. In the Middle East, political tensions are high, democratic forms of governance are weak or absent while regional co-operation is ineffective. The remarkable thing about the Arab world is the relative lack of co-operation in spite of a common culture.

Many ideas have been floated to promote different forms of regional co-operation. Some have talked of a Persian Gulf Security Forum. Others are thinking of a broader 'OSCE for the Middle East'. Yet others want to concentrate on Israel-Palestine and the neighbouring states. Each of these options has a different rationale and merit. But it is probably best to start quickly and focused on security perceptions in the Persian Gulf. A Persian Gulf security forum could do much to help fit the new Iraq into broader context; work on Iranian concerns; and tackle common and cross-border threats. Countries that feel less threatened tend to behave less threatening.

The initiative to promote such regional co-operation must come from the region. But we Europeans and others; including the US and the UN, can do a lot to help. Up until now, regional leaders and outside powers alike have been addicted to seeking security in balance-of-power calculations and short-term bilateral deals.

But the record of frequent wars and continuing instability shows the costs and limitations of this approach. Now there is a chance to break out of this loop. Let us seize this opportunity to move from crisis management to building co-operative security.

The spoken word is applicable!

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