

Nuremberg International Human Rights 1997

The European Union and the Peace Process in the Middle East

speech by

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a very great pleasure to be able to address you today, on the occasion of the presentation of the Human Rights Prize, and I should like to thank you, on behalf of the President of the European Parliament, José Maria Gil-Robles Gil-Robles, for the invitation.

But first of all, I must express my great gratitude on behalf of the human rights movement to the city of Nürnberg. Nürnberg is well known not only for its art and architecture: after the Second World War it became a symbol, throughout the world, of reconciliation. This is why Nürnberg's commitment to human rights, which were first trampled under foot here and later restored, is of quite particular importance.

You have invited a number of prominent guests, and I hope that those of us present here today are agreed in thanking the jury for their choice of this year's prizewinners. They are being presented with a prize today because they have both been fearless in their pursuit of peace and respect for human rights - as fighters for reconciliation in the Middle East. My speech will enable me to talk about the peace process in the Middle East from the point of view of the European Union, with particular reference, of course, to the European Parliament.

We should not forget that the strategic position of this 'geographical pivot' between Asia, Europe and Africa has been of crucial importance since ancient times.

It is a region whose oil deposits make it one of the most prosperous in the world, which is why it has always excite the envy of others.

In 1991 the Gulf War temporarily restored the hegemony of the Islamic states' petrodollars. But there were already signs of a development whereby economic and religiously motivated elements once again threatened peace.

When I use the term 'Middle East', I am referring geographically to the Mashreq countries (Egypt, the Lebanon, Syria and Jordan) and Israel and Palestine.

Chronologically, too, I am referring only to the period since the Madrid Conference of 1991, i.e. the most recent chapter in the history of the peace process in the Middle East. There is one key factor which needs to be looked at from a geopolitical point of view and which helps to shape the complex picture of this region. It is clear that the dynamic of change is closely connected with developments in the international system of major powers, which up to the end of the Second World War was shaped by Europe, then from 1950 to 1960 by the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA, and today by the hegemony of the United States and its privileged allies in this region. The European Union has been playing a leading role in this process since the Madrid Conference of 1991. The Middle East peace conference was hailed as one of the most significant political events in the last decade of this century.

Associated with this were not only all the activities on the part of the European Institutions seeking to create a new regional system in the Middle East; there were also numerous follow-up conferences intended to increase the economic cooperation and social progress of the peoples involved. Despite all these attempts, the Middle East is still the world's powder keg.

From the point of view of the partners, the peace agreements do not go far enough. Frustration was inevitable, preparing the way for further acts of violence. Social inequality, ethnic conflict and lack of progress towards democracy have also contributed to instability throughout the entire region.

A second negotiating phase began in 1993 with the 'Oslo approach'. When the Israeli cabinet under Yitzhak Rabin signed this agreement in August 1993, mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO was inevitable.

Our work is carried out in various delegations, consisting of Members of the European Parliament and members of the respective parliaments in the Middle East. There are



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delegations for relations with Israel, with the Mashreq countries and the Gulf States and with the Palestinian Legislative Council. The European Parliament maintains useful contacts with its counterparts in other countries in order to build bridges towards a peaceful solution. Heads of government address these parliamentary meetings and answer questions to make their political intentions clear.

Shortly after the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, both the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the PLO President, Yasser Arafat, were invited to address the European Parliament in plenary session in Strasbourg. The former President of the European Parliament, Klaus Hänsch, paid a return visit and was able to explain the activities of the European institutions in Gaza, Jericho and Jerusalem with a view to finding a balanced solution to the Palestine question,.

After 1993, with the historic handshake between Arafat and Rabin under the satisfied smile of President Clinton outside the White House in Washington, many people thought that a golden age of lasting peace was dawning. A number of different initiatives on the part of the European Union had contributed to this apparent success. The hopes of the people in the regions concerned hung on the lips of the two statesmen, neither of whom lost sight of the vision of 'reconciliation'. However, since the brutal murder of Yitzhak Rabin there are very few politicians in power whose vision of the future is one of peace. Egotistical, nationalistic stubbornness in the two camps has clipped the wings of the already weakened dove of peace in the Middle East. The tiny germ of hope of a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians has been trampled into the dust with every fresh Palestinian bomb and every new Israeli housing development in the occupied territories.

Nevertheless, and because of the very fact that many people believe the peace process in the Middle East has been killed off, the European Parliament is continuing its peace initiatives in the region. In this overall process we have used our own political potential to bring closer together the various political parties in the Middle East. We continue to condemn deranged attacks by suicide bombers, and we continue to attack the building of Israeli settlement in the occupied territories because they send the wrong message to the Palestinians. The European Parliament seeks to remain a democratic forum in which the two parties to the conflict can express their views freely.

Dialogue between the two parties must not be broken off: there is a need to talk, to listen and surprise oneself by revising prejudices after conversations with other people. Instead of supplying arms to this unstable region, all the Members of the Union must agree in future only to provide financial, technical and intellectual aid in building a stable region. This was the very area in which the European Parliament was successful in the preparations for the elections in the autonomous Palestinian territory.

Parliament also ensured that constitutional experts from EU Member States were involved in drafting a basic constitution. The European Union's budget has been expanded to provide financial and technical aid.

In 1997 the European Parliament organised a symbolic meeting in Strasbourg between Israeli MPs and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. It was important to facilitate support for any form of dialogue in order to resume the peace process.

The European Union's Special Envoy to the Middle East, Ambassador Miguel Ángel Moratinos, has endeavoured from the beginning of his mandate to cooperate closely with the European Parliament. Thanks to the various efforts made by the European Union, the European Parliament and the Special Envoy, we have become the most important supporter of the peace process.

In April 1997, partly thanks to the intervention of the Union's Special Envoy, a ten-point code of conduct was drawn up; it is to apply to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. The code was also presented to the United States as a confidence-building measure to revive the dialogue which had come to a standstill almost a year previously. Despite the absence of a common foreign policy, this initiative is supported by all 15 Member States of the European Union and it can be seen, not least by the USA, as the basis of a new European philosophy.

With this initiative the European Union wanted to present itself as a political partner in order to further the peace process. The efforts by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to revive the peace talks in the Middle East must also be seen in this light. The European Union has supported her in her endeavours and has not left her to fend for herself. In its letter to the United States, the Luxembourgish Council Presidency mentioned, on behalf of the Fifteen, a European proposal to create a standing security committee to facilitate joint action by the United States and the European Union in the event of a crisis. In so doing, it passed on the



appeal by the European Council of June 1997 for peace in the Middle East.

The main points are:

- the right of all states and all peoples in the region to a life in peace within safe and recognized borders;
- respect for the legitimate desire of the Palestinians to determine their own future;
- application of the principle of 'peace in exchange for land';
- no violent appropriation of territory;
- respect for human rights;
- rejection of any form of terrorism;
- good neighbourly relations;
- compliance with existing agreements; and
- the rejection of counterproductive unilateral initiatives.

In this connection special mention must be made of the two conferences of the European Union and the Mediterranean states in Barcelona and Malta, since they established a framework for creating close links between the two new partners in the political, economic and cultural fields.

This early stage in the process in Barcelona was not, by any means, a media event or an insulated political act. Given the major difficulties in the Middle East, the progress which has been achieved hitherto is quite substantial. It is important to bear in mind that in the last 22 months the Barcelona process has been the only forum, in an extremely difficult political context, where all participants in the region can work together constructively: dialogue created by the European Union - something which would have seemed unthinkable in the past.

The task now is to create a genuine dialogue between civilizations and between regions: the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations depends to a very great extent on mutual understanding between the peoples of the Jewish, Islamic and Christian faiths. Beliefs, culture and politics are very closely interwoven.

Reconstruction in Germany after the Second World War was possible only with the generous aid of Germany's former enemies. The Marshall package and the technical aid in rebuilding the ruined country were the basis for fifty years of peace in Europe. Germany was not kept artificially small and poor by its victorious enemies; it would have become dissatisfied and would have sought to gain the upper hand again. The founding fathers of Europe had learnt their lesson from history. They realised that there could never be a genuine peace between oppressors and the oppressed. This is why they gave substance to their vision of a free, democratic Europe based on solidarity, without obtaining any prior guarantees. They had a vision of a community of equals, which they achieved, stage by stage, despite all the national differences. Again and again it was only dialogue between the different parties which brought meaningful progress for Europe. This is the message of the two prizewinners in the Middle East. Without people like them, peace in the Middle East would be a thing of no substance. The European Parliament, too, seeks to continue the fight for a critical dialogue and the understanding that only social justice can bring peace to the region.

We talk a lot about humanity and human rights. I am firmly convinced that everyone has good and bad in him. But they are not both always apparent. Often the bad side has more support than the good. Atrocities continue to be the order of the day. If mankind succeeds in effectively combatting what is intentionally evil, the good would have more success. This solemn occasion today is on the side of goodness, to single out those who have been a shining example of reconciliation.

Thank you.