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»EU's Solana says Hamas leader's statements step in right directions

Text of report by Muhammad Shakir Abdallah headlined "Javier Solana: Mish'al's statements step in right direction of holding negotiations under President Abbas", carried by Palestinian newspaper Al-Quds on 21 January

Jerusalem: Javier Solana, High Representative for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, has said in an interview with Al-Quds that the contacts by US and European officials who recently visited the region have produced a genuine opportunity for developing ideas to help push the peace process ahead, that the time has come for settling the conflict instead of continuing to manage it and that this might be the appropriate moment for focusing on an overall settlement. Solana added that the Quartet will meet in the first days in February to discuss the outcome of the Arab and international meetings. Solana stated that the European Union [EU] supports the convocation of an international conference at the appropriate time and after good preparation for the relevant parties seek to render it a success and will not accept the failure of such an international conference at this level.

The following is the text of the interview:

[Abdallah] This is the second interview Al-Quds conducts with you since December. We would like to know if new developments have taken place in the region that made you decide to undertake this current visit to the Middle East?

[Solana] Much has taken place in the region that made me decide to pay this visit at the threshold of the new year. I was here last December and visited many countries to analyse the situation in 2006 with their leaders, for last year was a year full of complications. Many meetings were held in Washington early in 2007. I also held talks with many Arab leaders, and exerted efforts to give a vital push to the peace process.

After these meetings, I decided to visit the region to share these ideas and feelings with the leaders of the region and try to become acquainted with their course of action. I believe that in the wake of the trip of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and what it achieved there is an opportunity that looms in the horizon. This permits us to say that the ideas for pushing the peace process ahead have now materialized. Though I am speaking to you while I am on the first half of my trip, I sense that progress might be achieved and have as many countries as possible participate in reactivating this process.

I believe that the time has come for the peace process to move one step ahead and try to move from the state of crisis management to the stage of conflict settlement. We have tried for a long time to seek a partial settlement for the cause but the time, most probably, has come to focus on settling the cause in a comprehensive manner and prepare a framework to mobilize resources for settling the conflict.

[Abdallah] In an interview Al-Quds recently conducted with Rice, she spoke about her meeting with you in Washington. Is there some kind of coordination between the United States and the EU for your visit came immediately after her visit to the region. Other European officials and ministers may visit the region too?

[Solana] As you know, I represent the EU, its leaders and ministers during my visit. We and the Americans are members of the International Quartet. I was in Washington in December to meet the new UN secretary general to become acquainted with his stands and explain the EU stand and whether we can substantiate the ideas I spoke about a short while ago on the ground. Therefore, we will be able to share these ideas during these trips and the Quartet will meet early in February and we will find out if the Quartet backed by the Arab countries can push the peace process ahead. This might take place and we hope that this will be realized.

[Abdallah] What is the EU's stand on the convocation of an international conference?

[Solana] As you know, we have always supported an international conference at the appropriate time as stipulated in the road map. We have always been thinking about this. The difficult question one needs to answer is when is the appropriate time for this conference so that it might be more beneficial and give the best of results? I believe that the Israeli and Palestinian sides must have enough time and we must prepare for it in a good manner. The two sides need to hold several meetings before such a conference can convene. It must succeed because we cannot afford the failure of this international conference and all elements for its success must be secured.

[Abdallah] Secretary Rice during her tour focused on the comprehensive settlement and preparations for the final-status solution and not on interim steps?

[Solana] I would like to speak here about the final-status negotiations. We must define the general framework for the final status solution within a certain period of time. This does not mean that the situation will be settled on the ground for there is need for talks to start as of now until the final status solution is attained. This resembles a house that we define from outside but we need to know what is in it. We know the general guidelines and the framework but we need to specify the content during bilateral talks between the two sides with the help of the international community for reaching agreement on the final-status solution takes place through the negotiations.

[Abdallah] What impressions did you get from your meeting with President Mahmud Abbas?

[Solana] The meeting with President Abbas was very good. I have had a very good relationship with him for many years. We held a fruitful discussion of many issues, including the ideas about the general framework, the political dimension. He was very interested to listen to these ideas, which he said he fully supports. He said that he rejects the idea of temporary borders. We also discussed the efforts to achieve national unity either by forming a government or other forms. He added: I support some of the forms or mechanisms that will ensure Palestinian unity.

Unfortunately, the Palestinians are currently in a state of confrontation, particularly in the Gaza Strip, where there is an exchange of fire, kidnappings, and other things. This must stop if we want to move towards a final solution and this should take place by having the Palestinian factions discuss their course of actions, where they want to go, and try to do this united.

I have no information about the national unity government that President Abbas will discuss in Damascus. We will get better information once the meetings end in Damascus on how to reach agreement on a government.

[Abdallah] Will the EU accept the national unity government that Hamas and Fatah will form or are there specific conditions?

[Solana] First of all, violence and infighting among the two factions must stop and they have to discuss how to settle their political differences and calm the situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Gaza suffered more than enough and there is no need for further fragmentation of the Palestinian society. Therefore, all that we can do is try to stop the deterioration of the security situation and end tension.

We do not object to a national unity government that is in line with the spirit that led to the election of President Abbas to lead the Palestinian people towards a negotiated settlement. If this takes place, we are ready to help. President Abbas, who as head of the PLO can negotiate with the Israelis, must support this government.

[Abdallah] What about the recent statements by Hamas Leader Khalid Mish'al on the de facto recognition of Israel [and the establishment of a state] within the 1967 borders. How do you

assess these statements and will Europe exercise more flexibility when dealing with Hamas?

[Solana] I hope that Hamas will respond positively to the proposals we submitted to its head and these are not difficult to understand. They comprise the recognition of all the agreements and this is a very important issue because the negotiations and even the existence of the Palestinian [National] Authority are the result of an agreement between the PLO and Israel. All these agreements must be recognized. It goes without saying that in our endeavour to achieve the political objectives one must depend on the negotiations and through them one must recognize and accept the other side in the negotiations. This is what we ask Hamas to do and these statements are in the right direction to recognize Israel. We believe that any negotiations must begin with the 1967 borders with amendments and an exchange of land to be agreed between the two sides. We must also accept that some facts on the ground are difficult to change but this change should take place on the basis of an agreement between the two sides. This is the position that we defended and we will continue to adopt.

[Abdallah] Some European countries hold indirect contacts with Hamas. What is your stand on Ahmad Yusuf's document and does the EU accept it?

[Solana] The EU has not adopted an official stand on this document.

[Abdallah] What about the Arab role in the peace process following your meeting with President Husni Mubarak and in light of the meeting you will have with King Abdallah II?

[Solana] The Arab countries' stand and role is important. We are holding a dialogue with these countries. I am pleased with the results of my meeting with President Mubarak for Egypt plays a basic role. We work closely with Egypt. I will meet with King Abdallah tomorrow and I have very good relations with him. I believe the role of Egypt and Jordan is important, and I would like to emphasize that the Arab initiative is a basic and important element and must be preserved.

[Abdallah] What about the Rafah agreement for there is talk that it might be changed or amended?

[Solana] The Rafah agreement stipulates that the European observers will remain at the crossing until May 2007. We are ready to maintain the observers after this deadline but we need to amend some articles, particularly those dealing with the time and date of the opening and closing of the crossing and with logistical and data issues. Second, we must reach agreement on a mechanism for cooperation with the Egyptians. I spoke with President Mubarak about this issue and he welcomed this.

Third, I believe we should expand the scope of the agreement to cover people and goods and their flow from Gaza into Egypt to be sold there and from there to the rest of the world as a means for exporting Palestinian products worldwide through Egypt. This will benefit the Palestinian economy because it helps activate the other crossings. Therefore, I believe that any amendment of the provisions of the agreement will deal with the European presence and activities in Rafah and will take all this into consideration.

[Abdallah] With respect to the Israeli practices in the West Bank, a 10-year Palestinian child was killed near Jerusalem two days ago and people continue to be harassed at checkpoints. Will you discuss this with the Israeli Government?

[Solana] We will discuss this and these tragic incidents must stop and we ask that they are not repeated.

[Abdallah] A 10-year Palestinian child is killed. A hue and cry would have been raised had this been an Israeli child?

[Solana] We condemn such incidents.

[Abdallah] Palestinians appreciate European assistance. What are the estimates for 2007 and

what message would you like to address to Al-Quds readers and the Palestinian people in general?

[Solana] We have worked together for a long period of time and we will pursue this cooperation. I would like to say that we offered more aid to the Palestinians in 2006 than in 2005 and we will not invest less this year. I hope that the Palestinians will continue to have the opportunity to upgrade their standard of living, provide job opportunities, and end the occupation that began in 1967.

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