

**Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence  
13 December 2018**

**Developments at the Foreign Affairs Council**

**Opening Statement by the Tánaiste (check against delivery)**

**Opening**

Chairman, Committee Members,

Thank you for the invitation to address you this afternoon. I am keen to provide an update on developments at the EU Foreign Affairs Council, which most recently met on Monday. In addition, I know the Committee is interested in developments related to Brexit, given fast-moving events this week, and I look forward to a stimulating discussion on this and other matters.

My Department has provided a detailed information note to the Committee on the wide range of issues that the Foreign Affairs Council has considered these past few months. In the interests of maximising the time available for discussion, I propose to address the major themes of the Council's discussions in my opening remarks.

**Jordan**

As ever, developments in the Middle East featured prominently in discussions at the Council. I supported the addition of Jordan as a discussion item on the agenda in June. This took place just after I had visited Jordan myself. My own view is that Jordan plays an essential role as a stabilising influence in a difficult region, and I believed it was important for the EU to express, and show in a concrete way, our support. Jordan has long hosted large refugee populations – of Palestine refugees, refugees from Iraq after 2003, and now hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. This places a huge strain on the Jordanian economy, and US cuts to UNRWA funding have made the situation even more difficult. As Jordan is trying to introduce economic reforms under pressure from the IMF, I felt it was important that the EU look at the trade access that Jordan has to the EU market, and see how that could be improved. I am also pleased that plans are proceeding for Ireland to establish a resident Embassy in Jordan in the early months of 2019.

## **Yemen**

The gravity of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen cannot be underestimated. The UN has warned that the country is ‘on the brink of a major catastrophe’. The need for a ceasefire is stark. At the June Council, EU ministers were briefed via video-conference by UN Special Envoy, Mr Martin Griffiths, on his framework for peace in Yemen. We agreed conclusions that reiterated that there cannot be any military solution to the conflict and underlined our strong support for the UN Special Envoy, and his efforts to bring about an inclusive political solution. In November, EU Ministers reaffirmed our strong support for efforts to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. The situation in Yemen is incredibly shocking and distressing, and there has been little good news over the last four and a half years. I was very glad to hear that peace talks re-started in Sweden last week, following intensive UN efforts, and a number of confidence building measures. Clearly the problems in Yemen are very complex, but it is an important step that both sides have come to the table, and I wish those efforts well.

The Council has also considered the death of Jamal Khashoggi. On behalf of the EU, the HRVP has called publicly for an independent and credible investigation, which Ireland fully supports. As I have said myself directly to the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Dublin, we must get the facts of the case and ensure that all those responsible are held accountable. Ireland also specifically raised the Khashoggi case during Saudi Arabia’s Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council in November.

## **Libya**

The situation in Libya was discussed at the FAC in July and October and Conclusions were adopted this week, reflecting the seriousness of the situation there, and the importance it is accorded by the EU. During these meetings, my counterparts and I reiterated our united support for a Libyan-found solution to the political crisis, under the auspices of the UN political process. We also underlined the importance of elections in completing Libya’s transition, while recognising the need for the right conditions to be in place for free and fair elections.

Libya and Syria also featured in the October Council discussion on the external aspects of migration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and the Director General of the International Organisation for Migration Antonio Vitorino. On the issue of

migration, Ireland wants to find a consensus based on a balance of responsibility and solidarity. We support efforts to tackle root causes, and are supportive of the UN Global Compact on Migration, which represents a balanced approach for cooperation between countries and regions with very different perspectives on, and experiences of, migration.

## **Iran**

My colleagues and I discussed the situation in Iran in November, and again at the FAC on Monday. We discussed the implications of the re-imposition of US sanctions in November, and re-confirmed our support for the JCPOA, the nuclear agreement. Our objectives are to support the continued implementation of this agreement, which has been successful and continues to deliver, and to support EU business in continuing to trade with Iran, to the benefit of both sides. However, we also expressed our concerns about Iran's recent ballistic missile tests, as well as the destabilising role which Iran plays in many countries across the region.

The EU believes that we must face these issues head on and deal with them. However, we believe that keeping faith with the agreement we have already reached on nuclear issues is an important first step in bringing Iran back into the international fold as hopefully, eventually, a responsible and constructive partner. These are challenging issues, and I expect we will return to them many times, but there is a high degree of unity among Member States in what we are trying to do.

## **EU-Africa relations**

On Monday the FAC discussed preparations for the upcoming EU–African Union Ministerial meeting in January. This will be the first annual Joint Ministerial meeting since the AU-EU Summit in Abidjan last November. We agreed that the meeting agenda will be developed around three themes: (i) peace, security & governance, (ii) investment, trade & skills and (iii) multilateralism. Ireland remains committed to supporting countries in Africa in meeting the challenges they face, both bilaterally and through our membership of the EU. We must continue to strengthen cooperation between the African Union and the EU, including on trade and development. The proposal for an Africa-Europe Alliance for sustainable investment and jobs sets out a comprehensive economic agenda, with job creation at its core.

The FAC has also discussed developments in Africa more generally, including in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea in June, and in the Central African Republic in October.

### **Ukraine**

In November and December, the Council discussed Ukraine. On Monday, Ministers expressed deep concern about tensions in the Sea of Azov. The EU expects Russia to ensure unhindered and free passage through the Kerch strait to and from the Azov Sea, in accordance with international law. Ministers met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, and reaffirmed the EU's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. In November, Ministers condemned the so-called 'elections' in the separatist Donbas region of Ukraine on 11 November as running contrary to the letter and spirit of the Minsk agreements. Ministers also welcomed progress on reforms in Ukraine, while noting that much more still needs to be done.

### **Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, Central Asia**

The Council has also discussed developments in the countries of the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Central Asia. Ministerial meetings with the Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries took place in October and November. On Monday the Council had a wide-ranging discussion on the Western Balkans, touching on progress in 2018 and expectations for 2019.

### **Venezuela**

In October and again on Monday, Ministers discussed the situation in Venezuela, which appears to be worsening. There is an acute humanitarian crisis with the potential for regional instability due to the strain being put on neighbouring countries by mass migration. Ministers agreed to explore the idea of establishing an International Contact Group, to bring together the EU and other actors with influence on both sides in Venezuela, to facilitate negotiation. It is expected a decision on this will be made at the January FAC. Ministers also discussed EU reaction to the upcoming inauguration of President Maduro on 10 January, following elections that were neither free, fair, nor credible.

### **EU Global Strategy implementation**

The Council has also been discussing how the EU can promote a rules-based international order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its heart. This is very

much in line with Ireland's vision which I articulated at the UN General Assembly in September. The EU Global Strategy commits the Union to promoting peace, prosperity, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The Council has continued to monitor progress on the implementation of the Strategy.

This includes strengthening the EU's peacekeeping capacity in support of the United Nations. We have also made progress on implementing a strategic approach to strengthening the resilience of states and societies in our neighbourhood and developing an integrated approach to conflicts and crises.

### **CSDP issues**

The Council discussed security and defence issues in the context of the EU Global Strategy in November. Ministers adopted a new Civilian CSDP Compact that will make civilian CSDP more capable, flexible and responsive, and will strengthen the EU's external engagement in the rule of law, policing and civil administration. It will also enhance the capacity of the EU to respond to new and emerging challenges in our neighbourhood. Ireland was a leading promoter of the Compact.

### **EU-UN peacekeeping cooperation**

Ireland supports ongoing cooperation between the EU and the UN on peace operations and crisis management. We were pleased that the EU endorsed the updated shared priorities of the UN-EU Partnership on Peace Operations and Crisis Management in September. The Council also welcomed an Irish paper, introduced by my colleague Minister Kehoe, on how EU Member States can better cooperate under the auspices of the EU in support of UN peacekeeping operations.

### **Brexit**

Chair, with your permission, I might say a few additional words on Brexit, and the juncture we find ourselves at now, before I conclude this statement.

[Placeholder]

**Closing**

Thank you again for the opportunity to update the Committee on developments at the Foreign Affairs Council. I look forward to hearing the perspectives of Members on any or all of these issues and to answering any questions you may have.

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