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**Press Conference
with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Israel
Avigdor Liberman
and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
Baroness Catherine Ashton
Jerusalem March 17, 2010**

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MODERATOR: Hello. Welcome to our press conference where we will be hosting the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms. Catherine Ashton. We will begin with two statements: one by Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman and the other by Ms. Ashton, and then there will be four questions: two questions from the Israeli press, and two questions from the foreign press. We will begin with the statements. Ms. Ashton, please.

SECRETARY ASHTON: First of all, I hope we haven't kept you waiting. And I wanted to say how pleased I am to be in Israel and to have started my meetings with Mr. Liberman, who I met with in Brussels.

I'm in Israel for two purposes. The first is to demonstrate the commitment of the European Union to the Middle East peace process, and our desire to be of assistance to ensure that we're able to see the proximity talks begin under Senator Mitchell, with a view to moving to full negotiations and a resolution to the conflict that will lead to the two-state solution.

I'm also here to support the bilateral relationships with Israel and to have discussions about some of the economic questions between us, to ensure that we have those relationships on solid footing and, of course, in the course of our discussions, to talk about international issues that concern us, especially our concerns about Iran and the difficulty that we face of nuclear proliferation. Thank you.

FM LIBERMAN: Thank you, the Hon. Baroness Ashton, distinguished delegation members, representatives of the press. I am happy to have the opportunity to host you in Israel. It's our second discussion, our second meeting. In our discussion today we spoke about many international problems; first, of course, are the threats from Iran and, of course, the Palestinian issue.

I want to emphasize that in Israel everybody wants peace. There is only a discussion about the best way to achieve this peace. This government said from the first day that we're ready for direct talks. And I don't know any better solution than direct talks. I think it's crucial to keep the political process alive, and even today I say again that we're ready to start with the direct talks immediately.

With regard to the Iranian issue, I think that it's a crucial time. We cannot accept the Iranian policy of dragging out the time, of buying time, of wasting time. It is really the time for tough decisions in the Security Council and the EU. It is now the time for a new Churchill policy, not the time for a Chamberlain policy, and that's our expectation. Thank you.

MODERATOR: We will begin with a question for Israel Radio, Kol Israel, Mr. Shmulik Tal.

MR. TAL: Secretary Ashton, the question is addressed to you. What exactly is the European Union ready to do in order to tackle the problem of Iran? Because time is running out. There is actually no time left according to a few officials, and I'm sure you discussed this with the Minister of Foreign Affairs. What is the specific solution that the European countries are offering to this very, very urgent problem at the moment?

SECRETARY ASHTON: What we describe as the twin-track approach. The first thing and the best way of solving this problem would be by a dialogue with Iran that they would participate in to resolve the issues that we are concerned about.

We have made it clear that we consider it the right of the state to develop a civil nuclear power program, providing it's done within the context of ensuring the safety of that program and ensuring that any nuclear substances are kept safe. But we are very clear too that Iran is doing something very different by its enrichment program.

Therefore, if we're not able to resolve it by dialogue and, again, I make the statement that I'm very willing to have a dialogue, but about those issues, not about everything else and if not, then the European Union is supportive of the process going forward in the Security Council. And I have been in discussion with those members who are permanent members of the Security Council. I've talked with a number of different states that are also non-permanent member states about the importance of the Security Council moving forward, and I'm waiting to find out when the date of that debate may take place.

At the same time, each of the foreign affairs councils will continue to keep the situation under review, in the best sense of that, by looking at what is happening and by the 27 countries discussing this. I will continue to do that. We'll await the

Security Council, and then we will also look at what other measures may be appropriate.

MODERATOR: Second question from French daily Le Monde, Mr. Laurent Zecchini.

MR. ZECCHINI: Thank you. Mrs. Ashton, you said, like Mr. Solana has said many times, that the EU is very keen to step up its role, its involvement in the peace process. But the fact is that Israelis and the Americans don't seem very keen to increase the role of the EU. Did you reach a sort of understanding with Mr. Liberman about this?

SECRETARY ASHTON: Well, I'd question first of all whether it's necessarily up to everybody else to determine quite how we wish to be involved. The first thing is that the 27 member states came to the conclusions that they reached in December, which was a strong view from Europe, about the need to move forward with the process and what we believe the outcome should be. Against that backdrop, it is my job to turn that into positive action.

I've been in the region to talk to a number of countries, and of course to be here in Israel, in order to discuss how best the European Union can support the process. From here I will go to Moscow, to the Quartet, which will be another opportunity to do what I've described as reinvigorating the Quartet, and by that I mean the political will for the Quartet to become more visible, more active in support of the process moving forward, and for Europe to play its role both economically and politically. But we need to work out precisely how best we can do that within the context of wanting to be as supportive as possible in order to get to the results we all believe are the best.

MODERATOR: Next question from Israel Channel 2 Television, Mr. Udi Segal.

MR. SEGAL: Thank you. With your permission, I will start with the Foreign Minister in Hebrew.

Mr. Foreign Minister, you have been preaching a lot about insisting on our national honor, so I assume that you also understand why the Americans were so angry. Why are you accusing them of hypocrisy and what do you think Israel should do, practically, in order to resolve the crisis with the United States, and can you calm the citizens of Israel, and tell them that this is not a crisis that can affect the most important problem that you've raised, the Iranian issue?

And, Ms. Ashton, do you think that the harsh words that Israel heard from Washington are helpful for the process or damaging to the process? And you're coming from a meeting with Abu Mazen. Don't you think that he's using this clash between Washington and Jerusalem to prevent himself from coming into the talks, the proximity talks or the direct talks, with Israel?

FM LIBERMAN: Thank you. First of all, I would like to correct you. I never accused the Americans of hypocrisy. I don't know where you got that from. I think that from the standpoint of timing, it's not the right time. I think that the State of Israel has clarified that. There has not been any intentional attempt here, so we have no problem admitting when we are wrong, and that is what we did.

I think, however, that this demand was made, to a large extent, on the part of the international community as a sort of opportunity to attack Israel and exert pressure on Israel, and to demand things that are unreasonable. This demand that Jews be forbidden to buy or to build in east Jerusalem is simply unreasonable. Let's consider, for example, what would happen if we forbade the Arabs of the eastern part of the city to buy apartments or to build in western Jerusalem. I asked all the leaders that I have spoken to recently and they all said "Are you crazy? If you forbid the Arabs of East Jerusalem to buy apartments or to build in the western part of the city, everyone will immediately say that you are an apartheid state."

This kind of asymmetry is definitely not acceptable to me. We think that Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, must be accessible to all, to Muslims, to Christians and to Jews. Everyone is entitled to buy apartments and to build wherever they want, and there are already thousands of Arabs from East Jerusalem who live in Jewish neighborhoods in West Jerusalem, and things will also continue that way.

MR. SEGAL: And as to the question of what you propose to do to resolve this crisis?

FM LIBERMAN: I think that we are making every effort. We have no interest in a confrontation with anybody. Not with the United States, not with the European Union, not with other countries and not with the Quartet. We are trying, in the accepted channels, to clarify our position, to explain what is happening, and we hope that will meet with understanding. I do not suggest at the moment that we use this issue for some kind of confrontation, which certainly would not contribute anything positive to the political process and would not bring the sides closer together, nor will it make things easier for the parties and will not contribute anything useful.

SECRETARY ASHTON: I'm very clear about the international community's desire to see the talks begin in order to get to a two-state solution that will resolve the issues of Jerusalem and, as the Minister himself described, enable it to be a city enjoyed by all.

I think the question becomes how best we can achieve that. And my suggestion to you is that the only way to do this is by serious negotiation to ensure the future for the Israeli people and the Palestinian people. And I believe that it's in the

long-term interests of this country that this government, together with the Palestinians, determines that future. And the sooner we get to the talks, the better.

And what I've said to the Minister, and I will repeat, and I've been saying it all over the region, is that the European Union is here to be able to support those negotiations and enable and support the economic and political weight that is necessary to put behind it. We cannot conduct the negotiations for you and we wouldn't wish to. The solution lies with you to negotiate. But successful negotiations will be the best way of guaranteeing the kind of peace and security that every single member of this country and of Palestine wishes to have.

MODERATOR: Last question from Mr. Christian Sievers from ZDF German Television.

MR. SIEVERS: First to the High Representative, if I may. What you read from the Foreign Minister in regard to Israeli settlement policy today, how confident does it make you in regard to the advancement of the peace process?

And a question to you, Mr. Foreign Minister, would you please describe the mood between the two of you today after you heard the criticism from the High Representative over the past couple of days?

FM LIBERMAN: I think that we had a very positive discussion with a lot of understanding and a little misunderstanding. But I think that we really had a very important dialogue for both of us, and I will be happy to continue this dialogue in the next weeks.

SECRETARY ASHTON: And I'm very clear; I've made my position very clear on the announcement last week. And I'm also very clear that the best way forward to resolve all of these questions is by negotiation, and you have to begin that from a starting position of wanting to move forward now. And I want to say that I hope that we will find that Senator Mitchell, in all his efforts, is successful in starting what we call proximity talks and enable us to move to serious negotiation, because in the end that will be the best way of resolving all of the questions, including the issues where we have disagreement about how best to take forward the question of Jerusalem.

MODERATOR: Thank you very much. This press conference is over. Thank you for attending.

עד כאן.

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