

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you most warmly to Athens.

I would also like to congratulate ELIAMEP for convening this international conference. ELIAMEP has, as you know, a long history of impartial and profound analysis in matters of foreign policy and international affairs.

The time and place for such a meeting could hardly be timelier: the situation in the Middle East is critical and breeds greater dangers for the future.

I will concentrate my speech tonight on the situation in the Middle East. There are problems and prospects for the entire Mediterranean region. Yet, the situation in the Middle East calls again for our immediate and urgent attention.

I know that the participants of this conference, coming from ranks both exalted and specialised, will take the opportunity to use this forum for discussing many other issues pertaining to the whole Mediterranean. I am sure that they will reach conclusions and make recommendations useful for all the international actors concerned.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Greece is the European country historically, culturally, politically and geographically closer to the Middle East and the Mediterranean world in general. The Greeks founded some of the principal cities around this historic sea, as far back as the 8th century B.C. They created a culture whose main components form the basis of modern democratic societies. They helped formulate the first multicultural Mediterranean universe in Hellenistic times.

They were thus the first to come into close contact with the Arab world. This contact began as confrontational but soon the Arab

world and the Medieval Greek-led Roman Empire reached a position of profound intercultural dialogue and understanding.

Those speaking of a “clash of civilisations” today should be reminded of a simple truth: Arab civilisation reached great heights. And Arab men of letters were one of the main agents of disseminating Greek logic and philosophy, via Spain, into Western Europe.

It is indeed a pity that today, almost a millennium later, we are seeking anew just such a synthesis.

Geographically too, our country is the nearest to the Middle East, as it lies at the crossroads of three continents. Greek coasts comprise one third of the entire Mediterranean coastline. The Greek-owned merchant marine is the largest in the world and carries nearly 30% of all maritime commerce.

In the recent crisis in Lebanon, this country has helped evacuate the nationals of 28 countries. Cyprus has also proved itself an invaluable basis for facing this grave humanitarian crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Middle East is again in a critical situation. This may be so because, as a Israeli diplomat once said, “...governments have rejected proposals today, and longed for them tomorrow...”. Whatever the case, and maybe because some sound proposals have been rejected in the past, the situation today is critical mostly in four fronts.

First, the war in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel is just a few months behind us. The application of the One Thousand Seven Hundred and One Security Council Resolution proceeds. Yet, it cannot suffice for the needs of the future. Lebanon seems to be plunging into a new crisis already. We should all do everything in our power to prevent it from escalating.

Second, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has again reached crossroads.

Both the United States and Israel, disappointed from the past, approach cautiously any new initiative. The Palestinian Authority, for its part, has greatly delayed formulating a national unity government. It is only such a government that would be capable of putting up a credible discussant for negotiations.

Third, instability in Iraq continues. The existence of an elected government has, unfortunately, done little to change the situation on the ground.

Last but not least, Iran's nuclear programme is another major concern.

No solution seems to be easily forthcoming. Indeed, the whole issue of Iran, in Greece's view, should be reconsidered from scratch. Iran is a great country and its geo-strategic position, in view of the situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan, is greatly enhanced. As you know, Greece has a twenty-six century old relationship with Iran which has led both peoples to deeply respect and esteem each other.

Greece speaks from age-old historic experience when saying that no long-term stability in the wider region can be achieved without including Iran in the process.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my firm belief that all issues in the Middle East and the wider area, as far as Afghanistan, are closely interrelated.

I have already mentioned the enhanced importance of Iran in the aftermath of the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

But all actors in the Middle East are influenced by each other. Lebanon by Israel, the Palestinians, Syria, the Hezbollah, and, indirectly, by Iran.

Iraq by Syria, Turkey and Iran, among others. And so on.

In two words: in the Middle East, there is no way of definitely solving an issue while ignoring the others. This is why *we need an integrated strategy for dealing with the Middle East as a whole*.

Such a strategy would necessarily involve all actors in the region, as well as the international community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would now like to address each of these four issues in some detail.

In view of the disquieting news from Lebanon, I will start from the square formed by Lebanon, Syria, the Hezbollah, and Israel.

From this forum also, I strongly condemn, as I am sure we all do, the atrocious assassination of Minister Gemayel; and I would like to publicly convey the deepest condolences and sympathy of the Greek government and people to the people and the government of Lebanon.

Yet, such dreadful acts of violence, far from disheartening us, should iron our will for working with renewed determination for an overall solution to the problems that plaque Lebanon.

The international community, Ladies and Gentleman, can not afford to see Lebanon fail. Lebanon was and can again become a beacon in the Middle East: a paradigm of peaceful, prosperous and democratic symbiosis of cultures and religions.

We can draw strength from the resilience of the Lebanese people themselves.

Indeed, we have to acknowledge that the implementation of Resolution 1701 has proceeded with some success.

I hope that both Israel and the Hezbollah will understand the futility of going on with the war.

But the international community must in turn understand that the Resolution is temporary. It is not the proper instrument for a viable and sustainable solution to the problem.

Hence I believe that we must insist on:

- Strengthening the Lebanese State and the government of Prime Minister Siniora. The Lebanese state should be the

only one responsible for the Lebanon's territorial integrity.

- Providing ample and sustained assistance for reconstruction and economic recovery
- Removing the possible factors of tension by, for example, the return of Israeli captives, proceeding on an exchange of prisoners; calling to avoid violations of sovereignty in the area; in a later stage addressing the Shebaa farms issue
- And, the normalisation of relations between Syria, Lebanon and Israel. This can be done by holding parallel discussions, supervised by the Quartet, on a comprehensive settlement. Such a settlement would greatly help solving the Palestinian Issue as well, providing both a psychological and a factual impetus to that end.

In this context, I need to say a few words about Syria.

We have to spare no effort to engage Syria. An excellent paradigm is the case of Libya, which after years of sanctions and constant embargos came out of isolation and has developed into a trustworthy partner for the EU and the US.

I believe the EU, just as the Arab world, is willing to include Syria. But one thing is clear: it takes two to tango. This is why Syria must also showcase its intentions. A most constructive sign, for example, would be its contribution in forming the new Palestinian National Unity government.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Coming now to the Palestinian Issue, I must emphasise that stagnation must be avoided at all costs.

I feel that, at the moment, the Israeli government is not ready yet to embark on a new initiative.

The Israeli people are, justifiably, angry at the renewed ballistic attacks at their territory, despite the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.

They are also tired from the recent war there.

Furthermore, they could reasonably claim that there was no discussant at the other side. Hamas does not recognise Israel, which is a necessary precondition for the latter to hold discussions with the Palestinian Authority.

But this may change. To start with, we will hopefully soon see a Palestinian National Unity Government, at last.

It is clear, ladies and gentlemen, that the two parties can not move forward, on their own. The quartertet must of course continue its efforts. Yet, regional ownership is of the essence. Hence we should turn to the more moderate Egypt and Jordan.

The EU and the Arab states must, as I said, play a predominant role in taking a new initiative.

The EU is at the moment considered by the Arab world as being more impartial than the United States. The latter is still entangled in Iraq and viewed as being too close to Israel.

We are thus called upon to play a new role in the region. We must rise to take up the challenge.

In developing a new initiative we must see that the authority of the Palestinian government is reinstated and that the Palestinian economy is revived.

The situation in Gaza and the West Bank is grim. Today, we face the real threat of a civil war. The beginning of the second intifadah in September 2000 sparked an economic downturn, and the situation has been in a freefall ever since. High population density, limited land access, and strict internal and external controls have kept economic conditions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank dismal.

Upon formation of the National Unity Government, the financial and diplomatic boycott of the Palestinian Authority must be lifted.

We should also facilitate an agreement entailing an immediate prisoner exchange; a ceasefire; and the resumption of tax-revenue transfers to the Palestinian Authority.

Our final aim should be the creation of an independent and viable Palestinian State next to Israel, and in friendly relations with it. We need clarity on the Palestinian issue. A clarification, possibly with a deadline, of the prospects for the creation of a Palestinian state is necessary. The current authority has outlived its usefulness. There is also a clear political message that the establishment of a Palestinian state will send.

At the same time we have to do our best to strengthen President Abbas. This can only be done via cementing his political legitimacy. Development aid will be crucial and will be the role of the European Union which is the strongest donor on the region.

This is how we shall avoid the dilemma once described by a Palestinian diplomat and I quote: "...The tormenting dilemma of the Middle East is this: either we have one people to many, or one state too few...".

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to briefly turn to Iraq, this week the U.S. death toll alone was up to 2,844, let alone the huge Iraqi civilian casualties. One has to admit that there is little discernible progress in sight. The war there has now lasted 44 months, the amount of time that elapsed between Pearl Harbor and the end of World War Two. If this continues, it may have serious consequences for regional stability. Many voices lately point to Iraq's birth in 1921, when Winston Churchill, then the British Colonial Secretary, tasked with carving up the recently defeated Ottoman Empire, famously drew borders on paper. He tried to delineate areas containing, or suspected to contain, oil fields.

Ever since, or so the argument goes, the Shiite in the south, the Sunni in the middle, and the Kurds in the north, have been kept

together by a succession of regimes through varying degrees of repression.

There is talk in some quarters of the possibility of a de facto break up of Iraq into three pieces. But the international community is adamant in preserving its integrity. At this point I would like to underline that Greece, and the European Union, is committed to Iraq's territorial integrity.

The future looks difficult. Hypotheses take the form of four scenarios for US presence in the country: deploying more troops; turning away altogether; withdrawing gradually; and staying on indefinitely or as it was nicely put: go big, go long or go home.

The British Prime Minister, in a speech of his on November 13, has also talked of bringing all parties together again; of building Iraqi government capability, and of plugging any gaps in training, equipment, command and control of the Iraqi Armed Forces. Concerning the involvement of other powers in a solution, he has characteristically stated that, and I quote, "...A major part of the answer to Iraq lies not in Iraq itself, but outside...".

Greece's view is that all measures strengthening civil society and the understanding among Iraq's different religious and ethnic entities are welcome.

We consider an international conference on Iraq as equally welcome. A similar experiment took place with Afghanistan and was deemed successful. This conference should invite all actors of the region to take part, including Iran and Syria.

Greece believes that reliance on military force has its limits; limits both in time and in effectiveness.

Finally, we believe that promoting democracy, although a worthy goal, unfortunately can be neither the means nor the end at the same time. Richard Perle was right, when he stressed that, and I quote, "...In the Middle East, democratization does not mean calling immediate elections and then living with whatever happens next...".

This is why we believe in the synergy of all internal and external factors in securing the future of Iraq. The solving of the Palestinian Problem and better relations with Syria and Iran can add to the stability of the entire region, including Iraq.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me now to say a few words about Iran.

First, and in danger of stating the obvious, let me say that nuclear proliferation in the wider region, whichever country in the wider region crosses the nuclear threshold is far from welcome. One can only guess about the response of other regional powers to a declared nuclear Iran. At any rate, any such development will certainly raise the stakes, destabilize the region, and dramatically alter the balance of power.

I have already indicated that we Greeks have attained, many centuries ago and the hard way, a deep knowledge of the region's geopolitics.

This knowledge suggests that it is unwise, as well as unwelcome, to ignore Iran.

To be sure, Iran does not help itself by the often provocative pronouncements of its leaders, and by the way it promotes its nuclear programme. The Iranian authorities appear largely ignore the calls of the international community for cooperation.

Iran is also often criticized for its policies vis-à-vis Lebanon and Iraq.

Iran's polity, to be sure, is largely the product of its own ideological and religious conceptions. These are obviously liked by some and disliked by others. Iran's political attitude is, I suspect, the result of a curious synergy: a feeling of its own growing importance in the region, combined with a sense of isolation, and even rejection, from a large part of the international community.

Iran's growing importance is well attested. Both Iraq and Afghanistan have ceased to be security considerations for Iran.

Its relations with Syria and Russia are good, and no particular problem tints those with Turkey. As has been aptly said "...The dynamics of Iran's relations with its neighbours help explain why Iran feels able to resist Western pressure...".

Ladies and gentlemen,

Whether one likes it or not, Iran is a key factor for Iraq's future. It is also a crucial factor for the stability of the region as a whole.

The question is this: are the interests of the international community and those of Iran irreconcilable?

Before answering this question let us examine each side's priorities.

The international community is interested in the unhindered flow of energy to its markets.

Iran is interested in providing it.

The international community wants to preserve the current frontiers in the region.

Iran has does not attempt to change them, neither does it profess a wish of doing so.

The international community wants a peaceful and unified Iraq. Such an Iraq poses no threat to Iran. Its influence with the Shiite community there constitutes a great bond with that country.

In two words: there is more potential common ground than ground for conflict between the international community and Iran.

If Iran cooperates with the international community pertaining to its nuclear programme; and if eventually it recognises Israel's right to exist, the two main barriers for taking up its rightful position in the world will be removed.

This is why, the peace process in the Middle East is so critical. It will change the dynamics of relations in the whole region.

Will Iran's stance vis-à-vis Israel, for example, remain the same in the *aftermath* of a solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Can it stay the same even when all Arab states eventually recognise Israel?

Iran's present argumentation is based on its analysis of the present situation in the Middle East. When this changes, I expect Iran's analysis, and hence its positions, to change also.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

In my speech tonight I have restricted myself to four issues which, in my opinion, form the core of the wider security puzzle in the Middle East: the Lebanon – Syria – Hezbollah – Israel problem; the Palestinian Issue; the future of Iraq; and the position of Iran.

I have already stated my firm belief that these problems are greatly interrelated. The aggravation of one, usually deteriorates the perspectives of dealing with the others.

Yet, solving even just one could create a positive domino effect for the others.

Such a domino effect can be mostly created by solving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A solution to this conflict will ease tensions throughout the Middle East - and between the Muslim world and the West in general.

It will pave the way for ameliorating relations between Israel and Lebanon, and Israel and Syria - particularly if the Golan Heights are returned, in the aftermath of a new Syrian-Israeli understanding.

It will prompt Iran to take a milder view of the US - particularly if the latter contributes actively to a solution.

Such domino effects, to a lesser extent, can be created by solving other issues as well, *particularly the problem of Iraq*, and, certainly, the issue of Iran's nuclear programme.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are, as I said, at the crossroads.

But stagnation can only breed more problems.

It is high time for action.

We have seen in the past how concerted action can bare fruit.

As the historian Albert Hourani said "...He who rules the Near East, rules the world; and he who has interests in the world is bound to concern himself with the Near East...".

I think that trying to rule the world today by *ruling* the Middle East can only breed catastrophe.

But I strongly believe that he who has interests in the world is bound to concern himself with the Middle East.

We need to understand that its problems are not isolated the one from the other. On the contrary; *the more we realise their interrelation, the greater the chance we have for solving them.*

This is why we need, I believe, to move, if not simultaneously, at least on a parallel course for all of them.

It is high time particularly for *Europe* to act.

Europe, as I said, is presently seen by all as an impartial and honest broker in world affairs.

Greece is the European country nearest to the Middle East.

It is the country closest to some of the world's most important security theatres.

Greece has the longest history of contact with the Arab world, and with Iran.

It has a profound understanding of the Muslim world.

In the context of Europe, where we belong, we have much to say and even more to do.

Thank you.