

Mr. Co-Chairmen,

I would like to take this opportunity in the first place to commend our Co-Chairmen in convening this historic opening Conference where we see all parties around the table for the first time, which anyhow is historical. I believe indeed that this is no more than a beginning, a very important beginning. Having listened to all the contributions, I indeed am convinced how much we need a step-by-step process accompanied by confidence-building measures from the very beginning.

The greatest problem to overcome in the initial phase in the negotiating process, as far as I can see it, is overcoming mistrust and creating further solid foundations for meaningful negotiations in good faith. Many elements have been put on the table, many valuable incentives have been given by various delegations. Others have been accused of being too much withholding and looking too much to the past. We believe that bridges can be built and bridges have to be built.

The European Community has very traditional and longstanding bonds with the Middle East and with all the parties alike. The European Community and its member states are not partisans in the favor of the one viewpoint or the other but are partisans for legality. We are partisans for peace including security and justice for all without exceptions. We will continue to stand ready to assist this cause for any party that calls on us and we will remain in close and constant consultation with the co-sponsors in order to see that we further the process by cohesive action and coherent action.

Mr. Co-Chairmen, the Middle East that finds peace with itself can be a blessing not only for its own people, not only for its own environment, but for the world as a whole. It has a lot to offer and it has a lot to gain. And we are firmly determined to help the Middle East to achieve this goal. And as I have indicated in the initial address the day before yesterday, the European Community is fully prepared not only for a constructive partnership but also for a concrete partnership.

We feel that parallel to the bilateral negotiations also multilateral negotiations should be started up in due course; not at the expense of the political process but in parallel with the political process and emphasizing that all the parties are masters of their own decisions and can decide when results achieved in the multilateral process should be put into effect, but identifying the splendid opportunities that are there when peace is achieved. The possibilities of cooperation in the region and the contribution that the European Community can bring in concrete [form], we believe could be identified already at an early stage, thus giving an additional incentive to all the parties to reach a political solution which eventually will allow for peace but also for economic development and prosperity for all. I pledge on behalf of the European Community and its twelve member states a full assistance and readiness along the process for all those parties that so desire.

Thank you very much.