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PANEL I: EUROPE'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ladies and Gentlemen. I am delighted and honoured to be here at the Passia Conference to speak on the subject of "Europe's Role in the Middle East".

The European Union is performing an increasingly important role in the Middle East. My impression is that Arabs and Israelis alike welcome this engagement.

Resuscitating the Middle East process continues to be a matter of urgency. This is why it was important that the Federal Government used its presidency of the EU in the first half of 2007 to revive the Middle East Quartet.

If substantial progress is to be made, however, it is vital that the USA, too, plays a constructive role once again. It seems that it is willing to do so, even if there is still uncertainty as to whether the eagerly awaited Middle East conference in the American city of Annapolis in a few weeks time will actually go ahead. What happens during and as a result of the conference will have a defining effect on the region: positively or negatively. The hope is that the meeting will encourage rapprochement: not only between Israelis and Palestinians, but also between Israel and its neighbours. Failure, on the other hand, could lead to an escalation of the situation. We should, however, put our faith in the hopeful signals, without losing sight of the risks.

What is really important is that peace is being talked about again. The peace plan put forward by the Arab League and European efforts have both contributed to this. We have called repeatedly for a resumption of dialogue – including with the participation of the neighbouring Arab states. We are providing a large proportion of the funds for reconstruction and development in the Palestinian territories. And as already mentioned, the European Union is an active member of the Middle East Quartet. A few weeks ago Foreign Minister Steinmeier launched a further initiative in the form of an EU action plan. The main aim of this plan is to support and foster the negotiating process between Israel and the Palestinians.

The EU action plan has four elements:

1. Strengthening forces within the Palestinian private sector by promoting small and medium-sized businesses and establishing special economic zones.
2. Providing EU aid to equip and train the Palestinian police and establish democratic state structures.
3. Promoting the Palestinian education system.
4. Providing assistance in the reform of state structures, including the establishment of democratic parties.

It is hoped that the action plan will lend support to President Abbas and demonstrate to the Palestinian people the engagement of the international community. In addition, a meeting of donor countries is to be held in Paris on 17 December to arrange new aid money.

One fundamental problem remains. Since the EU cooperates exclusively with the Autonomous Authority led by President Abbas, the action plan will initially reach only the people of the West Bank. In Gaza, which is under the control of Hamas, the EU provides only humanitarian aid but does not fund any projects. These people must not, however, be abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Thought must be given to finding other ways here.

I would like to say at this point that the stance of the EU is not without controversy in European national parliaments. I myself would like to have seen different decisions in connection with the formation of a Palestinian unity government.

There are concerns in the EU that decisions may be taken at the Middle East conference in Annapolis which the EU would then be made responsible for implementing. The EU and its member states are already the largest donors in the region, providing over 800 million euro of financial and humanitarian aid in 2007.

Progress will be made at the conference only if concrete steps can be agreed on questions such as the dismantling of settlements and the status of Jerusalem and the refugees. This will not happen without internal reconciliation among the Palestinians and institutional reform. The outcome of the conference must take the form of binding

steps; non-binding illusions and declarations of intent would be a failure. Two states living within secure and viable borders is the prerequisite for peaceful development.

A fair and comprehensive solution is also the key to resolving other conflicts in the region. The EU would support peace talks between Israel and its three neighbours. Israel's security, a viable Palestinian state and the re-establishment of Lebanon's sovereignty are the goals. At the moment there are high expectations of Germany and Europe – perhaps too high. But Europe is needed. It is needed to bring credible civil initiatives and also much patience.

Neither the EU nor the conference in Annapolis can resolve the Middle East conflict. There is no avoiding the fact that ultimately the parties to the conflict themselves must work out viable solutions on the spot, even if only from a realisation that they have no alternative to the peace process.

Religious fanaticism and extreme nationalism are not viable responses to the challenges of the 21st century. More than ever before, there is a need for political responses and the courage to accept compromises. The right of the state of Israel to exist and the security of its citizens are non-negotiable. At the same time there is a need for realistic political settlements and solutions which guarantee the national rights of the Palestinians and create decent living conditions for them. Both on the Israeli and on the Arab side we need a willingness to reach understanding, mutual acceptance and the will to work together.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to an interesting and absorbing discussion.

PANEL III: THE EU'S RELATIONS WITH IRAN

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Our subject: "The EU's relations with Iran", is highly complex and should not be reduced to the issue of the mediation efforts in the context of the Iranian nuclear crisis. As time is so short, however, I intend to limit my remarks to this central theme and want to make a few points which I believe could provide material for our subsequent discussion.

The Iranian nuclear crisis is only part of a more general problem: Nuclear danger continues to grow. There are still more than 30,000 nuclear warheads somewhere in the world in heavily protected missile silos and depots. More and more states have the technology and are prepared to build nuclear weapons. Each case unleashes the danger of a regional arms race. International terrorist organisations, too, are trying to procure WMDs and nuclear material.

Irrespective of the Iranian nuclear issue, disarmament and arms control are once more on the international agenda. We are working for the success of the Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in 2010. This treaty is the cornerstone of nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament and nothing must be allowed to threaten its core.

We will only defuse the Iranian nuclear crisis if the USA, China, Russia, Arab states and the UN search together for a peaceful solution. Above all, the stakeholders in Iran must be prepared to make compromises. Warcries from all sides will do nothing to help; what is needed is clever diplomacy. We must rely on the instruments of classical foreign policy which have brought real progress on the Korean peninsula.

Iran is a central challenge to the global non-proliferation regime. The country is increasingly raising its profile as a regional power and seeking to fill the power vacuum in the Persian Gulf created by the Iraq war. Teheran is also seeking to extend its influence over the Middle East conflict through its alliance with Syria and its direct support of Hezbollah and Hamas. This includes Ahmadinejad's blatant threats vis-à-vis Israel.

There is no doubt that both the nuclear crisis and the Kurdish crisis in Northern Iraq are becoming increasingly dramatic. US President George W. Bush even spoke recently about the possibility of a third world war.

I observe this escalation in rhetoric with grave concern. Responsible politicians should let it be seen in the language they use that they are seeking solutions. Let me be clear: The nuclear dispute with Iran can only be resolved by negotiation, not by military action. This includes tightening sanctions if Teheran persists in its policy of delays and deceptions.

The central questions are: how can Iran be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons and how can the Non-Proliferation Treaty be saved?

Germany and the EU have made efforts since 1979 to maintain regular relations with Iran. Iran is an important partner for us in the region. A unified stance by the EU on the Iran crisis is an important step towards a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The EU 3 + 3 have, moreover, gained important information and time through their negotiations since October 2003. There have also certainly been some successes. In 2004, for example, Iran halted its enrichment activities and agreed to international monitoring. The negotiations then stalled when Ahmadinejad came to power in summer 2005. In February 2006 the UN Security Council stepped in.

Failure in its efforts to broker a solution would be a serious setback to Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The greatest success of international efforts to broker a solution to date has been the fact that the negotiating partners and the Security Council have not allowed themselves to be divided.

According to the latest findings of the IAEA, Iran is continuing with its contentious uranium enrichment programme. Teheran is hence once again in breach of the conditions imposed by the UN Security Council. One positive factor, however, is the willingness of the Iranian government to participate in a work plan to resolve the problems. The IAEA will be submitting a report on implementation of this work plan before the end of the year. This will also determine the next steps in the UN Security Council. In other words, a decision on sanctions will not be made until after submission of the reports by the IAEA and the EU representative.

In this context I would like to reiterate that nobody wishes to deny Iran the right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. The main concern is to remove the suspicion that Teheran is working on a military atomic programme. Until now Teheran has failed to provide this proof. There is also no proof, it must be said, that Teheran is producing weapons-grade material. Whatever the case may be, Iran is attempting to acquire medium-range missiles and this is leading to further uncertainty. The establishment of a missile defence system by the USA and NATO is only one aspect here. Iran's nuclear programme is in its early stages. The country will not be in a position in the foreseeable future to build an atomic bomb on its own. Even the American secret services are working on the assumption that there is a window of seven to ten years. This time must be used to negotiate and build trust. There have been missed opportunities on both sides in recent years. This is why it is vital to continue to work constructively to reach a resolution.

One possible option would be to point Iran towards a civil nuclear programme. This could mean that the uranium needed could be enriched temporarily outside Iran in an international facility. I think that another way out of the deadlock situation could be to negotiate concrete security guarantees for Iran. This would also mean direct talks between Iran and the United States. A similar procedure brought a breakthrough in the case of North Korea – even if the two cases are obviously not immediately comparable. Consideration should also be given to establishing a nuclear-weapon-free zone.

An Iranian bomb represents a serious threat. It would move first the Middle East and then the world towards nuclear anarchy. This is why it is so important finally to bring the protracted dispute over the Iranian nuclear programme to a resolution. More than providing just a glimmer of hope, this would be a positive signal for the entire Middle East.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to an interesting and absorbing discussion.