



**Statement by the Ambassador Aviv Shir-On,
Permanent Representative of the State of Israel
on the
4. Meeting of the OSCE Mediterranean Partners Contact Group
Friday, 20 July 2012**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

There is a lot going on right now in the Middle East and the attention of the whole world, governments, media, and the people everywhere is focused on this region.

The area in which Israel has to survive has always been of great interest and importance for billions of people since it has been the cradle of civilization, contains religious sites of all the main monotheistic religions, is strategically and economically significant, was the test and battlefield of foreign powers and has always been an area of conflicts. But the recent developments have shown that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, in contrary to what was claimed by many in the last decades, is not the main problem in the region. Many of the developments in the past and in the present have nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict but rather with the internal religious, economic, political, and social problems of the various countries and peoples in our region, Israel included. It is obvious that issues affect one another and that some developments are influenced by various reasons but too often in the past one issue was always blamed for the misfortune of the whole region - similar to the one who was looking for an object where there was light and not where it was actually lost.

In these turbulent times the OSCE Secretary General visited the Middle East, as leaders and decision makers should do. After visiting Egypt last September he paid a visit to Jordan and Israel a month ago. Crossing the Allenby Bridge

near the lowest point on earth, it's not Schengen yet but never the less, a peaceful border crossing between an important Arab state and Israel, he could witness the short distances in the areas that are so often in the news. In a two hours' drive he went from Amman to Jerusalem via the historically, strategically, and economically important Jordan valley. In Jerusalem the Secretary General could conduct talks with President Peres, Speaker of the Knesset Rivlin, Foreign Minister Liberman, and some other ministers and officials, listen to different views, inform himself on various issues and get a firsthand idea on how things look like on the ground. I think that the visit was useful also in the light of future discussions of relevant regional issues and the OSCE co-operation with the Mediterranean Partners in all three dimensions of OSCE activity.

The visit of the Secretary General was one of many important visits in Israel recently, like those of President Putin of the Russian Federation, President Gauck from Germany, the President of Hungary, Dr. Henry Kissinger and Secretary of State Clinton, to mention a few only in the last month. Secretary Clinton's talks in the region were also connected to the efforts to restart the peace process that is not moving forward as we would have liked it to. There are a number of reasons for this stalemate: the Palestinian internal division, the ongoing rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip, terror against Israelis from the Sinai, and the political debate inside Israel caused also by the things I've just mentioned. Another reason is of course the current situation in some of our neighboring countries. The democratization and stabilization process in Egypt is still undergo, the situation in Libya is unclear, in Iraq violence is again part of the daily reality, Lebanon is influenced too strongly by the Hezbollah, and Iran and the horrendous occurrences in Syria are a reason for great concern not only for us but for the whole Middle East and the entire International Community. In such times of uncertainty it won't be wise to make important decisions or to take steps that might affect our future, our security, maybe even our mere existence. Israel thinks by the way that the same logic should be applied right now when discussing suggestions to enlarge the Mediterranean group of partners. We watch closely what is going on around us hoping that more democracy and more freedoms will bring a better economy, better education and healthcare, and better standard of living to the people in the region creating in turn better chances for peaceful solution of conflicts.

In Israel too, the high prices of living and domestic political disputes on equal rights versus equal duties of groups in the population and the tensions between religious and secular citizens led to protests and demonstrations that are causing the government and the political system to concentrate more on these

problems than on others. On the domestic political stage, we have witnessed some rapid changes with Kadima, the largest faction in the Knesset, joining the coalition two months ago and giving the government one of the largest majorities in Israel's history only to leave it again a week ago.

Despite these developments and in spite of the international economic crisis, the Israeli economy is solid and stable with low inflation and low unemployment rates and an average growth of around 4%. Because of Israel's support and cooperation, the Palestinian economy is also improving. In Israel, however, not only the economy is doing well. In contrary to the difficult political situation around us there are some other positive developments in Israel that can be used to enhance relations with our neighbors and to further co-operation in mutual areas of interest. Israel is a research and high-tech powerhouse. Six Nobel prizes in 12 years, the tenth of successful startups and the technologies exported to all corners of the world demonstrate the possible benefits of co-operation with Israel in these fields. We have reached remarkable achievements in agriculture and water management and we are ready to share this know-how with others in the arid and semi-arid Middle East. We have recently improved our desalination technology and the world largest desalination plants stand today in Israel. 50 % of our drinking water is provided today by these plants and in three years it will be 75 %. We have solved a significant part of our water problem and will be glad to collaborate with our neighbors in this area.

In the last two years, large quantities of natural gas were discovered in three fields in the Mediterranean Sea, quantities that will free Israel from the need to import energy for the coming 50 to 70 years.

These positive developments might lead to better understanding and co-operation throughout the entire region, but in order to achieve this important goal we all need to remain firm and united against those who are trying to prevent peace, stability, and prosperity, namely Iran and Ahmadinejad, their allies Bashar Assad, Nassrallah and the Hezbollah, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the extremists of the Islamic Jihad, and the terrorists of Al-Qaida. The terror attack of Wednesday in Bulgaria and the two rockets fired yesterday from the Gaza Strip are the recent unfortunate reminders of these elements to all of us. Let's hope that the Arab spring will be able to stand against these forces of evil and lead our region in the right direction.

Thank you.