

**Closing speech by the President of the EP/EMPA
Hans-Gert Pöttering
at the fifth ordinary plenary session
of the
Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA)**

Brussels, 17 March 2009

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Saïdati wa Sadati,

Two plenary sittings of the Fifth Session of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA) lie behind us. Our debates have focused on the implications of the international financial and economic crisis for our region and on the situation in the Middle East.

Our discussions have been lively, at times heated. At times we have grappled with the question of whether it makes any sense for us, as Members of the parliaments of the Mediterranean countries and the European Union, to continue to meet in a joint assembly which represents a region at whose heart the Middle East conflict is raging.

My answer is unequivocal: yes, it does make sense. Let me take this opportunity to thank you all for demonstrating once again today the defining characteristic of our work in this assembly, namely openness to discussion and dialogue, to parliamentary debate which transcends the divisions created by old and new conflicts, by cultural and social differences.

This is the fundamental purpose of our Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly: to give the citizens of the broader Mediterranean region a voice, so that we, as elected representatives of the people, can draw up proposals to be addressed to governments, and - in particular - to exercise parliamentary scrutiny over the executive branch of the *Union for the Mediterranean*.

The 23-day Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip, which began with air attacks on 27 December 2008 and was subsequently expanded to include a ground offensive, horrified us all. Let there be no doubt: 1300 deaths on the Palestinian side and 13 deaths on the Israeli side are 1313 deaths too many.

It is unacceptable that rockets should regularly have been - and should continue to be - fired from the Gaza Strip at targets in Israel, at settlements, at people, at towns such as Sderot and Ashkelon. Hamas cannot evade responsibility for this.

At the same time, no-one wants to deny a State such as Israel the right to defend itself. However, to describe its response - the military operation - as merely disproportionate is an understatement.

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I have seen the results with my own eyes. As I have already reported today, during my most recent visit to Gaza I gained a personal insight into the situation, in talks, for example, with Palestinian businessmen, with members of the staff of the UNRWA food distribution centre in Gaza and with Commissioner-General Karen Abu Ziad.

And I can only repeat what I said to everyone I met during that EMPA fact-finding mission, what I said in Jerusalem, in Ramallah and finally in Amman: each and every individual, regardless of their religion or nationality, has the same dignity. There is no difference between the dignity of a Palestinian and the dignity of an Israeli. That is, that must be, the principle which guides our political action in all the countries of the Union for the Mediterranean, and in particular in the countries in the conflict zones in the Middle East.

Under my Presidency, therefore, in 2008/09, the situation in the Middle East continued to be a focus of the activities of the EMPA. Our Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly has the task of contributing to the settlement of the Middle East conflict, by means of open discussion, by means of constructive parliamentary diplomacy in the search for a political solution, for peace.

Under the Presidency of the European Parliament, we have endeavoured, through the recommendations we have adopted, to maintain the momentum of Middle East dialogue.

Both the EMPA plenary sessions - in mid-October 2008 in Jordan and today's meeting - have addressed this subject. During our meeting by the Dead Sea on 13 October 2008 we adopted a 'Declaration on the Middle East Peace Process' which, two weeks later, was submitted to the Foreign Ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean.

Central to that declaration - and to the talks I and the EMPA delegation held three weeks ago in Jerusalem and Ramallah - is the political aim of a two-state solution: an independent, viable Palestinian State living side by side, in peace and security, with Israel.

I have already emphasised this point this morning in my report on the EMPA mission to Gaza, and I should like to do so again now: development aid, possibly combined with assistance to improve internal security, cannot and must not be a substitute for a two-state solution. And I am delighted that today's debate has reflected that conviction, along with a general commitment to respecting international law.

I have been invited to attend the annual summit of the Heads of State and Government of the League of Arab States scheduled to take place in Doha on 30 and 31 March. In my address in Doha I have resolved to emphasise once more the two-state solution with the utmost clarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

A further principle which guides - and should continue to guide - our action in the broader Mediterranean region is that of solidarity. It is only logical, therefore, that the implications of the financial and economic crisis should have been on the agenda for the first day of our plenary session here in Brussels, what is more at the instigation of our colleague Mohammad Abul-Enein, the chair of the EMPA's Committee on Economic Affairs.

We were happy and grateful to take up the suggestion of a debate on this pressing problem. What is needed are practical measures to overcome the crisis. As parliamentarians, the onus is on us to draw up practical proposals and urge our governments to implement them.

This also applies, of course, to the practical projects developed by the newly-established Union for the Mediterranean. These are largely implemented using public funds. As one arm of the EU's budgetary authority, the European Parliament has a major say in how the European share of this funding is used, a fact which yesterday's debate made clear.

It is now a little more than eight months since the Union for the Mediterranean was established at the Paris Summit on 13 July 2008. With one eye on that event, therefore, in my inaugural speech as President of the EMPA, which I gave on 28 March 2008 in Athens, I set the task of consolidating the parliamentary dimension of the Union for the Mediterranean as an objective for my Presidency.

At the time I assured members that I would see to it that *'our Assembly takes its place as the only legitimate parliamentary dimension to this process'*.

Accordingly, the EMPA Bureau met in Paris on 12 July 2008, on the eve of the Mediterranean Summit in the French capital, to lend further weight to that statement. The Bureau adopted a declaration in which it called for the EMPA to become *'an integral part of the institutional structure of the Union for the Mediterranean'*. At the same time, it made clear to the Heads of State and Government who were due to attend the Paris Summit that the EMPA saw itself as the body responsible for exercising parliamentary scrutiny over the Union for the Mediterranean, a task which would involve drawing up proposals and conducting appraisals.

The next day, together with our colleague Abdelhadi Majali, the President of the Jordanian Parliament, who will now take over the rotating EMPA Presidency, I submitted the declaration to the Heads of State and Government and, in my speech, emphasised the nature of our calls.

A further important stage in this process was the extraordinary plenary session held on 12 and 13 October 2008 by the Dead Sea in Jordan, which I have already referred to, and the recommendation adopted there on *'the role of the EMPA within the Union for the Mediterranean'*, a recommendation addressed to the EuroMed Foreign Ministers Conference which was due to be held on 3 and 4 November 2008 in Marseille.

Today, however, we must acknowledge that the process of integrating the EMPA into the Union for the Mediterranean as its parliamentary institution is not yet complete.

I am grateful for the kind words spoken yesterday at the extraordinary meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs by the French Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, and his Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Abul-Gheit, the Co-Presidents of the Union for the Mediterranean; they give us hope. Nevertheless, there must be no let-up in our efforts to achieve our aim.

One day - I am convinced - the EMPA will be the *'parliament'* of the Union for the Mediterranean. The public expects this. Political action, and particularly the selection and

implementation of specific projects by the Union for the Mediterranean, must not be a matter for the executive alone.

The European Parliament also developed from modest beginnings. Initially it was belittled as a 'paper tiger', but today hardly a single European law finds its way on to the statute books without the European Parliament's approval.

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As you are aware, one of the consequences of the Israeli military intervention in the Gaza Strip has been the temporary halting of the activities of the Union for the Mediterranean. The work of the EMPA was also disrupted for a while.

At its meeting on 14 January 2009, for example, the Bureau of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Islamic Conference, acting on behalf of the Arab group in the EMPA, decided to suspend its involvement in the proceedings of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly.

Nevertheless, on 20 January 2009 we managed to adopt and publish a joint EMPA Bureau statement on Gaza and on 29 January 2009 to hold in Brussels an ordinary meeting of the EMPA Bureau, which then also took the decision to send a high-ranking delegation, involving all the EMPA committee chairs, on a fact-finding mission to Gaza to assess the situation on the spot and the (humanitarian) situation of the local population.

I should like to express my thanks to my Bureau colleagues and EMPA Vice-Presidents Abdelhadi Majali and Mustapha Mansouri and to Gianfranco Fini for their hard work and support during this difficult period.

Naturally enough, as a result of the postponement of a series of committee meetings our work has fallen behind schedule. By holding the meeting on 29 January 2009, however, we did manage to demonstrate that the EMPA is remaining faithful to its role as the only Union for the Mediterranean body to have provided guarantees of continuity and constructive commitment during the crisis.

The EMPA committees resumed their proceedings in mid-February. At this point I should like to express my admiration for the work of our colleagues the committee chairs: they have held debates, heard experts and drafted reports and recommendations on the topics agreed by the EMPA Bureau on 11 June 2008.

More specifically I should like to thank:

- Ms Tokia Saïfi, the Chair of the Committee on Political Affairs, who was faced with the additional problem of responding quickly to the new situation created by the military operation in Gaza - by means of a debate and the drafting of a recommendation on the situation in the Middle East - following the fact-finding mission by the EMPA Bureau to Gaza from 22 to 24 February 2009; the reports allocated to the Committee on Political Affairs by the EMPA Bureau on 11 June 2008 have thus been held over to the next plenary session.
- Mr Mohammad Abul-Enein, the Chair of the Committee on Economic Affairs,

- Ms Afifa Salah, the Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights,
- Mr Alberto Antunes, the Chair of the Committee on Culture, and
- Mr Georgios Salagoudis, the Chair of the ad hoc Committee on Energy and the Environment.

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the basis of a joint initiative of all the EU Member States, the European Commission and the European Parliament, last year, 2008, was declared the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

In my dual capacity as President of the European Parliament and of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly I was determined to use the year as an opportunity to highlight the benefits of cultural diversity - which also encompasses interreligious dialogue - and to hold a debate on its positive aspects.

For that reason I was a particularly fervent advocate of events such as the Arab Week held in the European Parliament from 3 to 6 November 2008 and the first EuroMedScola meeting, a 'simulated' parliamentary sitting, in a Euro-Mediterranean context, involving schoolchildren between the ages of 16 and 18.

With regard to the latter event, I felt it was particularly important that young people from our countries should be involved in the debate on intercultural dialogue.

I am delighted that on 16 and 17 November 2008 more than 240 young people from almost all the EMPA member countries - the 27 EU Member States, the 10 Mediterranean partner countries and Albania and Mauritania, countries which had already been present as observers at the plenary session held in Jordan in October 2008 - came together on the European Parliament's premises in Strasbourg.

Their constructive efforts and discussions send out a message of hope for the future of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation.

Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The shared history of the Mediterranean region is what unites us, but that shared history is also the source of the wounds which have not yet healed or which even today can still cause open conflict.

Our responsibility, however, is to build bridges, to maintain dialogue and together to devise proposals which our governments can put into practice, whether those proposals concern energy supply, alternative energy-generation projects, scarce water resources or the joint fight against terrorism, infrastructure projects, intercultural and interfaith dialogue, tourism, new funding facilities or the Middle East peace process.

After a year as President of the EMPA I should like to say one thing: presiding over the proceedings of a multilateral parliamentary assembly such as the EMPA is rather like being the

conductor of a large philharmonic orchestra. The President's task is to combine diversity, to pull together the full range of views and standpoints, with the ultimate aim of establishing a common position, what might be termed 'Euro-Mediterranean harmony'.

It has been both an honour and a pleasure to discharge the office of President of our Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly over the past year. The vote of confidence you gave me on 28 March 2008 in Athens has been a constant source of motivation and support.

Today I am handing over the Presidency to my friend and colleague Abdelhadi Majali, the President of the Jordanian Parliament. He will guide our Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary assembly through the events of the next twelve months. I have confidence in his wisdom and leadership skills.

Abdelhadi, I wish you the very best of luck. Rest assured that the European Parliament will never waver in its support for the work and development of the EMPA.

Thank you.
