

Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC)

High Representative Catherine Ashton led the EU Delegation to the 23rd session of the Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) held in Manama, capital of the Kingdom of Bahrain, on 30 June 2013. The two blocs remain key partners on a number of issues and the emphasis both sides place on the Joint Council reflects this.

Co-chaired by H.E. Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the meeting covered a number of discussions on a range of topics including joint economic growth and trade between the EU and Gulf states. The High Representative noted the '*spectacular*' increase in bilateral trade, which is now worth € 145 billion annually between European Union and Gulf states.

In addition, the Ministers expressed support for the on-going diplomatic efforts of the EU High Representative, together with the E3+3, to seek a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, and called on Iran to fully comply with the relevant UNSC and IAEA Board of Governors resolutions regarding the exclusively peaceful use of nuclear energy.

The Ministers also welcomed the current efforts of US Secretary of State John Kerry to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process, reaffirming their shared position that a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East is vital for international peace and security.

Finally, the Ministers underlined the importance of a unified international stance to reach a comprehensive political solution to put an end to the Syrian crisis. They reiterated the utmost urgency of finding a political settlement of the Syrian conflict and called on all parties to contribute constructively to this objective. In that context, they pledged that they will spare no effort in helping to create the appropriate conditions for a successful convening of the peace conference on Syria. The Ministers also condemned the participation of Hezbollah and other foreign forces in military operations in Syria. Catherine Ashton stated: "*Our attention is still very much focused on Syria. We believe that we need to work hard together to find the political solution that will bring peace. We are extremely concerned about the plight of the people, and about the rising sectarian conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq, and we want to do our utmost to try and defuse tension*".

Following the meeting, the High Representative thanked the hosts and emphasised just how important the strong and evolving relationship between the EU and the Gulf Countries is, describing it as "*extremely important, and increasingly important*".