Middle East: role of the European Union in the peace process and its future assistance

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OBJECTIVE: to redefine the role which should be played by the European Union in the Middle East peace process. SUBSTANCE: The Commission document is a response to the stalemate in the Middle East peace process and its direct impact on the intiatives adopted by the Community in connection with the Barcelona Conference. The failure of the peace process has had a disastrous impact on Europe's economic assistance programme, and the knock-on effect which the Union envisaged in terms of helping to stabilize the region has not been achieved. Instead of attracting private foreign investment, the massive aid from the Union has got bogged down, and economic indicators now show that the living conditions of the Palestinians are deteriorating. Nonetheless, the communication shows that international economic aid, particularly from Europe, has made it possible to keep the process alive and with it the Palestinian Authority. This paradoxical situation therefore makes it desirable to continue the aid. 1998 is the last budgetary year of the aid plan initiated in 1993. In view of the gravity of the situation and in order to give the peace process of chance of survival, the Commission proposes a series of initiatives for the future. These are primarily designed to enhance the role of the Union, both economic and political: 1) bilaterally: the aim is to guarantee the economic development of the Palestinians by eliminating barriers to both domestic and foreign trade. The Commission proposes that the Union should help Israel to eliminate these barriers in the context of common dialogue. It also proposes granting adequate financing for technical assistance projects for the Palestinians; 2) multilaterally: the Union should formulate practical proposals within the framework of the Regional Economic Development Working Group (REDWG) which it chairs in order to impart renewed impetus to the regional economic integration process; 3) regionally: the Union should renew its efforts to implement its Euro-Mediterranean policy, which has been at a standstill since the peace process reached deadlock. The Commission particularly proposes organizing a ministerial conference to review the Barcelona process in mid-1998; 4) politically: the Union has positioned itself as an intermediary complementing the USA, as the economic engine of the peace process. It is important that this role should be more correctly recognized and rewarded. The Commission therefore proposes that the role of the Union be re-evaluated in coordination with all parties concerned (Israelis, Palestinians, USA and international community). This new role should be reflected in practical terms at two levels: -with regard to participation, where the Union should be recognized in all the fora established in support of the negotiations between the parties to the conflict, alongside the USA; -with regard to the coordination of financial aid in accordance with a formula to be negotiated with other donors (the Union being the main net contributor to the peace process).