

**Intervention du Ministre des Affaires étrangères et européennes Jean Asselborn
Visite de l'Université du Luxembourg au MAEE**

Luxembourg, le 4 décembre 2017

Dear students,

I am very glad to receive you here today at the Mansfeld building, and to talk to you about a few issues that I deem might be interesting to students coming from so many different horizons. Let me make a few points, first on Brexit, followed by transatlantic relations and the southern neighborhood of the European Union.

Brexit: On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union. I regret the decision taken by the British voters to leave the European Union. Although this decision is painful, we have to respect and accept it.

There is no doubt that the most challenging aspect of Brexit is the uncertainty it has created, particularly for citizens. EU citizens living in the UK, and UK citizens living in the EU27, both need to know what the future holds for them after Brexit. It is in the interest of both the UK and the EU27 to get to a situation where we can provide certainty - for citizens and for students.

In order to eliminate these uncertainties, the EU27 and the UK need to reach a viable consensus on **citizens' rights**. This is a priority for Luxembourg. Citizens should not be bargaining chips during these negotiations and should not have to put their lives on hold while they wait for the outcome of the Brexit negotiations. Therefore, we need an agreement based on the principle of reciprocity and in the best interest of both the UK citizens in the EU27, and the EU citizens in the UK.

Besides citizens' rights, we are also discussing the Irish question and the **financial settlement** dossier.

The situation on the island of **Ireland** is very complex. The border between Ireland – which will remain in the EU – and Northern Ireland – which will be outside the EU – is currently invisible. However, this border will become the EU's external border after the UK's exit from the EU. The UK's decision to leave the EU's Single Market and the Customs Union created significant challenges for this border: the integrity of the Single Market must be preserved, while also allowing for the continuation of North-South cooperation, which currently takes place in many areas such as healthcare, environment, transport and social security. It is in everybody's interest to uphold the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to avoid generating the Northern Ireland conflict again.

As of now, **“sufficient progress” has not yet been reached** on these three topics. That is why we are not able to discuss the future partnership with our British partners. Much depends on the developments that will occur from now on until the European Council next week. The 27 Heads of State or Government will then reassess the state of progress in the negotiations. Based on a recommendation by the EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier, they will decide whether or not the threshold of “sufficient progress” has been reached.

In any event, **the UK will remain an important partner to the EU27** and we hope to maintain a close relationship with the United Kingdom once it has left the EU. Especially for students and researchers, it is vital that the UK and the EU27 retain the closest links possible: in the 21st century, academia is a global discipline and nobody would benefit from cutting off all ties.

Until March 2019, the EU27 will not focus exclusively on the Brexit negotiations. It is much more important that we focus on the needs and

priorities of the remaining 27 Member States and strive for a stable future for EU citizens. Brexit is neither the end of the European project, nor will it prevent the EU from moving forward.

This is why I welcome the **positive signals**, which the current wide-ranging debate **on the future of Europe** is sending all across the continent. New impetus has been given to this debate by the concrete proposals that have been put forward by Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, in his 2017 speech on the State of the Union, and by Emmanuel Macron, the French President, in a speech given at the Sorbonne. More recently, Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, contributed to this debate by presenting the so-called “Leaders’ Agenda”, which aims at providing a two-year-timetable for further work on the future of the EU.

What I want to make clear here today in front of you is that Brexit is indeed a challenge, but it also provides an opportunity for reforming and shaping the EU.

After having focused on Europe’s main internal challenge, Brexit, let us now turn to what might constitute Europe’s biggest **external challenges**: its southern neighborhood, North Africa and the Middle East. It is a region that has been plagued for too long by conflict, chaos, and wars, which contribute to extremism, migration, and poverty.

The **Middle East** is an important region for international politics. It is in this region faced with many existential challenges: conflicts about borders, occupation, foreign intervention, religious tensions, totalitarianism, democratization, sectarianism, nuclear proliferation, Weapons of Mass Destruction, terrorism, refugees, migration, State-building and Nation-building.

The Arab World has also a very young population, with 60% under the age of 30, and 3 million young people who join the labour market every year. The rate of youth unemployment is one of the highest in the world. The absence of socio-economic opportunities makes many problems in the Middle East worse.

In order to tackle these common challenges, we must not cut ourselves off from our neighborhood. **Europeans must cooperate directly** with these countries. The terrorist attacks that happened in Europe since 2014, but also attacks that have happened in the region, such as the brutal attack on a mosque in Egypt that recently claimed 300 lives, are aimed at all of us and we must jointly counter them. Let us not forget that most jihadist attacks are happening in the Middle East and that the vast majority of the victims are Muslims. The fight against terrorism is a double challenge: it must be conducted with determination, effectively and efficiently, but we must at the same time remain true to our own values and the rule of law.

The Middle East is torn by conflicts, be it in Syria, in Iraq, in Libya and in Yemen. As different as these conflicts are, they all have one thing in common: **they can only be resolved through political means**. In all of these countries, there is no military solution. Dialogues have to be conducted in each country between the different stakeholders in order to find sustainable solutions to marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion. The diversity, rights, and aspirations of all religious and ethnic communities must be respected in order to stabilize these countries.

In my intervention on the Middle East, I will focus on two conflicts in particular: Syria and Palestine.

The people of **Syria** are experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. Indeed, Syria's civil war is now even longer than World War 2. More than 350.000 have been killed, many more have been injured and mutilated, and half of the population has been internally displaced or

had to flee the country. After all this destruction and suffering, we must ask ourselves, why? Because a brutal dictator prefers to destroy his country to losing his power. He does not hesitate to apply violence or even use poison gas against his own people.

After all of the crimes committed by the Syrian regime, a new start for Syria with Assad as head of state is not conceivable, even if he could be part of a political transition process. War criminals must face justice, and thus Assad should be condemned in front of an international criminal court.

The complexity of the Syrian conflict lies in the fact that we are witnessing “wars inside the war”, with different stakeholders getting involved and fighting proxy wars. Therefore, finding a long-lasting political solution in Syria mainly depends on Russia, Iran, Turkey, the USA and Saudi Arabia, countries that have political, military or economic influence on parties in the conflict.

As for the **war against ISIS**, one can say that the caliphate is as good as dead, given that almost all of its territory has been liberated. However, ISIS will remain alive as long as the reasons for its rise are still present.

A dramatic consequence of the Syrian conflict is the exodus of millions fleeing from war and hopelessness. This exodus continues towards Europe, mainly through Libya. We as Europeans are aware that migration is and continues to be an enormous challenge, even though most Syrian refugees stay in the region. Just to mention one example: in Lebanon, 1 person out of 5 is a Syrian refugee. The European Union has to face this, not with barbed wire and walls, but with solidarity, political will in order to take in those who need protection according to international law.

Let us now turn to the **Middle East Peace Process**.

Ever since becoming minister of foreign affairs in 2004, I have been pushing for a **more significant EU role in the Middle East Peace Process**. For too long, Europe has only been a “payer” in the conflict, “paying and praying” for a solution. Europe needs to become a “player”, using all its financial and political means in order to get all the parties around the same negotiating table. Criteria for a two-state solution, the only just and viable one to this conflict, have been known for many years already and Europe has been pushing for these parameters since 2009.

The conflict is the world’s longest unresolved conflict, and even 100 years after the Balfour-declaration and 50 years after the start of the Israeli occupation, it has not lost its political, strategic and emotional importance. Without a solution to this central conflict, the whole Middle East will remain unstable and will be a fertile breeding ground for more radicalisation, in the region and worldwide.

It is the international community’s duty to point out that a consensus exists around a two-state solution and to keep this solution alive. It is equally relevant to point out that no one is taking a pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian stance. Especially as a friend of Israel, which Europe is, it is important to promote a two-state solution. The two-state solution is in Israel’s interest if it wants to secure its democratic and demographic future. One should also be able to condemn and criticise the Israeli government when it violates international law.

I am certain that respect for international law is key for peace. There is no doubt that Israel has the right to exist. Yet, neither is there a doubt that Palestinians have the right to their own sovereign state.

Despite this overall bleak picture, it is crucial to stay optimistic. Now, more than ever before, a common effort by the international community is of utmost importance, be it for Syria, the Middle East Peace Process, or any other conflict in the Middle East.

On the international stage, other challenges await us, and risk impacting on the future of the EU. In order to face these challenges, a **strong transatlantic alliance** is more important than ever. During the course of the year, it has not always been easy to estimate which direction the new US Administration under President Trump would take, to be diplomatic about it. Indeed, we had to do everything in our power to make President Trump and our new American colleagues understand what European integration is all about. We will have to continue to do so in order to make clear that a **strong and united Europe will be of direct benefit to the US.**

I hope that the insecurity afflicting the transatlantic relationship since the election of Donald Trump will start to recede in 2018, and that it will become possible for us to agree on a common approach to global problems. I very much hope that, in the second year of Trump's Presidency, it will be easier to defend our common values on the world stage.

Tomorrow, at the invitation of Federica Mogherini, the 28 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the EU will meet with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for the first time, during a lunch in Brussels. Such a gathering in the framework of the EU, before the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, appears of great importance to me. It will allow us to underline the fact that the US and the EU must work together in a multilateral context to once more defend and strengthen the world order that we created together out of the ruins of World War II.

I feel that, one year into the presidential term, Washington has understood how important the transatlantic alliance and transatlantic cooperation is, and how little a country, even one as large as the United States of America, can achieve on its own. In April 2019, we will celebrate the 70th anniversary of NATO. This will be a good opportunity to look beyond the issues of budget and capacity building, and to remind ourselves of the things that unite us, **our common values of freedom and democracy**, upon which our

societies are founded and which are often crushed in different parts of the world.

Please allow me to focus on two particularly important issues in EU-US relations.

The first issue is one in which both the US and the EU have shown leadership in the past, but on which we do not currently see eye to eye. I am talking about the **fight against climate change**. This is a global challenge that many in Washington do not want to take for real. On this issue, it is of utmost importance to work closely with our American colleagues at all levels, especially at the state level. Many US state governments adopt a more open attitude and have understood that global warming is a real and pressing issue.

The active participation of several US governors, led by governor Brown of California, in the COP23 climate change conference in Bonn a few weeks ago, has shown that transatlantic cooperation does not begin and end in Washington DC. I am convinced that we can build upon this kind of transatlantic cooperation in 2018. This would not be to circumvent federal government but to show them that we are determined to actively tackle common challenges together.

The second issue concerns foreign policy towards **Iran**. The current US government has continuously questioned the value of the nuclear agreement with Iran, the so-called JCPOA. As you know, President Trump has refused to certify the deal in October. The ball is now in Congress. While there is no love lost for the nuclear deal in Congress, there is a deep sense of understanding of what it represents. I do not need to emphasize how strong and united the EU continues to support this agreement, which was concluded in 2015.

We all agree that Iran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. But the agreement's very purpose is to prevent this, and this is why the continued, complete implementation of the agreement by all parties is of utmost importance. This does not mean that we do not share the concerns of our American partners, when it comes to other aspects of Iranian politics, such as for example Iran's regional politics or the Iranian program for ballistic missiles. We stand ready, of course, to continue to collaborate closely with the US on these issues. But a unilateral withdrawal from the Iran deal is certainly not the way to greater security in the Middle East.

Let me finally mention a third issue, after the fight against climate change and the nuclear deal with Iran, where we see a very concerning trend against multilateral approaches, and that is **migration**. Just two days ago, on Saturday, the US Mission to the United Nations announced the decision of President Trump to end the participation of the United States in the Global Compact of Migration. This global compact is a political agreement for safe, orderly and regular migration, to be adopted in September 2018 at the UN, after an intergovernmental process of negotiation. President Trump's decision is not surprising, given his position on immigration, but it is nevertheless very regrettable: migration is a global phenomenon that requires a global response, and multilateralism remains the best way to address such global challenges.

Thank you for your attention.