



The President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, concludes visits to Lebanon and Syria

Today, Hans-Gert Pöttering concluded his second official visit* to the Middle East region in his dual capacity as President of the European Parliament and President of the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly (EMPA).

After visiting Lebanon (6-9 August) and Syria (9-12 August), Mr Pöttering declared: "After holding thorough exchanges of views with a wide range of political and social actors, my deep conviction is that the time is ripe for significant progress towards a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, in which the European Union as a fair broker should play a more important role, as indicated by all counterparts in Lebanon and Syria".

In Lebanon, he held meetings with the President of the Republic, Michel Suleiman, the President of the National Assembly, Nabih Berry, the head of the new national unity government, Prime Minister Fuad Siniora, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Faouzi Saloukh, and several other Ministers, as well as parliamentary representatives of the majority and the opposition. Discussions focussed on the challenges faced by the new national unity government, the strengthening of Lebanon's legitimate state institutions and army, the normalisation of Lebanon's relations with Syria, and the active role that the European Union must play in achieving a sustainable peace in the region. In this respect, Mr Pöttering said that he was particularly proud of the role fulfilled by European troops in the framework of the reinforced United Nations Interim Force for Lebanon (UNIFIL), whom he had the opportunity to meet on the ground during a visit to Southern Lebanon.

In Syria, Mr Pöttering met the President of the Republic, Bashar Al-Assad, the Vice-President, Farouk Al-Sharaa, the President of the Syrian People's Assembly, Mahmood Al-Abrash, the Vice-Prime Minister, Abdallah Dardari, and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Walid Moallem. The main topics discussed were improving the relationship between Syria and the EU, most notably regarding the future signature of an association agreement, the human rights situation in the country, improving relations between Syria and its neighbours (Lebanon, Turkey and Israel), the position of Syria towards Iran, and Syria's essential role in achieving a comprehensive peace settlement in the Middle East.

Mr Pöttering said: "I am convinced that there can be no peace in the Middle East without Syria. The initiative of Nicolas Sarkozy, in his position as President of the European Council, to reinforce the *Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean* must serve to foster the Peace Process and to bring Syria closer to the European Union. I hope that the signing of the EU-Syria association agreement will be possible in the

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near future, hopefully during the French Presidency.”

He also added: “I hope that the upcoming visit to Syria of the Lebanese President, Michel Suleiman, will lead to concrete decisions leading to solutions in the relationship between the two countries, and that it will be an important step for further peace developments in the whole region as well as for the opening of Syria to the European Union and to the international community in general.”

In both countries, Hans-Gert Pöttering met important religious leaders, such as the Maronite Patriarch, Nasrallah Sfeir, the Grand Mufti of the Republic of Syria, Ahmad Badr Al-Din Hassoun, and the Greek Catholic Patriarch, Gregorius III. At a joint meeting with several of them, he was very much impressed by the good understanding that prevails between the various religious communities. He also met representatives of Lebanese and Syrian civil society.

N.B. :

*** In May 2007 Mr Pöttering had visited Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Jordan.**

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