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Under no illusions

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The president of the European Parliament on achieving a lasting resolution to the conflict.

I am a friend of Israel. These are not cheap words. As a Pole growing up in the shadow of Auschwitz, and as a European, I am all too aware that the fates of Europe and Israel hang together.

Europeans have a special responsibility toward Israel: to remember what has gone before, and to act on these memories – to secure the right of existence for Israel at a time of tumultuous change.

We take this moral duty very seriously.

The European Union – whose citizens are represented in the parliament of which I am president – was created to prevent the recurrence of the nightmare of war.

The first president of the directly elected European Parliament was Simone Veil – an Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen survivor orphaned by the Shoah. To this day, we are determined to ensure that lessons are learned from the tragic events of the past.

My generation understands this. My visits to Israel have always been special to me. Polish and Jewish history are interwoven, and span 1,000 years.

Israel's streets and squares are named after Ben-Gurion, Begin, Anielewicz and Korczak – heroes of Israel, but also famous sons of Poland and Europe. The courage of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters formed the foundation of the State of Israel.

I often think of my late friend Bronislaw Geremek. He was many things: Polish foreign minister in my cabinet, a brilliant historian, a distinguished MEP, a Solidarity activist.

One of the best. But it was as “a child of the Warsaw Ghetto” that he defined himself.

One of my proudest moments was when I went on the March of the Living with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu 13 years ago. Now we have to ensure that the new generation of Europeans also understands that powerful message: Never again! HOW DO we do this? First, it is our duty as Europeans to educate; the younger generation must not be allowed to forget. We must also put straight those who question – in whatever form – the right of Israel to exist.

But this is not enough.

We must put all our joint efforts into achieving a peaceful and lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I am older than the State of Israel, and am deeply impressed by what has been achieved in such a short time.

Against all odds, Israel has built a dynamic democracy in an arid land.

Israel has won battles and wars. Now Israel has to win peace.

That's how we have to inspire a new generation. That's how we can translate "Never again" into concrete action.

The European Union has stressed the urgent need to relaunch direct negotiations leading to a comprehensive two state solution. I know this sounds glib to many Israelis, but Europeans now understand that the security of Europe is contingent on peace and mutual recognition in the Middle East. So when we call for Israelis and Palestinians to live together side-by-side in peace, we are not just being naïve sentimentalists.

I have no illusions – this will be very tough. Painful concessions will be demanded of Israel. But the EU will be there for you all the way. We will provide assistance, show solidarity, and offer our honest advice – even when it is something perhaps you do not want to hear. We will do everything in our power to help push the peace process forward.

Now is the time for Israel to act. Europeans understand Israel's concerns about the unpredictability of the Arab Spring. The Arab revolutions have been a wake-up call for us all. It is in Israel's interest to be at the heart of these changes. Israel was the first democracy in the Middle East. Let's hope it is not the last.

The writer is president of the European Parliament.