

**Speech by Mr Martin SCHULZ
President of the European Parliament
Closing session of the Conference on 'Engaging Youth'
Brussels – 20 March 2012**

Mr Prime Minister,
Mr Commissioner-General,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you today, here in Brussels, at the end of these two fascinating days of debate about the future of young Palestinian refugees.

1. First of all, it gives me a chance to emphasise once again the importance which the European Union attaches to the remarkable work which UNWRA has been carrying out for more than 60 years.

I should like to pay tribute to the 25 000 exceptional men and women whose day-to-day commitment is the lifeblood of the agency and to Mr Filippo GRANDI, who has been its Commissioner-General since 2010.

For many years now we have enjoyed an excellent working relationship, based on trust, with the UNWRA, whose achievements have won plaudits from all the European Union's partners.

The agency is dedicated to assisting what is still the world's largest group of refugees, and we regard its work as vital and essential, whether in the context of humanitarian emergencies or in the areas of education, training, health or economic development. In that respect, UNRWA provides the most basic of public services.

I should like to emphasise in particular its work in the area of education, which has overriding priority, simply because it is fundamental to the future of young people.

By allocating half its budget to education, every year UNWRA offers 500 000 pupils high-quality basic education.

In the 700 schools it administers – which were the first in the region to guarantee genuine gender parity, with 50% of the pupils being girls – UNWRA endeavours to disseminate knowledge in a spirit of tolerance, open-mindedness and respect for others, values without which there can never be peace.

This is why we in the European Union regard our support for UNWRA as an integral part of our efforts to foster peace and stability in the Middle East.

What is more, our political support is matched by our financial commitment, and we are proud to have become, over time, the UNWRA's largest multilateral donor. In the last 10 years, the Commission and the Member States have thus contributed EUR 1 billion to the funding of the UNWRA.

2. However, despite its exemplary achievements the fact that UNWRA has now been in existence for more than 60 years is a reminder of the urgent need to revive the peace process.

When it was set up in 1948, UNRWA was supposed to be a temporary agency.

Sixty years later, the agency has already worked with four generations of Palestinian refugees. Today it still provides assistance to 5 million of them, in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the Occupied Territories; one-third of their number is still living in one of the 59 camps in the region.

We simply cannot allow this situation to continue.

There is a pressing need to find a fair and lasting solution to the issue of the Palestinian refugees, in the same way as solutions are needed to the issues of borders, the status of Jerusalem and access to water, as part of the peace process.

That process has been blocked for too long now. Any serious attempt to revive it therefore deserves our support. My hope is that the proposal put forward by the Jordanians will lead to the resumption of direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

Our position on that issue, like that of our partners, is well known: we unconditionally support the two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the capital of both States; in other words, the State of Israel and a sovereign, viable and democratic Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security.

In that connection, the presence here today of the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Mr Salam Fayyad, gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to the remarkable efforts he has made, with President Mahmoud Abbas, to improve the governance and economic development of the West Bank, in the areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority.

I cannot praise this example of sound management highly enough: as already highlighted in the reports drawn up by the World Bank, the IMF and the United Nations, the Palestinian Authority is now regarded as a functioning State in a whole range of key areas. Mr Fayyad has strengthened the institutional mechanisms which, in the future, will be at the heart of the Palestinian State.

The issue which has still to be resolved, of course, is that of reconciliation and national unity. On that point, as friends of the Palestinian people, and as friends of peace, we can only encourage all political forces in Palestine to engage in dialogue, to seek consensus and to show moderation.

The situation is clearly difficult, but our hope is that a Palestinian people united in its diversity will contribute to the lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as part of a political process.

3. Finally, I should like to take this opportunity to speak directly to you, the young Palestinians who have done us the honour of being present today in Brussels.

It is my firm belief that young people, whether in the Middle East, in the European Union or in any other part of the world, constitute the real wealth of nations.

As these two days of dialogue with young Palestinians come to an end, I would like to share two thoughts with you:

a – Firstly, I am pleased to note that this event will help us to overcome certain pessimistic stereotypes.

I have read the details of your academic and professional careers, and I must say that I was very impressed by the range and excellence of your qualifications. We have with us today, in this room, brilliant students of law, engineering or commerce, to cite only a few examples.

Throughout your university careers, you have shown great aptitude for learning and study. My hope is that you will be able to continue along that path and find work commensurate with your expectations.

Over and above your first-rate qualifications, however, I was particularly struck by your commitment to serving others, as reflected in many cases by your involvement in programmes in the areas of social assistance, voluntary work or development. This demonstrates the altruism, the open-mindedness and, in a nutshell, the nobility of spirit which are, to my mind, a formidable source of strength and hope for the Palestinian people.

Today, the priority is to help refugees become integrated into their daily environment enjoying their full fundamental rights and, on that point, we can only appeal once again to the generosity and solidarity of the countries who have been playing host to them for more than 60 years.

However, looking beyond that immediate objective it is comforting to realise that the Palestinian State which we hope to see established one day will also be able to count on talents such as yours, the talents of competent and dynamic young professionals, in its efforts to develop and prosper.

b – Secondly, I want to thank you for making your voices heard in the workshops held yesterday and today and reminding us of something fundamental: despite the camps, despite the violence, despite the occupation, despite all the problems, young Palestinians have the same aspirations as young people the world over.

Not only are your aspirations the same as those of all young Arabs, those who, in Tunis, Cairo and Tripoli, have taken to the streets to send us a simple message, namely ‘we want democracy, we want freedom, we want justice’; those who, for more than a year now in Syria, have endured violent repression by a merciless regime simply because they insist on fighting for their dignity and the right to play a role in political and economic decision-making in their country.

Your aspirations are the same as those of young Europeans, who, although they have the immense good fortune to live in democracy and peace, are not prepared to accept being at the back of the queue when it comes to finding a job or a place to live.

In my view, there is no such thing as young Palestinians, young Arabs, or young Europeans.

In my view there are only young men and women, all free and equal, who want to exercise their universal rights, whether these are civil and political or economic and social rights; who want to make their voices heard; who want to build a future for themselves; who want a job; who want to start a family; who want, quite simply, to live and be happy.

And it is our responsibility, as men and women of goodwill, whether in Europe, in the broader international community or in the Middle East, to ensure that those aspirations are not thwarted, and turn into disillusionment.

I will stop here to leave time for your questions and a discussion.

Thank you.