

BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY VISITS DAMASCUS "SYRIA CAN BE A FORCE FOR STABILITY OR FOR INSTABILITY"

The British Foreign Secretary David Miliband undertook a groundbreaking visit to Syria on 17-18 November, as part of his tour of the wider Middle East region. Mr. Miliband is the first senior British figure to visit Syria since Tony Blair in 2001, which was the first visit by a serving British Prime Minister.

The Foreign Secretary began his visit with a tour of the Umayyad Mosque in the Old Town of Damascus, before taking a walk through the souq with the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister. Mr. Miliband took the opportunity to chat with local shopkeepers and sample some of Damascus's finest pistachio covered icecream. The following day he held talks with the Syrian President Dr. Bashar al Asad and Syrian Foreign Minister Dr. Walid Al Muallem.

Mr. Miliband said that he hoped his visit would lead to Britain and Syria developing a mutual understanding in the search for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, and urged Syria to play a "constructive role" in this. Mr. Miliband told journalists "Syria has a big potential role to play in stability in the Middle East. It can be a force for stability or for instability".

Dr. Muallam affirmed that the talks, which followed on from his own visit to London three weeks earlier, laid down the foundation for strong ties between the two countries. The visits came after 18



months of talks between the British and Syrian Foreign Ministers, on issues such as counter-terrorism, tightening Syrian control of its border with Iraq, improving Syrian relations with Lebanon and Syria's desire to continue negotiating with Israel.

"Syria is a very important country with important responsibilities," Mr Miliband told reporters at a joint press conference with his Syrian counterpart. "Syria has the opportunity to play a constructive role for peace in the region."

But the Foreign Secretary said that rocket attacks by Hamas, supported by Syria, were harming that process. Speaking after talks with

President Bashar al-Assad, the Foreign Secretary warned that a commitment to peace was not compatible with backing for the Palestinian Islamists who now control the Gaza Strip. But he added: "I argue that Hamas's violence hurts Syria, which says it believes in a comprehensive peace."

President Asad told Mr. Miliband that peace needed "seriousness" from Israel and an "honest sponsor and an effective European role". The President said that a comprehensive peace based on UN resolutions was the "only way to bring about security and stability in the region".

Later in the visit Mr. Miliband held a roundtable discussion with a group of Syrian religious leaders including the Grand Mufti of Damascus and the Grand Mufti of Syria. The Grand Mufti highlighted Syria's history of tolerance, respect and peaceful co-existence between people of different faiths. Mr Miliband said later that they had also discussed "how Islam is an enemy towards none and a friend towards all, how Islam is a credo of peace and how it is vital that all of us work to narrow the gaps that can divide people across religion or geography or race". Mr Miliband praised Syria for the positive example it offers the rest of the world on pluralism, communal co-existence, and humane religiosity.