The Mediterranean shores have not been such a tense place since the end of World War II. The conflict in Syria has killed some 250,000 people. Libya has been struggling for years to find peace and unity. A terrorist organisation is trying to redefine the borders of the Middle East and North Africa and old crises are far from being solved. The long stalemate in the Middle East peace process is proving to be increasingly unsustainable: violence will spiral if we do not move decisively towards a two-state solution. Conflict and instability have forced thousands of men and women to flee their countries towards the northern shore of the Mediterranean, via land and sea: humans have always left their homes in search of a better future, but one has to go back to the post-war mass resettlements to find a comparable phenomenon in our region. Too many have died pursuing the dream of a more human life.

It is a grim scenario and every day we face new calls to action. As we tackle the latest emergencies, though, we must keep in mind how we reached this point. Together as a European Union, together as an international community. No single country can put in place a truly effective action by its own: no country alone can save the lives of so many people who cross the Mediterranean, as we do every day, nor find political solutions to the crises in Syria and Libya, nor address the other root causes of migration such as poverty or climate change.

Such historical circumstances demand an understanding of our history and an imaginative effort to find a new path for the future. Our solutions must focus not just on the next weeks and months, but on the years to come.

The crisis the Middle East is going through is political. The decades-long tension between Sunni and Shia forces is now joined by clashes between alternative blocs inside the Sunni world. Rising powers versus old alliances, secular versus religious groups, one school of political Islam versus another. Against this background, sectarianism has prospered. The result has been the destabilisation of entire countries, with spill-over effects hitting the whole world. The foundations of the Middle Eastern social fabric have come under attack and it may take years, or decades, to heal the wound. But we cannot accept sectarianism as the basis for a new order in the Middle East and North Africa. We cannot accept the drawing of borders along sectarian lines. Doing so would destroy the unique richness of the region.

Such a complex puzzle will not be solved overnight. As a political crisis, it will certainly not be solved by military means: political crises require political solutions, and political solutions require patience, wisdom, courage and leadership. Regional powers need to stop waging proxy wars against each other and agree to sit at the negotiating table. In war-torn countries, we need processes of national reconciliation to put an end to the conflicts. This is true in Syria as it is in Yemen and in Libya. Politics is as crucial as military force for the ultimate defeat of Da‘esh, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The threat they pose goes beyond their territorial gains and the atrocities they perpetrate: they are trying to pervert a noble religion for their own cynical and apocalyptic goals.

The agreement we reached in Vienna on Iran’s nuclear programme can be an important step towards a different regional dynamic. The deal is first and foremost a non-proliferation agreement, but it can
also open a new chapter in regional politics. And the multi-lateral approach that led to the deal can serve as a model for other crises.

A more cooperative regional scenario could also benefit immensely from the reprise of peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. After so many years, restarting the peace process may seem like an illusion. Still, this is no excuse for not trying. In years of regional turmoil, some believe the Middle East Peace Process will be put aside. It will not; at least not by Europe. More resolve and more creativity will be necessary. I am personally involved in trying to define a new regional framework that will allow for a resumption of negotiations. All regional and international actors agree on the need for such an approach: we all face the same threats, including the rise of extremist groups and failing states. In these tough times, peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians could send a powerful message to the whole region and the whole world.

A new and more cooperative order for the Mediterranean and the Middle East might need a major accord among all regional players. But we will need more than this. As we recall the last decades of Mediterranean history, we cannot forget the events of just four years ago. For too long, people were peripheral to the political processes, too distant from the decision-making affecting their lives and livelihoods. And then, in 2011, it was the people who rewrote the script. They said enough is enough. They took to the streets with protests and demands for freedom and dignity. And bravery came at a huge cost.

We have spent the past few years discussing whether the Arab ‘Spring’ has fully bloomed or disappeared too soon. What has not disappeared is the reason why these youngsters rose up. Their demands and aspirations will not go away. A new order for the Mediterranean and the Middle East will not emerge until the issues they raised are fully addressed: the call for inclusive and functioning democracies, rule of law and respect of fundamental human rights.

There are so many young people who simply ask for a place in their societies. They ask for an opportunity to be listened to and to contribute. They ask for an opportunity and they do not get their fair shot. We all bear a responsibility for the society we create. We have to give back hope to the younger generations. We need inclusive societies. We need effective democracies. This is the best answer we can give. And this is true on both shores of the sea.

Of course Europe, North Africa and the Middle East have different societies and economies: but in all continents peace, stability and prosperity ultimately depend on the quality of our democracies, on the opportunities we guarantee our youths. Education will, therefore, be crucial — there is nothing terrorists fear more than education. Reducing unemployment will be crucial. Human and civil rights will be crucial.

Some are fostering the fear of an ‘invasion’ of Europe. If you compare the numbers of people arriving with the overall population of Europe, it is clear there is no invasion: the figure is well below one per cent. But this is not just a matter of statistics. Throughout our history, the sea has been a link between civilisations, more than it has been a border. Europe would not be the same had Christianity not spread from the Middle East, where it was born, or had the Arabs not brought their algebra to the northern shore. Of course there have been wars dividing our peoples — just as they have divided the peoples of Europe. The European Union has guaranteed seventy years of unprecedented peace and prosperity for its Member States. Now, with our Mediterranean partners, it is time to start writing a new page for the whole region.