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The Mediterranean region has never been so central to the European Union's concerns. The turbulence of recent years has served to demonstrate – in case anyone needed persuading – that Europe's interests, its well-being and security, are intimately tied up with developments in its southern neighbours. These partners currently face some extraordinary challenges, which impact ever more directly on Europe, and not only on its Mediterranean Member States.

The days are gone when Europeans could look across the Mediterranean Sea and consider benevolent development aid as an enlightened but optional activity. Migratory flows to and through our southern partners are a matter of common concern. Radicalization and terrorism threaten our societies on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. Conflicts that once seemed far away, have direct repercussions on our daily lives.

And, the emergence of an overwhelmingly young demographic across the region offers exciting potential, but daunting challenges for us all.

Net population growth in a country like Egypt is around 7,000 a day, over two million a year. We all have reason to work for sustainable economic and societal development that can offer the rising generation the opportunities they need: the education, the jobs, and the individual freedoms that are the best safeguards against bad choices – either to seek irregular migration in the hands of unscrupulous people smugglers or recruitment to organizations that offer the young false ideology and violence in place of peace.

That is why the EU will continue to work through its Neighbourhood Policy to co-operate with Mediterranean partners on all these issues in a strategic fashion, and not simply respond to each latest crisis to hit the European headlines.

The EU is, and will continue to be, a very significant donor in the region. For decades the leading provider of financial support to the Palestinian people, the EU is now also the leading donor in the international response to the Syrian crisis, supporting refugees, internally displaced persons and host communities in neighbouring countries, where we focus particularly on education, access to healthcare, improved water and wastewater infrastructure, as well as support for projects promoting resilience, economic opportunities and social inclusion.

Lebanon alone is hosting 1.1 million Syrians – besides other refugees in the country. EU support under the Neighbourhood Policy is designed to address not just the current urgent needs, but to help address the economic structural weaknesses that were there BEFORE the crisis, and invest in public services that will continue to help the country develop AFTER the crisis is over.

Similarly, in North Africa we are providing hundreds of millions of euros to support not just improved handling of the migration crisis but to strengthen the countries through which the migrants pass. While the media highlights our measures to enhance the Libyan Border- and Coast Guards' capacity to effectively manage the country's borders, few are aware of the very wide-ranging work underway to help Libyan municipalities and communities improve their economies and services, reducing the attraction of moving on or joining the smuggler networks.

In the review of Europe's Neighbourhood Policy, which we carried out two years ago, I was determined to set our relationships with the Mediterranean on a new footing. Partnership means respect and our

new agreements with our southern neighbours are much more differentiated, thus reflecting their individual aspirations and interests, as well as their different choices for engagement with the EU.

The EU continues to believe its own success is founded on certain fundamental pillars – human rights, democracy and rule of law. We promote these values, and continue to argue for them, but we have left behind the self-righteous tone and set aside the megaphone.

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We would like to see more open societies, because we believe this is the key to building stability and increasing resilience, making each country less vulnerable to external and internal pressures. Where there is a will to reform we will support it, and where there is not, we will support civil society and the private sector where we can, and try to demonstrate the relevance of our case, without the condescension of the past.

In a country like Tunisia, which is pursuing a wide programme of reforms, we are doing all we can to support both governance reforms and economic development with significant economic assistance, hoping that we can play our part in supporting Tunisia's transition.

In some other countries where there is a choice for a narrower range of engagement with the EU, we concentrate on the shared goals. Algeria has embraced this new approach, and on the basis of a new set of agreed "Partnership Priorities" we are working together, for example, on diversification of the Algerian economy, till now predominantly focussed on hydrocarbons, and on shared security challenges.

Some issues are addressed more effectively at regional level. The Union for the Mediterranean, co-chaired by the EU and Jordan, is a fruitful forum and we support regional dialogues on a wide range of

shared challenges. To take one example, the energy platforms (on gas, renewables and electricity) are proving valuable places to exchange experience and develop joint agendas. Energy consumption is rising exponentially across the region – and looks set to double by 2030. So our work together on regional strategies, to get the best from gas resources, develop renewables and boost energy efficiency, is important for the energy security of partners on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Similarly, the EU is supporting joint action through the UfM on water. The Mediterranean is among the most water-stressed regions in the world. We are supporting the development of a shared agenda for action, and contributing to the investments and governance systems necessary to manage an increasingly scarce resource.

We will support implementation of the latest declaration on sustainable urban development, and look forward to the ministerial meeting later this year, which will adopt a declaration on women's empowerment.

Of course there are areas of work that never move as fast as we would like. Increased South-South trade, currently at 5%, would boost economies across the region. The EU is ready to help but, ten years after the Agadir agreement, this needs southern ownership.

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Geography is destiny: just as you cannot choose your family, you cannot choose your neighbours. Europe and the Mediterranean are bound together forever for better or for worse. I am determined that our partnership should be decisively for the better: the EU will continue to seek to be a relevant and effective partner. Even where we have our differences we should work together for a more prosperous and peaceful future – because the future we build, will be one that we share.