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It is through pain, but sometimes also through hope, that the Mediterranean reminds us of its position at the heart of Europe, at the heart of our lives, and ultimately at the heart of the world.

Over the past months, hundreds of thousands of people have attempted to cross it. Some have succeeded in reaching the Italian, Greek or Cypriot coasts, often exhausted and traumatized. But nearly 3,000 people have also lost their lives here during the first six months of 2016. According to the International Organization for Migration, it has been the deadliest half a year ever recorded in the Mediterranean.

The conflicts dotting the shores of the Mediterranean are driving desperate people to take to the sea, risking their lives on makeshift boats. Their hope for survival is stronger than the certainty of dying under murderous tyrannies.

Syria has entered the sixth year of conflict now. In this devastating war, terrorism prospers alongside the power play of foreign governments fighting one another with armed groups as proxies. Today, this country is no more than a field of rubble with the livelihoods torn to pieces. Stuck in chaos, Libya is at the hands of militias and terrorist groups; causing instability which serves as a rear base for the prospering activities of smuggling networks and human trafficking rings. The Israeli-Palestinian status quo continues to nurture blind hatred, ready to explode at the slightest provocation.

It is our shared responsibility as inhabitants of the Mediterranean shores to deal with these dramatic events and the ever-increasing challenges. We cannot accept that the most memorable image of the past months should be that of the

body of a Syrian boy washed upon the beaches of Turkey.

The Mediterranean remains our shared horizon and requires a medium- and long-term strategy. Our efforts must not be scattered. For years, the European Parliament has been advocating a global policy on migrants and refugees. We are most welcoming towards any concrete proposals by the European Commission.

The strengthening of the agency Frontex in its means and responsibilities, as well as the proposals regarding a common asylum system, are not restricted to standardizing regulations but extend to the sharing of efforts in an equitable way, distributing the asylum requests in such a way that governments assuming their responsibilities will not be the object of populist attacks which fuel fear and hatred.

These migrants and refugees are fleeing war, famine and poverty. There are 508 million Europeans, so that even considering the specificities of the member states comprising our Union, we can meet this challenge. It is Europe's duty to offer refuge to those in need of it and it would honour all Europeans if we can do so in the best way possible.

Guided by a common desire to fight the criminal networks exploiting the desperation of those fleeing from conflict, the European Union and Turkey agreed on a resettlement mechanism in March 2016. Since then, the number of those lost in the Aegean Sea has fallen considerably, which means that many lives have been saved. Today, Turkey accommodates over two million refugees. Lebanon and Jordan are home to nearly 1.5 million and 640,000 registered refugees respectively, which, in the case of Lebanon, equates to over a third of the population. Contrary to populist statements, it is the bordering countries who are on the front lines in the refugee crisis. They are demonstrating their impressive commitment and

their generosity, quite incomparable to the efforts made by EU member states.

These countries need support from us and from the international community. The financial commitments made at the London conference must be upheld to lighten the pressure resting on the social infrastructures and local communities in these countries. The European Union, backed by its Parliament, will continue to deploy all the means at its disposal as regards humanitarian aid and assistance for Syrians, be it in or outside Syria.

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It is our duty to respond to the humanitarian emergency by preserving human dignity, just as it is our responsibility to search for a political solution to end the Syrian tragedy. In the face of a battered population, the international community must be guided in the immediate future by the imperative need to bring hostilities and violence to an end. A cease-fire was possible for several days last February, proof, if any were needed, that influential powers can silence arms if only they want to. Diplomacy must regain control. The European Union supports the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Syria in his mediation efforts to help the Syrians formulate a political agreement in which all Syrians, true to the diversity build over thousands of years, can recognize themselves.

The day will come when all Syrians will rise again, join forces and rebuild their country together, not on the rubble of the present, but on the foundations of their shared history. This is precisely what a generation of Europeans has done. What once seemed in the order of the unthinkable to a wounded generation has become today's reality. We are not here to lecture the peoples of the world, but by its very existence, the European Union simply shows how reconciliation is always within reach.

True, the Mediterranean is in turmoil and today political uncertainty strikes even at the very heart of the

EU. As policymakers, however, we must always keep one eye on the present and the other on the future.

One of the lessons to be learned from the Arab revolutions is that South Mediterranean countries are transforming on the impulse of a new generation, educated, mobile and open to the world, who no longer accept being excluded from participation in their countries' politics. This generation reminds us that economic and social rights are inseparable from political and civic rights and that these rights are universal. These are realities that we should not lose sight of and on which the European Union should build, on both the bilateral and regional levels. On my official visits I recently had the opportunity to assure myself of this.

Last February, I left Tunisia with the firm conviction that the country has all the necessary human capabilities to meet the economic, political, social and security challenges, which its citizens are facing today. In my discussions, I have noted the Tunisians' will to act for the good of their country and the consolidation of democracy. This lively spirit is a considerable asset and so Tunisia is emerging as a model of pluralism and tolerance in the region.

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Cyprus is another source of hope for the region. For years, the reunification of the island seemed impossible. Today, the resuming of negotiations between the two Cypriot leaders is a beacon of hope. These leaders must be supported and encouraged – as Presidents Tusk and Juncker, as well as myself, have done – in order for them to enter into an historic, visionary agreement which, by contrast to other territorial conflicts in the region, is still within reach. I myself grew up and lived in a divided Germany. I know that the reunification will be a magical moment await-

ed by all Cypriots, first and foremost by its youth. Reunification will also convey a strong, symbolic message of reconciliation and prosperity which will be beneficial to the other inhabitants of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin as well.

I am convinced that, if we do not limit ourselves to purely economic matters, the Mediterranean can become one of the most dynamic regions in the world by 2030. We must rethink the issue of mobility, less in terms of security and more in terms of solidarity. We must bring about co-operation on both sides of the Mediterranean and build our prosperity on the basis of concrete projects that respond to the needs of citizens in a logic of sustainable development.

Despite the prolonged crises and conflicts dominating the scene, remarkable efforts have been made in this regard by the Union for the Mediterranean Barcelona Secretariat. These efforts will not be crowned with

success unless we accompany them with constant political support. The UfM's Parliamentary Assembly is exerting itself in its role of consultation for the fostering of democracy and democratic monitoring. The fight against blanket judgements and stereotypes, still giving rise to irrational fears and extremist discourse, requires a structured political dialogue, which should be led primarily by the Members of Parliament. This is also what the European Parliament promotes within the multilateral framework of the UfM's Parliamentary Assembly.

We cannot simply sit back and confine ourselves to national thinking, seeing the Mediterranean as nothing but an unstable, dangerous border. This region is a formidable area where the major challenges of globalization are resounding and the prosperous future of a community of 800 million people sharing a common destiny is at stake. We simply need to provide the means.