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Europe is a Mediterranean continent. Even if millions of us were born far away from Europe's southern shores, we all know that peace and prosperity in the Middle East, in North Africa and in our entire neighbourhood are a core European interest. The sea has never divided us. It has always been a gateway, more than a border. Thousands of Europeans have family on the other side of the sea. We trade on a daily basis. What happens along the Mediterranean coast echoes all across the European Union, and the European Union has a special responsibility towards all Mediterranean countries.

Yet peace and prosperity sound like distant dreams for too many people around the Mediterranean. The corona pandemic has taken hundreds of thousands of lives across the region. Its economic impact might create new inequalities and exacerbate existing tensions. The virus has exposed the fragility that surrounds us: the fragility of our health and health systems, the fragility of our livelihoods, the fragility within our communities. Meanwhile, a gigantic blast tore the heart of Lebanon apart. Syria and Libya are still at war. Progress towards better and stronger democracies has slowed down or reversed in too many parts of our shared region.

To the people of the Balkans and the Maghreb, of Lebanon and Syria, of Turkey and Egypt, I say: the European Union is at your side. We care about your fate. We care about the future of your youth. We care about fundamental freedoms in your countries. Europe cares about its neighbours and we want to prove it in practice, through our daily cooperation. The European Union was hit the hardest by the corona pandemic but this did not prevent us from help-

ing our neighbours. From Jordan to Tunisia, the European Union came in support of its partners with funding for hospitals and liquidity for firms. We were with the frontline doctors helping Syrians and Palestinians in refugee camps, as well as Africans stranded in Libya. We invested over 3 billion euros in the Western Balkans, to buy ventilators, testing kits and protective equipment, but also to support companies during the lockdown.

On our side – inside the European Union – we felt Mediterranean solidarity, too. Many migrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa enrolled as volunteers in the COVID-wings of French and German hospitals and cared for those in need. Our friends in the Western Balkans also came in our support. Albanian doctors and nurses joined forces with their colleagues in northern Italy, who were working day and night. Serbia and Montenegro helped enormously to fly stranded EU citizens back home. We will not forget their generosity.

I believe the European Union must always be there for its friends in need. In a matter of hours after the explosion in Beirut or the terrible earthquake that devastated Albania, our search and rescue teams were already digging in the rubble and saving lives, guided by high-definition imagery coming from EU satellites. We mobilized over 60 million euros to address the emergency in Lebanon in a matter of just a few days. And the international donors' conference that we organized for Albania raised 1.15 billion euros for the country's reconstruction.

2020 forced us to act in constant crisis mode. Yet the issues that the Mediterranean faces have deep roots and call for strategic thinking. Almost ten years have passed since the beginning of the great Arab uprising, but the motives that led millions of people to take to the streets are still haunting many Mediterranean societies. An unfair distribution of wealth.

The repression of dissent and the attacks against fundamental rights. The high levels of corruption. In recent years, the growing impact of global warming and the unequal access to digital technologies have only added to the discontent of Mediterranean peoples.

This is what the people of the Mediterranean care about. And this is where the European Union can truly make a difference – with our programmes to raise a new digital generation in the Middle East and North Africa, with our investment in restoring the Mediterranean environment, with our funding to civil society organizations and independent media, with our cooperation on good governance and security sector reform. The people of the Mediterranean ask for more than the status quo, and they can always find an ally in the European Union.

When we invest in clean energy from wind and sun in the Jordanian desert, or when we support digital start-ups in Tunisia and Morocco – it is a win-win situation for the European Union and for our partners. We have a shared interest in creating good and sustainable jobs on the South shore of the Mediterranean. We have a shared interest in choosing renewable energy sources and protecting our environment. This is the kind of partnership that the European Union has in mind: a partnership where both sides contribute and advance towards our shared goals.

We are ready to give substantial support to the reconstruction of Syria and Libya – but this can only happen as a result of negotiated political solutions. The future of these two countries should be decided

by the Syrian and Libyan people, through democracy and compromise, not by regional powers. As soon as Syrians and Libyans reach a political solution, the European Union's support will be strong and steady. We are ready for dialogue with everyone, but we will not shy away from protecting our own interests. We will protect Cyprus' and Greece's sovereignty and legitimate sovereign rights in the Eastern Mediterranean – this is a collective European interest. Yet the only way out of the current situation runs through dialogue and diplomacy.

Finally, part of Europe's Adriatic coast has still not joined the European Union. The EU will never be whole as long as the Western Balkans are not part of it. The Western Balkans belong in our Union. In 2020 we finally opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia – a long overdue move. By the end of the year, we will put forward an Economic and Investment Plan for the region – one that puts the Western Balkans at the heart of Europe. And in the years ahead, I expect to see substantial reforms that bring the Western Balkans even closer to the European Union. The path is marked, but it is for us to advance towards the unification of the European family.

In challenging times for the entire Mediterranean, we Europeans will not just stand on the shore and watch the tide. We are extending our hand to our friends all around this little big sea. 25 years on, the goals of the Barcelona Declaration – a free-for-trade, peaceful and cooperative Mediterranean – are still the European Union's goals.