Remarks by High Representative Catherine Ashton at
the opening of the EU-LAS Ministerial

Thank you very much Co-Chair and can I first of all thank Secretary General Nabil al-Araby and the Arab League for your hospitality today and for the tremendous work that is going into the organization of this event.

I'm delighted to be here. I'm always pleased to be in this room, meeting with colleagues from the Arab League. I think everyone knows how much the European Union values the collaboration between us so I'm especially pleased to see so many Ministers from the European Union and from the Arab League who've come together today.

I hope this will be a day with an opportunity for serious dialogue on some of the shared challenges that we face. Arguably we have grown together with an inter-dependence and that's why I attach such great importance to our close cooperation, especially in a rapidly changing region.

As you have said, Co-Chair, the heart of many of the upheavals this region has seen lies the desire that people have for freedom, dignity, justice and prosperity. And from the European Union we believe the democratic system based on the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedom is central to secure their aspirations.

We want to support efforts to sustain human dignity and political empowerment and we attach enormous value to our cooperation with the Arab League in this region. That's why we've mobilised our resources and created new vehicles: for example tomorrow we have the latest of our Task Force meetings here in Egypt.

And we have re-thought and developed our neighbourhood policy and I pay tribute to Štefan Füle who joins us for the opening session, for the work that he has done on this.
But as we meet today, we are especially conscious of the terrible situation in Syria. I want to welcome the work that was done in Doha to build and bring together the opposition groups to be inclusive of the people of Syria, to be determined in the offer that they make to the people.

I'm extremely pleased that the Special Envoy of the United Nations and of the Arab League, Mr Brahimi, could join us today and I look forward very much to his contribution.

But the tragedy of Syria is a tragedy that affects not just that country but the whole region. Countries represented here know the challenges of refugees who are fleeing for their lives, the threat of the over-spill of violence, the challenges to stability of the region and the concerns that causes. We have to continue and to strengthen our efforts in support of all the people of Syria. I believe this will be a crucial discussion and that we need to reinforce the resolve to work for a lasting peace.

We will focus our attention too on the Middle East Peace process and discuss in great detail current events. You know that the European Union is fully united in seeking a two state solution negotiated between the parties and we are extremely worried by the recent escalation of violence. The discussion here will inform and support our discussions at the Foreign Affairs Council next week and I look forward very much to the contributions that will be made, that will enable and enrich our conversations next week.

And of course not far from our thoughts is the situation in the Sahel where illegal trafficking of arms, of people and of drugs affects all of us.

Co-Chair, these and other challenges have implications for our joint security, stability and prosperity. We need regional approaches and regional solutions, that is why we need to strengthen the cooperation we have, that is why we need to work together as we have done when we considered how to collaborate during the Libya crisis, over Syria and of course the Middle East.

I want this meeting to create even closer cooperation between us. We will later today, the Secretary General and I, inaugurate the crisis room. A concrete result of the cooperation that we have had. It will help the Arab League in its capacity to gather and analyse information and it is a manifestation of the strength of the partnership between us.

But I believe there is much more we can do. We have agreed action in the fields of energy, culture, empowerment of women, legal affairs, humanitarian assistance, crisis management and electoral process.

It is a particular pleasure for me to see that the Arab League will be a key partner in EU funded projects developed to advance women's citizenship and political participation.

So to end, again with a thanks for the hospitality that we have been shown already. I look forward very much to our discussions, and Co-Chair I hand the chair to you.