Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the EU-Gulf Cooperation Council Ministerial meeting in Manama, Bahrain

"Thank you, your Highness. I appreciate the hospitality that has brought the European Union here today together with the members of the GCC. I don't have to tell anyone here how much we regard our relationship with the Gulf countries as extremely important, and increasingly important. I think today's meeting, which has been very constructive and very useful, comes at an extremely important time.

I'm very pleased that we have representatives of all 27 Member States of the European Union here, as well as Croatia, which, as you know, will join the EU tomorrow. I think that's a testimony to our commitment to strengthen the foundations for dialogue and cooperation between us.

I want to pay tribute to the Secretary General of the GCC, and to our senior officials in the EU, who've worked so incredibly hard together to strengthen those ties. It's on our agenda because we share common interests and a lot of common concerns.

We've seen a spectacular increase in bilateral trade: it's worth a €145 billion annually. I'd like to see a Free Trade Agreement agreed. I made a point in the meeting that, when I was Trade Commissioner, I hoped it would be under my watch that this would be completed. I'd like it to be under my watch as High Representative that we're able to do this.

I also believe that our political cooperation is extremely important and, as you indicated, our attention is still very much focused on Syria. We believe that we need to work hard together to find the political solution that will bring peace. We are extremely concerned about the plight of the people, and about the rising sectarian conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq, and we want to do our utmost to try and diffuse tension.
You probably already know that we will continue to mobilize our resources of humanitarian and non-humanitarian support, and that we've recently announced an additional €400 million in support of the people in Syria and those who are refugees in the neighbouring countries: particularly we think of Lebanon and Jordan. And that brings the contribution of the EU and its Member States to €1.25 billion.

As you've indicated too, we share many interests on other global issues. Over lunch we'll be discussing our work together on piracy and getting stability in the Horn of Africa. There are two important conferences, one in Dubai and one in Brussels, coming up on this issue.

But we've already indicated too that our relationship is not just between governments. It is equally important to promote exchanges and increase understanding between people. Academics, businesses, civil society. And that also means that we understand the deeper relationship means a more open one. So we do have honest and open discussions on issues, for example on human rights. We may have different perspectives at times, but we're able to have that honest dialogue. We have a genuine gift in exchanging views and discussing issues frankly and impartially with our partners.

The GCC has made important contributions on many regional issues and we, in the European Union, really value that. I believe we have to continue to work together with increasing resolve to address the regional challenges which are our common concern. I'm convinced that we shall do so more and more in the months and years ahead.

Thank you."