

A new EU Neighbourhood Policy for Lebanon and the region

Last week, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Johannes Hahn made a strong call on all partners in the region to have a critical look at the current policies and practises of the European Union in its Neighbourhood. This far-reaching European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) review is done in the spirit of a strong partnership we have built over the years whereby our relations with our neighbours in the East and the South are deep, our interests are mutual and our values are widely held beyond our shared borders.

It is clear to the new leadership in Brussels that the ENP has not always been able to offer adequate responses to the changing aspirations of the people in the Neighbourhood, including in Lebanon. Therefore, during the next four months, our partners, the government and the civil service, the parliament, local authorities, civil society, private actors, the business community and any citizen who takes an interest in EU-Lebanon partnership are invited to take part in open consultation (ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/consultation.pdf).

For ease of reference, four areas of reflection have been defined around a set of questions:

1) What can the EU do to increase the scope for *differentiation* in the way we work with our partners? In other words, is there enough recognition of the fact that the countries in the Neighbourhood are very diverse with different levels of complexity and are we sufficiently apt to adjust our rules and procedures according to the partners we work with? This question stems mainly from the fact that in the past, the EU would have a similar approach to the partners in the Eastern and the Southern Neighbourhood. Today, does a country, based on the aspirations of its people, really want to engage and abide by a set of rules; does the leadership want to modernise and adjust regulations in order to really ‘associate’ with the European Union? Do the neighbours of the neighbours want to assist our partners in advancing on an agenda of peace, security and state-building?

2) As the EU leadership has always said: It is for the countries to decide. It is for the people to decide. The Neighbourhood is meant to be a partnership of equals. Our policies and actions should not only be owned by the EU, the EU Member States, but also by the partner country. It is that very *ownership* the EU has been calling for, since many years, in particular in Lebanon. The government should be in the driver seat of its own policies and actions. The EU can only facilitate but never take the seat of the driver. This is not the role of the EU.

3) Of course no policy or plan of action, as detailed as it may be, can ever be called ‘great’, ‘groundbreaking’, ‘overpowering’, unless there are tangible results and positive changes for the people’s daily lives. The third area of reflection is therefore around the question where one should *focus* best. The EU cannot be expected to cover every sector and work with every partner. For those that want, and who are able, we should continue to pursue wide-ranging cooperation, helping the country align with EU standards. But, for the countries who can't, or do not want to engage with the EU so deeply, we may explore other formats of cooperation. Trade and mobility have been the traditional focus areas in some neighbouring countries – yet and unfortunately not so in Lebanon. Here perhaps energy security is far more pertinent or the threats to peace and security stemming from the region in a broader sense. I tend to believe, after more than four years now in Lebanon and based on the long experience of my predecessors, that Lebanon would want the EU to provide assistance in a wide variety of sectors and that ‘focussing’ will be a challenge. It will be especially so, knowing that this country has used the widest variety of instruments and support ever made available to its Southern neighbours by the EU. This shows the people of Lebanon’s creativity and

enthusiasm about working with the EU. Still, we will have to work out together where the real difference can be made.

4) It is clear for some partner countries that the EU needs to be more flexible. Since the crisis hit Lebanon, the EU has adapted and will continue to adapt as much as possible to the ever changing needs. Yet there is certainly more room for improvement when it comes to *flexibility*, the other elements mentioned above and any other suggestion our partners may have. We need to have *a fit for purpose framework* and look forward to our partners' contributions. Prime Minister Tammam Salam expressed a sincere interest to work with the EU on defining needs and priorities. Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil offered a consultation with all Arab partners to this end. A first round of meetings will take place in Barcelona on 13 April, the invitation for which I handed over to the Foreign Minister together with the Ambassador of Spain Milagros Hernando Echevarria. Our current and future well-being is deeply interconnected, and it is our common interest to make our countries more secure and moving forward as better places to live.

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