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***Lebanese Armed Forces
4th Regional Conference***

***Panel Discussion: "The International – Middle Eastern Relations: Junction
of Interests and Intention of Partnership"***

***The EU's partnership with its Neighbourhood
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting the European Union – I think for the first time – to this prestigious gathering and experienced audience from different institutions from the region and from here, our friends in Lebanon, and our partners from the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The topic of today is very broad and frankly I needed more than a moment to see how I could best focus on what you as an audience would like to take back from this exchange.

But since it is the first time the EU is on this podium and since Brigadier General Khaled Hamade challenged the EU yesterday evening with his reference to the 'decline of the European role', allow me to take a little more of your time to address three issues:

- 1) The EU as a global player
- 2) Our challenges in the Southern Neighbourhood
- 3) Our challenges in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The EU as a global player

For Europe, in today's rapidly changing and increasingly challenging world, the issues concerning peace and security on our own continent are inevitably of prime concern.

In the past four weeks only, and never ever in the history of Brussels, we had such a flow of top leaders visiting European Institutions. When I was in Brussels last week I was truly struck to see how our newly established diplomatic service – the European External Action Service which I am proud to be part of – is being put to test to the extent of round-the-clock crisis management, policy making, public diplomacy, efforts to de-escalate, efforts to re-unite, meeting the expectations of European citizens and of our partners across the world, including here in the region, including in Lebanon – and this all at once and for a series of very important foreign policy questions.

It is true that mostly the ongoing activity in our part of the world takes place against the backdrop of the crisis around Ukraine – and I will come to that.

Yes, we had our crisis, a deep financial and economic crisis and the whole of Europe mobilised. Together, all countries fought for the stability and the integrity of the eurozone. And we have won that battle. The existential threats on the eurozone have been laid to rest. Had we not succeeded, we would have found ourselves not with a recession but a depression; not in some member states but in every single member state – and beyond. If the single currency had collapsed, the single market, perhaps even the whole Union, could have followed.

That risk is now behind us. Solidarity prevailed. Thanks to resolute action: political action from all the member states, nationally through reform efforts, but also collectively as a Union; and monetary action too by the European Central Bank, but which could not have been possible without that very political determination - like the decision to set up the banking union. The existential threat is now behind us... but still, the path ahead promises to be challenging. We may be stronger today, but the global economy remains fluid. And the economic crisis in Europe is not over yet. We are still not where we want to be – least of all on jobs, and even least so on youth employment. But we are on safer ground. And we have done a lot already.

What do we draw from this:

There is the deeply-rooted conviction that we live in a world where a strong united, cohesive Union is much needed, and that we must keep working hard towards that goal.

And that is what makes us solid on the world stage. Today, European countries and the European Union, we are deeply involved in addressing global issues – be it the fight against poverty, climate change or nuclear proliferation. Yes, compared to other global actors, Europe has a different past, a different situation, also different interests. Our values shape strongly our basic understanding. And one should not underestimate what you can – and what we do – achieve that way.

We are strong supporters of an international rules-based system, and work hand in hand with the United Nations. Without Europe, there would be no WTO, no International Court of Justice, no global fight against climate change, no G20.

Together we provide more than half of the world's development and humanitarian aid, and we are by far the largest donor worldwide.

We are not a soft power, but we do have soft powers.

We apply what we call a 'comprehensive approach', and this is what makes the EU unique. We have the ability to respond to a crisis with a wide range of tools and instruments, short and long term, humanitarian and development, security and political.

This is an approach that we believe is particularly suited to tackling the new challenges we face today, especially our security challenges, and that leads me to our CSDP.

Our Common Security and Defence Policy has become an important and integral part of the EU's policy options, helping countries to build statehood, security and the rule of law. The EU has considerable operational expertise. Currently 7000 civilian and military men and women are involved in sixteen civilian and military crisis management missions and operations, on three continents. All these operations are conducted at the request of concerned countries, in close cooperation with the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab League. It is the High Representative Cathy Ashton's firm belief that we need to be able to act through CSDP, as a security provider in our neighbourhood and at the international level to protect our interests and values.

Of course, Europe is also a major economic player; together, our countries are the world's first economy, bigger than the US or than China and India combined. Now that we have left the euro crisis firmly behind us, we can focus again on a positive agenda of trade, thanks to negotiations with not only the US, but also with Canada and Japan, in fact all members of the G7.

And let me say to you, with the crisis along our border there is a new sense of shared responsibility for Europe to play an even stronger role in our neighbourhood and in the world.

Indeed, the events in our neighbourhood have an impact on all our citizens.

This realisation is new.

A new realisation asks for new solutions to new challenges. In the South and in the East.

Our challenges in the Southern Neighbourhood

With our neighbours in the southern Mediterranean, including Lebanon, we have had for long a strong positive engagement not least because of the prime importance this region holds for us. That is why we have elaborated, for over two decades a three pillars approach to supporting political, economic and social reform and – if indeed our partners deliver on reforms - promoting deep integration with our internal market and facilitating the free movement of people.

As you know as part of our Neighbourhood Policy we launched negotiations on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with our southern neighbours - modelled after the Agreement that was, interestingly, first negotiated and agreed with the Ukraine. To date, negotiations have been launched with Morocco and preparatory talks have taken place with Tunisia. Jordan has indicated an interest in launching talks in the near future. Owing to the ongoing process, talks with Egypt have not entered as yet an exploratory phase.

There is more or less the same state-of-play in terms of "Mobility Partnerships" with these same four countries, which when implemented

would also, to a large degree, be modelled after the facilitated access to the EU currently enjoyed by some of our Eastern partners.

I name these two initiatives because they are essential in understanding our approach to our neighbourhood: to promote development through liberalised flows of goods, capital and people. The development we foresee and want to support is precisely that which we enjoy ourselves. This has been the key to our own success and can also be the key to the success of our closest neighbours, south and east.

Many terms have been used to define and evaluate the 'Arab awakening'. I prefer to use the key words *freedom, dignity and respect*. It is in a nutshell all about listening to and supporting the aspirations of the people. It is about the recognition of the fact that democracy can only be sustainable if, in addition to the holding of free and fair elections, the rule of law is upheld, the right to free expression and free assembly is maintained and the armed forces are subject to democratic oversight and control. We call this "deep democracy". It is not about the 'winner takes it all', it is about once you are in office, you allow for transparency and for all voices to be heard and deal with it, you manage it, democratically. It is called pluralism.

As EU we welcome the positive changes emerging from challenging democratic transitions. In fact, in Tunisia we have played a key role in supporting the country on the road to a stable and democratic future. It is a real success story, has huge potential and we will continue to work tirelessly - as we do with other nations of the region. Particularly at the moment in Egypt. Our key message there is it is really important that Egypt moves to stabilise in an inclusive society that will enable it to move forward.

The war in Syria has resulted in over 150,000 dead and more than 9 million refugees and internally displaced persons. The war has put pressure on neighbouring states such as Lebanon and Jordan as well as Turkey and Iraq, firstly by the burden of accommodating huge numbers of refugees (and the knowledge that other countries refuse to share this burden with them), but secondly by the spill-over of the conflict in security terms.

In our attempts to bring a small measure of relief to the suffering of the refugees and IDPs, we Europeans have made available more than €2.6 billion. The neighbouring countries and the UN continue to call for further

contributions to meet what we all foresee will be a growing humanitarian crisis. The needs are growing, the means are shrinking, but we will continue to try to mobilise as much support as possible...

When asked how to get out of this we cannot but admit that absence of the slightest sense of responsibility of those who fuel conflict and subsequent the failure of international cohesion has prevented serious pressure being brought to bear on the Syrian regime to bring the conflict to an end.

We continue to support the efforts of the UN and the difficult work of Special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. A political, negotiated solution is what we see as needed to prevent further suffering and to contain and reverse the festering extremism that is now so apparent. But in order for this to take place all stakeholders need to not only be present but also prepared to commit to a resolution. We need to build on the small positive steps of the agreements to remove chemical weapons and to facilitate humanitarian relief operations in Syria with clear commitments from those responsible. Syria is self-imploding, victim to a proxy war of outside powers with sectarian or other scores to settle. By a concerted international effort we can and must resolve the crisis in Syria, this would be the single most important contribution we could make to humanity.

As for the Middle East Peace Process the EU remains truly engaged in supporting all efforts to finding a solution to this longstanding conflict, including the peace talks led by Secretary Kerry. In a nutshell we support the two state solution, the 1967 borders – al which is well put on paper in a set of Council Conclusions. In December 2013, the EU offered an unprecedented package of European political, economic and security support to the Palestinians and Israelis in the context of the peace talks and the ultimate agreement. That includes Special Privileged Partnership with the EU, aiming amongst other things, to increase access to European markets, closer cultural and scientific links, facilitation of trade and investment, promotion of business relations. A successful result would also need to include regional partners – here we should not forget the strategic importance of the Arab Peace Initiative in securing a broader peace.

As you know the High Representative leads on behalf of the UN Security Council the E3+3 Iran nuclear negotiations. After the agreement on the Geneva Joint Plan of Action last November, implementation began on 20

January. The parties are now working towards a comprehensive and final settlement and further rounds of talks the last one just concluded last night in Vienna. Still a lot of intensive work will be required to overcome the differences which naturally still exist at this stage in the process. As you know the parties will move to the next phase in the negotiations with a next meeting set for 13 May in which they will aim to bridge the gaps in all the key areas and work on the concrete elements of a possible Comprehensive Agreement.

Our challenges in the Eastern Neighbourhood

As EU, we are clearly beyond the situation where our main foreign policy tool is EU enlargement – even if, indeed, enlargement has been our most successful foreign policy. The mere perspective of EU accession is helping our closest neighbours to become more stable, modern and democratic. This was particularly true since 1989, when the Iron Curtain came down. With the latest entry of Croatia as our 28th member state, last July, the wave of Western Balkans enlargement is well on its way.

The Western Balkans were the last war zone in Europe. Nobody really wants to go back to the past. That is why Serbia and Kosovo are normalising their relations. The result of the last election is Serbia endorsed the country's choice for a European future, for peace and prosperity. And as the European flags at the Maidan in Kiev showed, the magnetic force of our Union is still at work.

What we see today in our Eastern Neighbourhood are reviving memories of a history which we had thought was over.

We are re-living these memories through witnessing the events in Ukraine.

Within the European Union, we have a strong and united position, established at the highest level. On 21 March, our 28 Heads of States and government signed the political parts of the Association Agreement with Ukraine. It was a strong way to recognise the aspirations of the people of Ukraine to live in a country governed by values, by democracy and the rule of law, where all citizens – and not just few – have a stake in national prosperity. We recognise the popular yearning for a decent life as a nation, for a European way of life.

With the Association Agreement – the remaining economic parts of which will also be signed soon – the European Union shows steadfast political support for the course the people of Ukraine have courageously pursued on the way to an open and inclusive democracy. It was their choice. It was neither imposed nor triggered by manipulation, provocation or violence.

As regards Russia, all European leaders have strongly condemned Crimea's illegal annexation. Early on our leaders decided unanimously on sanctions in three stages. We are in stage two (visa ban, asset freezes). But we made very clear that failure to settle the crisis peacefully, and any steps by Russia to destabilise Ukraine, will have far-reaching consequences. And by that we mean consequences on relations in a broad range of economic areas. Further targeted measures are being developed.

Of course, sanctions are not a goal in themselves; they are a means to a goal. The objective is a negotiated solution, in respect of Ukraine's sovereignty and international law.

This foreign policy crisis already has internal consequences for Europe – including positive ones. There is now a clear decision for instance to deepen the Union's energy policy, towards a 'energy union' of sorts. Indeed, we all want to decrease our dependency from Russian gas (which is on average 30%), as it is Gas that is used by Russia as a political instrument.

We are rethinking the EU-Russia relationship. We invested a lot in good relations with Russia the last decade by supporting its WTO membership; the Partnership for Modernisation. We were ready to engage on a New Agreement. We should have common objectives for the future and not try to restore a foregone world. The past will never come back.

Let me say a few words on the EU's commitment towards Lebanon. We know that the regional crises have brought your already existing challenges to the fore and that you are facing an unprecedented demographical, social and economic challenge.

We commend the security agencies, the Lebanese Armed Forces in particular, for their work to protect the stability and unity of Lebanon and we will continue to support your work as is taking place today in Rome in the conference organised by Italy in support to the LAF.

As we have said time and time again we will stand by you and your uniqueness in the region.

Permettez moi de finir avec une citation du Président Herman van Rompuy qui pendant la cérémonie de l'adoption de la nouvelle constitution en Tunisie a son tour a cité Nelson Mandela qui a dit: "Être libre, ce n'est pas seulement se débarrasser de ses chaînes; c'est vivre d'une façon qui respecte et renforce la liberté des autres". Grâce à la détermination de tous les tunisiens et tunisiennes, la liberté est en marche en Tunisie. Et alors que vous préparerez les prochaines élections libres, transparentes et inclusives, sachez que vous pourrez toujours compter sur votre voisin, votre partenaire, votre allié, l'Union européenne. Ensemble, nous continuerons à renforcer nos liens fraternels et notre coopération. L'Union européenne est et restera toujours à vos côtés.

J'espère que, un jour, on puisse dire la même chose pour tous nos voisins dans la région. Je vous remercie.

Thank you