European External Action Service (EEAS)

Opening Remarks by Kaja Kallas for the 10th Union for the Mediterranean Regional Forum

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Dear Minister Albares, dear José (Manuel), thank you for hosting us in Barcelona.

Dear Minister Safadi, dear Ayman, you have been a co-chair with not one, not two, but actually three High Representatives! But unlike the famous song by Joan Manuel Serrat, I was not born on the Mediterranean, rather the Baltic Sea. This is also something completely new, but also a physical sign that geographic differences no longer count as the world is more interconnected as we are right now.

Dear Secretary General Kamel, dear Nasser, we met earlier this year to discuss some of the topics we are here to discuss today. Including how we can work better together for a stronger Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. This is the theme of today's Regional Forum.

And it is a genuine pleasure to welcome Syria back to the UfM. The coming year will be important to consolidate international support for Syria, how to help Syria on their necessary reforms they need to do in order to have an inclusive democratic society. And I will make sure that it will stay high on the EU's agenda.

It is great to be here for my first Regional Forum. And I would like to start with three observations.

The first observation: Mediterranean cooperation, via the Barcelona Process and then formalised with the Union for the Mediterranean, has achieved a lot already.

In three short decades, we have seen that modest actions can make a big difference in peoples' lives. From small grants injecting cash to companies, training centres and local organisations, to business fora supporting female entrepreneurs in the region.

We've also seen that big actions make big differences, especially when you focus on vital sectors such as water. Water is life, especially in this region. Work on water management as we see in Egypt and Jordan for example, reflects the true spirit of the UfM.

Aside from supporting small and large-scale projects, the UfM has another important quality that has helped it achieve a lot.

It is the only platform that gathers all EU Member States and all Mediterranean partners. It wields immense convening power.

Whether we are talking about ministerial meetings, civil society gatherings, meetings of international financial institutions or think tank events, the UfM has brought together well over 10,000 stakeholders around the Mediterranean.

This has always been the added value of this organisation. And is truly impressive for a region as diverse as this is.

But anniversaries are as much about reflecting on what comes next, as they are about celebrating endurance. Which brings me to my second observation: Since the Barcelona Process was launched, the region has changed beyond recognition. So too has the world. Even since the last major revision of the UfM in 2017, today's realities are not yet reflected in the way this organisation works.

But even within the year since last year's Forum, the situation has shifted again. The United Nations Security Council Resolution on an international stabilization force for Gaza presents a real opportunity for long-term peace in the region.

It enjoys global support, and this is the key. Securing the peace will require all hands on deck. And there is a role for everyone. Aside from our support for the Palestinian Authority, the European Union will continue to push for humanitarian aid to reach the people of Gaza and be ready to mobilise our resources. I have engaged myself personally for months to ensure Gaza receives humanitarian aid. I will continue engaging.

We also have two important missions that support border management and police training on the ground: EUBAM Rafah and EUPOL COPPS. These are already playing an instrumental role and I am working with EU partners to reinforce their presence in the future.

For Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is our existential crisis, but the ripple effect is also global. A 2025 UfM report also recognised the profound impact of Russia's war on UfM countries. And let us not forget that Russia tested military tactics and equipment in Syria that it would later use in Europe.

Putin boasted of testing over 320 weapons systems in the country and many Russian army commanders currently leading troops in Ukraine gained combat experience in Syria.

It is in all our interests that this war ends but how it ends also matters. In the last 100 years, Russia has attacked more than 19 countries, some as many as three or four times. None of these countries has ever attacked Russia.

There are rarely wars where the situation is so clear cut. Here we have one aggressor and one victim. We need the widest international coalition pushing back against the Russian

aggressor, and I call on the members of the UfM to support this. If aggression pays of somewhere, it is an invitation to use it elsewhere. This is in no one's interest.

The third observation: it is not a coincidence that as global security diminishes, the odds are stacked against multilateral fora like the UfM. Multilateralism has never been before under such intense pressure. But this is precisely why we need it. This is the era so many international organisations were really built for. But the UfM needs a revision and a vision.

We will hear from Secretary General Kamel on this next and I don't want to pre-empt what he will say, but I'd like to share a couple more thoughts.

Trade. Trade is an area where there are huge regional imbalances that the UfM could help right. If we look at the total amount of trade involving all our countries, 90 percent of it takes place within the European Union, 9 percent between the EU and our southern neighbours and only 1 percent between the southern neighbours. From talks on reducing non-tariff barriers, to promoting sustainable cross-border investment, the UfM can serve as a platform to push for collective change.

Transport is another example. A well-connected land, air, and maritime transport network is also vital for boosting trade, as well as mobility and investment. The UfM can work closer with the financial institutions to encourage much more investment in this area.

Dear colleagues,

The UfM was built from the idea that political differences should not stand in the way of bettering our countries, regions, and societies. It was designed to convene, encourage collective thinking and produce solutions that work for all involved.

You will not find a stronger advocate for this kind of work than the European Union. Because we know it works. And while the world is changing, and international norms are being trampled on, the basic fact remains that we are all stronger when we work together.

That is what I am here for – and we expect you to be here for that too.

Thank you.

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