European External Action Service (EEAS)

Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following a meeting with Lebanese Foreign Affairs Minister Ghebran Bassil

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It's really a pleasure to be back in Beirut and in this ministry, for the second time in my year and something of my mandate in the European Union. I remember very well, I visited Beirut at the very beginning of my mandate, just a few weeks after taking office, to show the priority we give to the relationship with Lebanon, the partnership we have, the friendship of our institutions, but most of all to the people and the fact that we are together in a difficult region, in a difficult time.

It might be because of my national background, but it is completely evident to me that we are in the same region, we are not neighbours only, we are living in the same environment and this is also why, since my last visit, we met so often, and in so many different formats, working side by side, together on many different fields. And I am particularly glad that the minister came and visited us in Brussels at the Foreign Affairs Council a few weeks ago to share with the Foreign Ministers of the 28 Member States of the European Union common visions on the many different issues we have on our common agenda.

First of all, let me start with this, the European Union and Lebanon are together in believing that diversity is a point of strength in our societies. And that making diversity work within societies is bringing an added value to our politics, to our societies, to our economies even, to our humanity sometimes. And we know how much this is difficult, in these times of our history, it's also difficult in Europe, I know how difficult this is in Lebanon, not only from a social point of you but also from an institutional point of you. We are together in this, first and foremost to show that living together in differences is possible and is part of the richness of a culture.

Second, we are together working for peace in Syria, we have a vital interest, both of us, a vital interest in making the cessation of hostilities that have started, continue, consolidate and expand. We have a vital common interest in making sure that humanitarian access for delivering aid inside even larger parts of Syria increases. And we have a vital common interest in making sure that the political process, restarting now in Geneva, can be accompanied by all the regional and international actors in a constructive way and that the

Syrian parties themselves find the necessary political space to build a political process for the country that can put an end to the war and can unite forces against Daesh and can create peace and security for the Syrian refugees that are currently in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Turkey, in Europe, in many other parts of the world to have the conditions to safely go back to their country. This is going to be a difficult process, a long process, but a process in which we all have an interest, first and foremost the Syrian people. And I believe that this is our common understanding.

Third, we have a common interest, Lebanon and the European Union, in having effective counter-terrorism activities and dialogues in the region, and the expanded region. We've had fruitful counter-terrorism dialogue not long ago and I think that the sequence of the dates of the terrorist attacks in November tell us very clearly - the terrorist attack in Beirut was just the day before the terrorist attack in Paris - that we are together in this and that there are no boundaries, that there are no divisions in this, there is a common effort to prevent radicalisation, fight terrorist organisations and to create political conditions, in Syria in particular, to make sure that all forces can be united against Daesh and Al-Nusra and the other terrorist groups that are operating there with a connections with the broader region.

Fourth, but not least - and the list can actually be very long but I know our time is not too long: we are together in managing one of the worst, if not the worst humanitarian crisis related to the refugee flows from Syria. You know very well that Lebanon is a country that has the highest rate of refugees per capita in the world, close to 25% if you put together the official and the unofficial number. And as the minister reminded, the European Union has been from the very beginning the first donor to make it possible for Lebanon to protect and support the lives of Syrian refugees, knowing that this is obviously something that cannot be permanent, also due to the composition of the society in Lebanon. But we need in this moment as we have done for the past four, five years to protect the lives of people, to create living conditions that are appropriate for them, to provide education to the children, to provide job opportunities for the Syrian refugees while we work for creating the conditions for them to be able to safely return to Syria to reconstruct their country and the future of their country.

Since the beginning of crisis, the European Union and its Member States have already provided, to Lebanon alone 1,5 billion euros which is a significant amount of resources, but still we are committed and we have committed in the London Conference to increase our support for the refugee themselves and for the Lebanese people that are facing difficult times. It is extremely important for us to invest in the resilience of the country, of the society and the possibility for the Lebanese people to get jobs. It is as simple as that.

We are together in this, today even more than one year ago. You see true friends in time of crisis; this is the case today, I am afraid. Let me also say that the European Union’s support alone will continue to be relevant and important, but it will never be enough. That is why as friends, as true friends, we wish to see fully functional institutions in Lebanon, in the interest of all. Strong institutions also make the country stronger. This is true for the election of the

President, this is true for the functioning of the Parliament, for the Council of Ministers, this is true for the local elections that we wish to see happening this spring. This is true for Lebanese armed forces. Let me stress here that the European Union is ready to increase, to work together with the Government to explore possibilities to increase our support to the Lebanese armed forces that are fundamental institution of the country for its security, but also for its unity and also for the region.

We also share our efforts to relaunch the Middle East Peace Process. The European Union has worked in these months, through the Quartet - we agreed just few months ago together with the other principals of the Quartet, John Kerry, Sergey Lavrov, Ban Ki Moon and myself - to work on the report, including recommendations for the future of two state solution and to make it possible. We are also coordinating with our French friends and with the rest of our Arab friends on the possibility of having an international conference, going hand in hand with the work of the Quartet.

Let me finish by saying that what we share is the fundamental need for dialogue and cooperation within our countries, within our societies, within our institutional systems, within our politics, it is always complicated, but also within this region. And, if there is a message that the European Union is bring in the wide region, it is this: we have plenty of crises and conflicts around us, this is a golden opportunity for the actors of the region to invest in dialogue and cooperation. This is the only way in which we can hopefully manage and put an end to the crises and conflicts we have in front of us.

Thank you.

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