

## **EU-Syria: scope for closer relations**

On 25 January I will visit Syria for the first time in my capacity of European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. The main purpose of my visit is to discuss ways for enhancing the relationship between Syria and the European Union.

**The historical and cultural ties between Europe and Syria date back thousands of years.** During the centuries this relation has been enriched by a continuous exchange of people, goods and ideas and gave an invaluable contribution to the flourishing of civilisation around the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea.

**The EU and Syria have a shared interest in building a prosperous and stable region.** The EU is strongly engaged in the Middle East Peace Process, including through the Quartet, supporting vigorously the Palestinian State-building plan, while condemning the expansion of Israeli settlements. At the same time, the EU is not losing sight of the ultimate objective of achieving comprehensive and lasting peace in the region, including peace between Syria and Israel on the one hand and Lebanon and Israel on the other hand. .

**Syria has embarked on a reform process to modernise its economy and raise the living standards** of its population. Syria has opened up to the world by entering into free trade agreements with Arab countries, under the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement and with Turkey. The EU is committed to support Syria in its reform process.

**Today, the EU is Syria's main trade partner**, with a total value of trade amounting to 5.3 billion euro in 2009. **The EU is also Syria's largest donor** with an annual commitment of over 210 million euro in grants and loans from the EU, its Member States and the European Investment Bank towards better education, health care and social protection as well as an attractive business climate and modern infrastructure. .

**But the potential of our relationship can go further than that.** I believe that the EU and Syria should move towards a more ambitious relationship. I see many opportunities for Syria to benefit from a closer association with the EU, internally and internationally. These include for instance : transfers of EU expertise and technology to upgrade Syrian enterprises and Syrian products; a better business and regulatory environment capable of attracting foreign investments to finance the modernisation of transport, energy, water and tourism infrastructure; and greater opportunities for academic and research cooperation and exchanges.)

**This visit comes at an important moment.** As we are currently reviewing our policies towards our neighbours, I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss these matters and to hear what Syria has to say. The most important goal is that cooperation between the EU and Syria creates a relationship built on trust that is mutually beneficial for the citizens of both sides. This is not only my aim for this particular visit, but for all future relations between the EU and Syria.

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