

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

**I am happy to visit your beautiful country on 28 October for the first time** in my capacity of European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, to discuss ways for enhancing the relationship between Syria and the EU.

**Our historical and cultural ties 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.** At a time when the international community is renewing its efforts for a comprehensive settlement of conflicts in the Middle East, the EU and Syria have an important role to play.

**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 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 and health care as well as an attractive business climate and modern infrastructure. **The EU is also Syria's main trade partner**, with a total value of trade amounting to 5.3 billion euro in 2009.

**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, such as those which link the EU and other Mediterranean partners. The EU's Mediterranean partners have succeeded in getting out the most of their Association Agreements with the EU. Most of them are currently seeking a deepening of their partnership with the EU, beyond the objectives set in their Association Agreements.

**I see many opportunities for Syria to benefit from a closer association with the EU,** internally and internationally. The signature of the EU-Syria Association Agreement would certainly be a mark of mutual commitment. This includes 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.

**The timing of this visit could have not been better.** As we are now in the process of reviewing our policy with our neighbours, I look forward to hearing and discussing the views from Syria. What matters at the end of the day, is that EU and Syria cooperate in a spirit of mutual trust, for the benefit of their citizens. This is my objective for this visit in particular, and for the EU-Syria relations, in general.

**Stefan Füle,**

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy