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Speech by Minister of State for European Affairs Lucinda Creighton on behalf of HRVP Catherine Ashton on the EU-Iraq partnership

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Mr President,
Honourable Members,

Let me first congratulate the Rapporteur, Mr Mauro and the European Parliament for this excellent and comprehensive report on the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which highlights the main issues and challenges in the EU’s relations with Iraq. While focusing on the Agreement, the report also looks into the wider context and the best ways to promote EU interests and European values in Iraq.

The EU has a long-standing commitment to support Iraq in its reconstruction and transition to democracy, with the objective of helping to build a stable, prosperous and democratic Iraq, re-integrated in regional and global structures. The EU has been a major donor to Iraq, providing support in many areas, such as basic services, assistance to refugees and displaced persons, as well as the strengthening of the political system, the rule of law and the protection of human rights (for example, through a CSDP rule of law EUJUSTLEX mission). EU overall support to Iraq since 2003 has amounted to over 1 billion euro, and this without counting the bilateral contributions of Member States.

With the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, we have opened a new chapter of our bilateral relationship. This is the first such agreement to frame the relations between the EU and Iraq - providing a clear legal basis and a comprehensive institutional structure.

The HRVP was very pleased to sign in May last year, with Iraqi Foreign Minister Zebari, this historic agreement that is good for Iraq, good for the EU, and good for our long term relationship. We are now looking forward to working with Iraq on its implementation.

That is what the Agreement is about: the start of a new partnership, sealing our common wish to work together on a whole range of issues where we both have much to gain. But also providing a platform to talk about difficult issues, including the promotion of security, the cooperation in countering terrorism and arms proliferation and the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Agreement also provides for cooperation in support of Iraq’s accession to the International Criminal Court.

We are committed to boosting trade and investment between the EU and Iraq. Economics meets politics is a formula dear to the HRVP: increased trade and investment will be crucial to back the work on the political front to support Iraq’s transformation into a stable and prosperous democratic nation. The Agreement will support Iraq’s reform and development efforts and facilitate its integration into the wider international economy. It should also be a stepping stone to Iraq's WTO accession, supporting its adaptation to WTO rules and practice. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with Iraq is a non-preferential agreement based on Most Favoured Nation principles. It offers very substantial market access to the EU and some preferential elements in public procurement, services and investments.

The Agreement also provides ample opportunities for enhanced cooperation on sectoral policies across the board, from energy and environment to education and innovation. Let me stress the example of energy, where the EU can help Iraq to harness its enormous energy potential, while Iraq can contribute to the diversification of the EU’s energy supply and to its energy security as it is a potential source country for the Southern Corridor.

There was a commitment with Minister Hoshyar Zebari during the signature event in May for the rapid implementation of the main parts of the Agreement that are provisionally applicable pending ratification. The EEAS is discussing with Iraqi counterparts the way forward so that progress is made as soon as possible.
In this respect, I would also like to emphasise the important role of the European Parliament. The Parliamentary Cooperation Committee should be an important forum for the European and Iraqi Parliaments, providing excellent opportunities to exchange on democratic practice and provide further support to Iraq’s transition.

This partnership is not without challenges. Iraq is a young democracy, and the road ahead will not always be smooth. Iraq has made considerable progress in its transition towards democracy, but continues to face serious political, security, and socio-economic challenges. The level of violence in Iraq is still unacceptably high and recently tensions between the major political forces (Shia, Sunni and Kurdish) are on the rise. This carries a risk of re-igniting sectarian tensions in Iraq, and threatens the fragile balance that the ‘national partnership government’ is based on. It also slows down the necessary reforms as well as socio-economic progress. The human rights situation continues to be of serious concern, with the increased use of the death penalty an unsatisfactory situation for women and vulnerable groups, including minorities.

Camp Ashraf remains an important and sensitive issue. There has been substantial progress, but there are still a number of challenges in the critical process facilitated by the UN with our full support. The EU is also committed to supporting the UN process with a contribution of €12 M to support the operations of the UN monitors and the UNHCR refugee status determination process.

The HRVP and member states all follow the recent developments in Iraq with concern. It is in everybody’s interest to see a stable, democratic and prosperous Iraq, where the political system is underpinned by a strengthened rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, therefore arrives at a very timely moment, since it creates a platform and increases the EU leverage to address these concerns with Iraqi counterparts.

We must see Iraq’s transition also in the regional context – in particular with respect to the dramatic and violent developments unfolding across the border in Syria but also Iran’s increasing influence. This adds to the difficulty of Iraq’s democratic endeavours – but makes its success even more important.

Let me conclude by stressing that this agreement is above all, a symbol of the EU’s wish to be a constructive partner for Iraq in its democratic endeavours. It brings together the EU and its Member States and is the main instrument to show the EU’s unified determination to build a long-term partnership with a stable and democratic Iraq, not just for today or tomorrow, but for many years to come.

On behalf of the HRVP, let me again congratulate AFET and the Rapporteur Mr Mauro for this excellent report. I would also like to thank all Members for their constructive contributions to our debate today.

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement should become the backbone of EU-Iraq relations, and we are encouraged by the strong support expressed here today for an enhanced partnership between the EU and Iraq.

The Agreement enables the EU to engage more deeply with the Iraqi administration across the board, creating a platform for a regular, comprehensive and frank dialogue on issues of mutual concern, at all levels. It gives the EU a key tool to promote and defend its interests and values. For the EU this is a unique opportunity to develop our ties with a country that has the potential to become a key actor in the changing Middle East.

Both the EU and Iraq are committed to a rapid implementation of the Agreement. We should focus on concrete actions and key priorities.
In conclusion, let me stress that the EU is committed to underpin the new partnership with continued assistance. Despite Iraq’s significant resources, targeted support is still critically needed. The EU will keep focus on delivering capacity building programmes and technical assistance where these are most needed and have the greatest impact. For Iraq remains today, more than ever, an indispensable partner for the European Union at a moment when the whole region is facing major challenges and needs to build a solid and serious partnership with its European allies.