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Education, Economy, and Institutions for Stability and Peace in the Mediterranean Basin

Mr. President Vaccarone,
Professor Cannata, Rector of Universitas Mercatorum,
Chancellors, Professors, Distinguished Guests,
Students, Faculty, and Staff, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to address you today on a topic that is not just timely but essential to the future of our shared region: the role of education, the economy, and institutions as pillars for stability and peace in the Mediterranean basin. This region, with its rich tapestry of cultures, histories, and peoples, stands at a critical juncture. Its challenges are numerous and complex, but so are its opportunities. By coming together, we can ensure that the Mediterranean becomes a model for unity, cooperation, and shared prosperity.

I am delighted to address students full of hope, empowered by knowledge, and driven by ambition. Young people who are thinking of how to make this world a better place!

Today, I would like to tell you the story of a young girl who was once quite shy but very observant.

Observation is one of the best ways of learning, growing, and flying high.

Long before graduation, she followed her father everywhere and learned a lot from him.

She learned that life comes with challenges, that she should never give up, that everything is possible, and that where there is a will, there is a way, no matter what.

That hard work and determination, added to knowledge, are keys to success and happiness!

You must have already guessed that the young girl was me! Yes.

I was born in Gabes, an oasis in southern Tunisia. I was fortunate that my loving and supportive parents raised us in a strong, stable environment.

My late father symbolizes achievement through service, giving so much to his country from nothing.

He has always been my leading light throughout my studies and social evolution.

After graduation, I was eager to start the rest of my life's journey, just like you will be about to do in a few months or years, and to apply my knowledge in the field.

I did several internships in different local and international companies before I joined my father's company, where I started from scratch.

With his brown-eyed, hard gaze, he assigned me lots of basic work, like answering calls and filling out forms.

I enjoyed everything I did, as I learned from every little task. Experience is like a huge puzzle that you must put together centimeter by centimeter.

In 2011, I was the first woman in the Arab world to be elected President of the Tunisian Corporation for Industry, Commerce, and Handicrafts, one of four organizations that initiated the Tunisian National Dialogue as a Quartet.

The Dialogue, led by that Quartet that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

The Dialogue aimed to elevate Tunisian values and steer the nation from stagnation.

Following a difficult period for Tunisia, beginning in January 2011, the Quartet, consisting of The Tunisian Corporation for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts, the Workers Union, the National Order of Lawyers, and the Tunisian Human Rights League worked together to foster unity and national progress.

The success of the Dialogue, which brought together diverse political and social forces, was rooted in its ability to rejuvenate institutions and methods and a shared commitment to citizenship, pushing aside personal pursuits for the collective good.

This consensus-building process, though challenging, proved effective, enabling Tunisia to navigate conflicts through dialogue and compromise.

The Tunisian National Dialogue demonstrated the power of genuine engagement, leading to informed decisions and strong relationships. It demonstrated that dialogue could reconcile diverse views.

We laid the foundation, and we look to the young generation, like you, to continue the work.

As a Tunisian entrepreneur, I have seen firsthand the interplay of hope and hardship across our shores. The Mediterranean is more than a geographic region—it is a shared identity built on interdependence. From the spice routes of the ancient world to modern economic partnerships, our fates have always been intertwined. Historically, geographically, economically, and socially, the threads that connect us are unbreakable. Yet, to harness this interconnectedness, we must act with purpose, vision, and urgency.

Let us begin by recognizing the central role of enterprises in shaping the social and economic fabric of our region. Businesses are not just profit-driven entities; they are, in essence, social institutions with the capacity to transform lives. Enterprises create jobs, drive innovation, and offer solutions to some of the most pressing challenges of our time. However, their influence extends beyond economic measures. By fostering fair labor practices, ensuring equitable wages, and championing diversity, businesses contribute to reducing inequalities and building a fairer society.

But it is not enough for enterprises to succeed economically—they must also prioritize sustainability. In the face of climate change

and dwindling natural resources, businesses must adopt environmentally conscious practices. From renewable energy investments to waste reduction strategies, enterprises can set an example for sustainable development, balancing economic growth with ecological responsibility. Moreover, businesses that embed corporate social responsibility into their operations help to solidify the social contract between institutions and the communities they serve, reinforcing trust and stability.

While enterprises drive economic growth, education lays the groundwork for their success. Without education, there can be no innovation, progress, and meaningful participation in the global economy. Education empowers individuals, providing them with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a world marked by rapid technological and social change. It also fosters critical thinking, civic responsibility, and a sense of belonging—all essential for building peaceful societies.

Universities, in particular, hold a unique place in this equation. They are more than centers of learning—they are engines of social mobility and incubators of ideas. A robust university system must offer accessible, high-quality education that is inclusive of all, regardless of background. In the Mediterranean, this inclusivity is key to bridging the deep inequalities that divide communities. By addressing disparities in education access, we can create opportunities for personal and community growth, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Beyond traditional education, universities must adapt to meet the challenges of our time. Climate change, cybersecurity, and digital transformation demand new skills and innovative solutions.

Interdisciplinary programs that combine technology, environmental science, and social studies are crucial for preparing future generations to navigate these complexities. By investing in such programs, universities not only equip their students but also contribute to the broader resilience of the region.

Equally important is the empowerment of women. Gender equality is not just a matter of justice; it is a necessity for societal stability and progress. Studies consistently show that when women participate fully in education and the workforce,

economies grow, poverty declines, and societies become more resilient. Yet, women across the Mediterranean still face significant barriers, from unequal pay to limited opportunities for leadership.

To address these challenges, we must take bold action.

Legislation ensuring equal pay, workplace protections, and anti-discrimination measures is essential. But so too are grassroots initiatives that challenge stereotypes, provide mentorship, and support women in traditionally male-dominated fields. Gender equality is not only a moral imperative but also a practical strategy for unleashing the full potential of our region. When women succeed, their families, communities, and nations succeed with them.

All of these efforts—economic growth, educational reform, and gender equality—must be underpinned by dialogue and trust. In a region as diverse as the Mediterranean, dialogue is the bridge that connects differences and fosters understanding. Whether addressing migration, security, or the effects of global warming, meaningful conversations are essential for crafting solutions that reflect the needs and aspirations of all.

Here, technology offers a transformative opportunity. A digital university, for example, could transcend borders, bringing together students, educators, and researchers from across the Mediterranean. By offering accessible, high-quality education online, such an institution could foster collaboration, celebrate diversity, and create a shared sense of purpose. It would not only address educational disparities but also serve as a symbol of what we can achieve when we work together.

Dialogue, however, must go beyond formal institutions. It must be rooted in empathy, inclusivity, and a genuine commitment to listening. This is particularly important for engaging youth, women, and marginalized communities, whose voices are often overlooked in decision-making processes. Trust is built when people feel heard and valued, and when they see that their contributions can make a difference.

The Mediterranean basin stands at a crossroads. The decisions we make today—about how we educate, how we conduct business,

and how we foster dialogue—will determine the future of our region for generations to come. By aligning our efforts around shared values of equity, sustainability, and inclusion, we can create a Mediterranean that is not only stable but also thriving.

Let us move forward with determination and hope, embracing the power of education, enterprise, and collaboration to build a future of peace, progress, and unity. Together, we can turn the Mediterranean into a beacon of cooperation and resilience for the world to follow.

Thank you.