

Speech by **Sir Simon Penney, HM Trade Commissioner for the Middle East**

Lebanon-UK Business & Investment Forum 2018

12th December 2018 at Savoy Place, London

“Let me start by welcoming you, Prime Minister Hariri . It is a great honour that you have chosen the UK as the venue for this Forum. My name is Simon Penney and I am her Majesty’s trade Commissioner for the Middle East. My role covers three area: growing bilateral trade between Lebanon and the UK, growing FDI between Lebanon and the UK and finally trade policy between our two countries.

As Minister Burt says, the relationship between our two countries has never been stronger. And trade is at the heart of that relationship. Our trade and investment is stronger than ever and getting stronger still. Over the last year our total trade has reached nearly £600 million.

British foreign direct investment in Lebanon leapt by 47% between 2015 and ’16 alone. You can see that in the Beirut Container Terminal Consortium, a joint venture with Mersey Docks and Harbour (UK), which has helped make the Port of Beirut the busiest port in the Eastern Mediterranean.

You can see it in the UK-Lebanon Tech hub, a joint initiative of the Central Bank of Lebanon and the UK government, which since its launch in 2015 has supported over 80 startups and helped create 2,000 jobs.

These opportunities are continuing to flow in. Just last month the London Stock Exchange Group launched its new ELITE programme for Lebanese businesses, with the patronage of the Lebanese Capital Market Authority.

This programme has a solid track record of taking businesses through the dual listing process and helping them get investment. I look forward to seeing the first cohort of firms graduate. And today, we have a \$300 million deal between Rolls Royce and Middle East Airlines.

I believe these opportunities can continue to flow and our trade can continue to strengthen. But we all have to play our part to make sure that happens.

As Minister Burt said, tough decisions still need to be made for the betterment of the economy and the people of Lebanon. For that to happen, it needs to have a government in place and I too welcome Prime Minister designate Hariri’s efforts to make that a reality. The steps you, Prime Minister, are taking, are a testament to the importance you place on trade and on tackling the challenges Lebanon faces in attracting investment. If we build on those, and Lebanon fulfils its commitments to economic reform, I know that

our firms will take notice. It will demonstrate that Lebanon is a country to invest in, and that in turn will be a pathway to jobs and trade. Another important step is to replicate the existing EU-Lebanon Association Agreement, to give British and Lebanese firms the certainty they need to continue investing and doing business with each other.

As we in the UK look to our future outside of the European Union, I want to reassure all of you that we remain committed to the continuity of our trading relationship. Replicating the agreement will make that a reality. With all these steps in place, I believe trade between our two countries will go from strength to strength. As I said earlier, our trade and investment is stronger than ever before. But there are so many more opportunities for firms in both our countries to take.

Opportunities like oil. It is exciting to see Lebanon becoming an oil and gas producing country. The UK has great offshore expertise from North Sea oil and I am sure this opportunity will be very interesting to a number of businesses here today.

Opportunities like Public Private Partnerships in the infrastructure and energy sectors, especially through your Capital Investment Programme. We, as the pioneers of PPP, have a great deal of expertise to offer here. And many more opportunities besides.

I had the pleasure of visiting Lebanon two weeks ago and took away three key observations: Lebanon is dynamic, Lebanon is ambitious and Lebanon is very much open for business and presents significant opportunities for UK firms.

So, I believe that the true potential of opportunities between Lebanon and the UK has not yet been tapped. Lebanon is a place of opportunity and immense potential. It offers great business opportunities in its own right, and it is a gateway for investment across the region. Business and government need to work ever more closely to secure those opportunities. I know many of our firms feel the same way. And I very much look forward to what the future holds for the trade relationship between our two countries with all that promises for prosperity, for security, and for stability”.