His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, Supreme council Member and Ruler of Sharjah and President of American University of Sharjah (AUS), has called for increased cultural and economic interaction and cooperation between the East and the West and for the emirate of Sharjah and UAE to play their due role in this multi-faceted exchange. His remarks came during the inaugural speech made at the opening of the MENA Economic Forum 2013, held under the theme ‘Sharing Vision and Prosperity,’ at AUS today, February 3.

“We hope this forum will increase cooperation and cultural interaction, gathering East and West in one human culture based on tolerance, love and knowledge to all human beings without discrimination,” said the Sharjah Ruler. “We are also looking for the emirate of Sharjah to reflect a bright image for this shared human culture,” he added. His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan said that the objectives of the forum are strengthening cooperation and the exchange of expertise between the city of Sharjah and the rest of the cities of the Western world. “Sharjah has already succeeded in strengthening its relationship and cooperation in the fields of culture, business and tourism with several Western cities,” he said.

The Sharjah Ruler pointed out that it was with such an objective in mind that AUS was established “to become a center of cultural interaction and exchange of science and knowledge between East and West. We established AUS with the mandate of becoming organically linked to the economic, cultural, scientific and industrial sectors of society in productive collaboration. We built the university to ensure that science and education regain their rightful place in the betterment and advancement of society. It is through organizing such conferences and forums that these mandates can be met,” he stressed.

“Sharjah has distinguished its relationship with the city of Marseille in France in various cultural and economic fields. Marseille and Sharjah have had a distinguished cultural impact on an international level. Marseille was selected as the Cultural Capital of Europe for 2013, and Sharjah has been selected as the Cultural Capital of the Islamic World for 2014 and was the Cultural Capital of the Arab World in 1998, as selected by UNESCO,” said Sheikh Dr. Sultan, referring to the event’s role in presenting an important dimension of the collaboration between the City of Marseille and the emirate of Sharjah within the private, educational and cultural sectors.

His Highness said that the number of distinguished officials in government, academia and business from various parts of the world gathering together is proof that the distances between East and West are becoming shorter and that this was also an indication of the wish to broaden minds and to exchange ideas and thoughts.
The opening was also attended by His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Sheikhah Hour Bint Sultan Al Qassimi, President of the Sharjah Arts Foundation, Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abdullah Al Thani, Director General of the Sharjah Statistics Center, Sheikh Salem Bin Abdul Rahman Al Qassimi, Director of the Ruler’s Office. Present were also Dr. Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs; Abdul Rahman Bin Mohammad Al Owais, Minister of Culture, Youth and Social Development, Hamid Jafar Member of the AUS Board of Trustees and President of the Crescent Petroleum; Dr. Amr Abdul Hamid Advisor to His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah for Higher Education, Maroun Samaan, Member of the AUS Board of Trustees and President of Petrofac and Dr. Peter Heath AUS Chancellor.

His Excellency Sheikh Nahyan Bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, also addressed the gathering. He said that the UAE now plays an important role in commerce worldwide as the country has become a unique model of how international trends and challenges can be handled successfully.

“We enjoy an open economy that balances opportunity and encourages positive competitiveness; an economy that provides fruitful opportunities in the UAE,” he said. “We have always been keen to pave the way for an environment that supports business and promotes pioneering endeavors and entrepreneurship; one that enhances the lifestyles of all the people of the UAE. We are committed to founding a knowledge-based economy. Academics have an important part to play and I welcome the organization of such a forum and hope it helps promote sustainable development. We are proud of our present and optimistic about the future,” he said.

“I look forward to the outcomes of your discussions and am very pleased to see this forum as a collaboration between Europe and the Arab world and I hope we can build on the common ground between us and solidify the relationship between our two regions,” he added.

Sheikh Nahyan’s address was followed by the inaugural session entitled “Transitions: How Can the West and the GCC Cooperate and Meet Future Challenges?”, which comprised of two panels, one of which was addressed by senior government officials from the region and beyond and included H.E. Dr. Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, UAE; H.E. Cherif Rahmani, Minister of Industry, Algeria; H.E. Philippe Douste-Blazy, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations and Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, France; H.E. Jack Lang, President of the Arab World Institute, and Former Minister of Culture, France; H.E. Homaid Al Shemmari, Executive Director, Mubadala Aerospace, UAE; and H.E. Bariza Khiari, Vice President, French Senate, France.

Speaking on session the topic, Dr. Gargash said that the UAE had lessons to offer the region in creating a business friendly environment for economic growth. He said that the oil exporting countries in the region should help their struggling Arab neighbors as a business friendly region is good for all. However, he also noted that the region has challenges that need to be addressed. “Economic integration in the region has lagged behind other economics around the world such as the EU,” he observed.

The second panel comprised prominent expert speakers including H.E. Miguel Àngel Moratinos, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Spain; Anne Lauvergeon, CEO, Areva, France; H.E. Sheikh Khalid Bin Jaber Al Thani, Chairman, Qatar National Cancer Society, Qatar; Fouad Makhzoumi, CEO, Future Pipe Industries, UAE; Simon Henderson, Baker Fellow and
The forum, which began with a note of welcome from Dr. Peter Heath, Chancellor of AUS, and Dr. Nada Mourtada-Sabah, Vice Chancellor for Development and Alumni Affairs, concluded with a gala dinner held for all the delegates following the sessions.

The second day of the forum will see eminent speakers comprising the Opening Keynote Panel, which will look at the topic “Challenges and Opportunities in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring.” The panelists include Pr. Gilles Kepel, Professor of Middle East Studies at Sciences Po, along with H.E. Fahad Al Raqbani, Director General, Abu Dhabi Council for Economic Development, UAE; Badr Jafar, President, Crescent Petroleum, UAE; Faizal Kottikollon, Founder and Chairman, KEF Holdings, UAE; Pr. Jean-Louis Reiffers, President, FEMISE, France; Jay Footlik, Founding President and CEO, Global Policy Initiatives, USA; Khaldoun Tabari, Vice Chairman and CEO, Drake & Scull International (DPI) PJSC; Jose A. Lopez-Monis Plaza, CEO and Managing Director, Habtoor Leighton Group; Sultan Abu Sultan, CEO, Barclays Bank, UAE; Varouj Nerguizian, CEO, Bank of Sharjah; and Fahad Al Othman, Business Development Executive, Zone Group, UAE.

Other plenary sessions will also feature a roster of prominent international panelists who will take a look at a wide variety of topics, including “Infrastructure and Utilities: How to Meet the Needs;” “Finance: Looking for Innovative Solutions to Help the Real Economy;” “The Role of Medias in Building Bridges Between the West and MENA Countries;” “Green Business and Smarter Water: Building Resources for the Future;” and “Education and Healthcare: Meeting Higher Standards.”