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## **MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS BURDEN DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE WEST AND THE ARAB-MUSLIM WORLD**

1. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the struggle to stabilise Iraq, have a wide-ranging impact on regional security and heavily influence mutual perceptions between Western and Arab-Muslim countries. Nevertheless, public diplomacy and dialogue are indispensable tools in the strategy to overcome misperceptions and establish cooperation across the Mediterranean, parliamentarians from both European and Middle East countries agreed while meeting in Naples on 2-3 July for a seminar co-organised by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and the Italian Parliament. The meeting gathered some 45 legislators as well as a number of government and international organisations officials, academics and journalists.

2. The greater Middle East, according to keynote speaker **Gerd Nonneman**, Professor of International Relations and Middle East Politics at Lancaster University, is afflicted by three kinds of security problems: internal problems of the states of the region; regional effects of the two major conflicts (Israeli-Palestinian and Iraqi); and threats to the West, such as terrorism and energy security. Internal problems are generated by physical absence of security in some cases, and by a generalised insufficient political legitimacy and representation, coupled with economic uncertainty and lack of performance.

3. Discussions on the first day of the seminar focused on the two major conflicts in the Middle East. All participants expressed their profound preoccupation for the recent escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians, involving Palestinian Qassam rockets fired from Gaza into Israel, the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier and the subsequent arrest of Palestinian cabinet members and legislators, and culminating with air strikes and military incursions in Gaza by the Israeli forces. While condemning Palestinian militias for their tactics, NATO legislators called upon Israel to exercise more restraint in its use of force. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), from 9-27 June, 32 Palestinians, including 10 children, have been killed by Israeli air strikes and artillery shelling inside Gaza, while 10 Israelis have been injured by rockets fired from Gaza.

4. The cycle of violence is exacerbating an already dramatic humanitarian situation in the Palestinian territories. **John Ging**, Director of UNRWA operations in Gaza, declared that the cut-off of direct aid to the Palestinian Authority and the embargo on the banking system, as well as the recent deterioration of the security situation and access restrictions imposed by Israel "are all combining to have a significantly negative economic and humanitarian impact in the occupied Palestinian territories". Despite UNRWA's enormous efforts—with generous donor support—most of the refugees in Gaza and the West Bank will suffer "very negative consequences of the current situation" and as "despair for their future is increasingly prevalent among the young population, we earnestly advocate that care is taken to protect against it becoming their only outlook", Mr Ging concluded. As the humanitarian crisis will soon translate into renewed anger from the Palestinian population, who in their eyes will take the blame, asked senior RAI TV special correspondent **Monica Maggioni**, the Hamas government or the international community? Chances are, she said, that extremists and terrorists will be the only ones to benefit from this situation. Therefore, Ms Maggioni urged the international community to "find some ways" to talk to Hamas.

5. There was no agreement, however, among participants on the strategy to adopt with regard to the Hamas-led Palestinian government, although many recognised that, as Mr Nonneman stressed, "Hamas is not a terrorist monolith". Legislators, however, are reluctant to make steps that would "break ranks" with the position of the Quartet, which requires Hamas to fulfil three conditions in order for the international community to open dialogue with it: recognition of Israel's right of existence, explicit rejection of violence, and acceptance of all past agreements between Israel and the PLO.

6. Discussions on Iraq focused on the challenges of reconstruction and state building two years after the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi government. While terrorism and insurgency seriously hinder the reconstruction efforts, the lengthy formation of the Al Maliki cabinet has greatly strained the political process and further highlighted ethnic and religious fragmentation. **Gian Ludovico De Martino**, Minister Plenipotentiary and Head of the Iraq Task Force at the Italian Foreign Ministry, emphasized that such fragmentation has nonetheless given way, in some instances, to encouraging developments about new political alliances and links, as well as to other positive signals—such as an increased participation of Sunnis in the political process—which need to be encouraged by a “renewed effort and commitment from the international community”.

7. **Gareth Stansfield** of the University of Exeter’s Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies pointed out that Iraqi political life has “moved from being dominated by ideologically-based politics of nationalism and socialism, to communally- and identity-based politics”. As it appears that Shi’i parties will dominate any future state, the question is whether Kurds and Shi’i are capable of finding a “centralised” compromise solution to which Sunnis will also subscribe. In case of a failure of such a “centralisation” scenario, Mr Stansfield envisaged two other possible outcomes: fragmentation, involving failure of both transitional power structure and security as well as a protracted Shi’a-Sunni power struggle, or the actual partition of Iraq into three different entities. He also warned that an early departure of international forces from Iraq would likely bring the country closer to the latter scenarios.

8. Addressing the two major Middle East conflicts are by no means the only tasks of the international community in the region. A session of the seminar was entirely devoted to the question of migration and its links with security in the region. Irregular migration poses a threat to security and stability as it is linked to smuggling, trafficking and organised crime, but also because it fuels corruption, informal economies and undermines social cohesion. The challenge that states face, according to **Peter Schatzer**, Director of the Regional Office for the Mediterranean of the International Organisation for Migration in Italy, “is how to protect society and reduce irregular migration without stifling legitimate and needed movement and without imposing serious constraints on personal rights and liberties”.

9. While security is certainly a dimension of migration management, there are many other factors to consider with regard to the Mediterranean, key among them, as **Philippe Fargues** of European University’s Robert Schumann Centre in Florence highlighted, is demographics. While many European countries are registering most of their population growth thanks to immigration, between 12 and 15 million people migrated from Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries in the last 12 years. Migration policies should necessarily focus on effective integration, which would help both permanent and temporary migrants to become active members in the economic, social, cultural and political life of host states.

10. The seminar concluded with a debate on dialogue and co-operation initiatives focusing on security between the West and the countries of the MENA region. **Christian Jouret**, Head of the Middle East and Mediterranean Unit in the European Council secretariat, described the objectives and achievements of the EU security policy in the MENA region. He stressed the importance of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, or Barcelona process, the most ambitious co-operation project in the region, which, despite its shortcomings in the security sector, is nonetheless functioning as “a spider web” constantly creating political, economic and cultural links favouring institution building throughout the region. Despite the successes of the Barcelona process, Mr Jouret regretted that this North-South co-operation network was not accompanied yet by equally strong South-South co-operation initiatives. The Barcelona process, he also reminded us, was accompanied by more specific EU operations in the context of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), notably the border control operation in Rafah, between Egypt and the Gaza strip, and a Palestinian police training operation. In conclusion, Mr Jouret admitted that the EU remained, in terms of

security policy, a “paper tiger” or an “adept of soft power”, not willing to impose things by the use of force. But he also declared that those criticising Europe for being “Venus”—as opposed to “Mars”, represented by the United States—were missing the point, because the EU could never be compared to a nation state and would always base its decisions on its values as much as on its interests.

11. Considered as complementary to the EU policies, the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) initiative has, since its inception in 1994, focused on co-operation in the security sector. Based on “joint ownership, non-discrimination, complementarity and progressiveness”, in the words of Ambassador Maurizio Moreno, Italy’s Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council, the MD is a “flexible and transforming tool”. Its annual Work Programme “includes 26 fields of cooperation, including civil emergency planning, crisis management, light weapons, humanitarian action against anti-personnel mines, defence reform, training, scientific cooperation, and public diplomacy activities” offered to seven partners around the Mediterranean. Ambassador Moreno reminded participants that in 2006 the first meeting of MD Defence Ministers took place in Taormina, Italy, and the Atlantic Council met for the first time in Rabat, Morocco, examining the idea of a new military and security training initiative in the region. Such initiative, to be discussed at the Riga Summit next November, aims not only at fostering interoperability between NATO and Mediterranean partners, but also to improve NATO’s knowledge of the greater Middle East region. The Training Initiative would also be offered to partners in the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), a programme launched in 2004 and involving so far four out of six countries participating in the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Contacts with Saudi Arabia are ongoing and an Omani delegation will soon visit NATO Headquarters to discuss co-operation.

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