



ARAB GEOPOLITICS AFTER THE CALIPHATE

How to exit the fragmentation trap

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A message from Fabio Massimo Castaldo – Vicepresident of the *European Parliament*

Good afternoon,

It is an honour for me to address such a high-level conference organized by the NATO Defense College Foundation (NDCF). NDCF has a long tradition of successful conferences where decision-makers, politicians, and other actors have been able to exchange ideas in high-level panels.

When I got the invitation for this high-level conference I enthusiastically accepted the honour of addressing such an important audience. However, unfortunately, I cannot be present today due to my role as Chief Observer of the EU electoral mission in Tunisia. As Vicepresident of the European Parliament and as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, since the beginning of my mandate, I focused my attention on the Mediterranean region and its evolutions: I have been several times in Tunisia in electoral missions and now as Chief observer. As you perfectly know, the European Union is paying great attention to the elections in Tunisia. Therefore, according to my role, I had to stay there to carefully follow the whole procedure.

I apologize for not being present today with you but I hope that President Minuto-Rizzo, whom I thank again for this idea and his kind invitation, can extend my warmest greetings to all the authorities, speakers and guests of the conference.

When NATO was established in 1949 the Arab world was far from being a priority of the Alliance, while the EU was still a dream. During the Cold War, the Middle East has been a proxy battlefield between the US and the Soviet Union, but the main focus of the Alliance remained the Iron Curtain. 1979 changed the face of Iran; in 1989 the Soviet Union retreated from Afghanistan and then collapsed. The Gulf War at the beginning of the '90s was intended as a collective effort to maintain peace, but it was ephemeral; the end of the 90s saw the engagement of NATO in the Balkans. In 2010-2011, the Arab Spring triggered a sudden change in the whole region; many old regimes fell, some states resisted, some other collapsed due to civil wars and sectarian clashes. For NATO and other organizations, these events opened new challenges for security in the area.

Today we have been called on giving some thoughts on post-Caliphate geopolitics, on an Arab world without ISIS. But I wonder if this is the case.

Are we in a post-Caliphate phase? ISIS has been reduced geographically, the territory it controls is not wide as it was some years ago. But can we say ISIS has been completely defeated? I believe that the challenge posed by the Caliphate is still quite open, and it is going to take place far from where ISIS was born. The problem is not anymore the territorial conquer, but the spread of the Caliphate's message and ideas, facilitated by the weakening of some states, sectarian tensions and social unrest caused by poor economic conditions. Have we addressed and eliminated the roots of the Caliphate? I think that an honest answer should be quite negative. ISIS geographical extension has been shrunk by military operations, but the Caliphate has not been fully defeated. Let's enlarge our view: Libya, Sahel, Burkina Faso, maybe even in Europe we can have some sleeping cells of "foreign fighters", European citizens who served in ISIS' ranks in the Middle East. It sounds like a paradox, but today the Caliphate may be less strong in military terms but it has moved even closer to us, or between us, in our communities. There are dozens of pro-ISIS groups around the world, spreading from Far East Asia to Africa, and several of them have already delivered terrorist attacks. On the ground, the recent Turkish decision to challenge Kurdish units could be an assist to the remaining ISIS units. The Kurds have a long tradition of resisting ISIS' offensives, therefore weakening their position could be an assist to the Caliphate, an assist that does not help the stabilization of the region.

The Caliphate and a series of groups, factions or even lone wolfs inspired by ISIS' ideology will continue to be present and eventually act in several areas of the world. In other words, they will continue to influence our security and our perception of security. The geographical range of the confrontation has enlarged: the Middle East is just one of the areas where ISIS or pro-ISIS groups are active. There is the case of Libya, where it is no secret that pro-ISIS groups are consolidating their position on the ground^[1]. Then there is the case of the Sahel, where several states have been penetrated by ISIS sympathizers; we cannot mention here the case of Far East Asia, where already existing terrorist groups have decided to "join" the struggle of the Caliphate. This means that areas that were once considered "far" from Europe and NATO or just unable to influence our security, now represent a new frontline for us all. The security perimeter of NATO and the EU has enlarged: limiting our approach to the northern side of Africa or the Middle East would be a mistake, and it will not provide the answers that many of our citizens are asking. The previous picture with different crises related to different areas (Syria-Iraq; Libya; Sub-Saharan Africa; the Persian Gulf) has now changed, and these crises are more intertwined than before, while several states, today, are weaker than before. This "liquid" context could be a perfect breeding ground for future terrorists, extremists or just criminal groups.

Besides the Caliphate threat, a reflection on Arab geopolitics cannot overlook the tensions in the Gulf. In many Western media, the Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry seems to be the main issue, but we should also mention the tragic consequences of the war in Yemen, where, unfortunately, some European companies are also involved with their weapons.

So, in such a highly volatile context, where the EU and NATO should look for? Can we fully rely on traditional alliances? Can we count on the support of the US in our neighbourhood? Can the EU, for instance, just ignore what is happening in its backyard, delegating a third part to guarantee the security of its southern flank?

I have always insisted on a strong synergy between NATO and the EU and several topics that will be discussed in these days are a perfect area of cooperation between our organizations. The era of NATO as an anti-Soviet Union alliance has long gone. We cannot overlook anymore our southern flank as a source of opportunities but also of threats. The Southern flank, therefore, is a challenge for NATO but also the EU; yesterday there has been the hearing of the new EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Mr Borrell, who expressed a clear position on these issues. The EU has several tools to contribute to the support and the stabilization of the area; NATO has several other assets, mainly focused on the security side. Stronger coordination of these tools could be beneficial for both organizations. During this term, 2019-2024, EU-NATO relations will be at the core of our reflections on the security and defense dimensions, and a strategic area like the Mediterranean must be at the center of our attention. Nonetheless, EU and NATO efforts will not be enough if the Member States will not find some common positions and then policies to implement it.

For the European Union, this is the main challenge: I hope that also the contribution of the European Parliament could push other Institutions and the Member States not to postpone anymore a series of concrete actions to help internal security, stabilization, economic recovery, promotion of justice, state-building and reforms in our neighbourhood. EU and NATO cooperation in the future can show that multilateral approaches, instead of unilateral solutions, can be more politically and economically feasible, and my hope - and what I will try to support in the European Parliament - is a stronger synergy between NATO and the EU in the Mediterranean theatre.

Thank you very much.

[1] Trauthig I.K., *Assessing the Islamic State in Libya*, Europol, 2019

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