



High-Level Conference

## ARAB GEOPOLITICS AFTER THE CALIPHATE

### *How to exit the fragmentation trap*

The High-Level Conference, structured into three sessions, was organised by the NATO Defense College Foundation (NDCF), in co-operation with the NATO Political Affairs and Security Policy Division (PASP) and the NATO Defense College. It took place last **Wednesday, 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019**, at LuiSS Guido Carli - Aula Magna Mario Arcelli, in viale Pola, 12, Rome, gathering 19 speakers, more than 240 participants and over 30 journalists.

Ambassador **Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo**, President of the Foundation, opened the conference highlighting the importance of addressing in a serious, concrete and respectful manner the instability that continues to affect the Middle East and North Africa - areas at the core of the NDCF research and activities since its foundation in 2011. «The arc of crisis that we have witnessed in recent years has to be transformed into an arc of opportunities. [...] It is for the Arabs to take their destiny in their hands and for them only. The key question for our democracies is: how to be a real support without interfering?»

Opening the floor with a special intervention, **Mahmoud Gebril** (former Prime Minister of Libya in 2011) stressed the need to reflect on the underlying causes of late 2010 and 2011 Arab Springs, symptoms of new drivers of history that witness the predominance of societies over states. «When the regime fell down in Libya, we turned into a stateless society, which needed to have all its institutions rebuilt. [...] A huge dichotomy has thus risen between power and authorities. We have lots of authorities, but the power is with those who carry weapons, who control the media, who shape the public opinion».

The first session deepened the discussion on how the international community could assist local leaders and countries in addressing today's regional fragmentation and the threats coming from ever-powerful non-state actors. In this regard, **Nicola de Santis** (Head of the Engagements Section of NATO's Public Diplomacy Division and former Head of the Middle East and North Africa Section - PASP - for nearly a decade) referred to the fact that «this year we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the *Mediterranean Dialogue* and the 15th Anniversary of the *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative*, which are NATO's cooperative engagements with countries in North Africa and the Arab Gulf. By promoting political dialogue and practical cooperation in the defence and security fields with its MD and ICI partners, based upon a two-way street and a tailored approach, NATO has achieved a better mutual understanding with a large number of countries of different cultures, realigning misperceptions, thereby preventing tensions, which could degenerate in conflicts. [...] The Alliance should continue to assist countries in building their defence institutions where they do not exist like in Libya, and strengthen the resilience of their defence establishments where they do exist».

Increasingly lower dependence on oil and gas revenues also emerged as a key element towards the sustainable economic growth and development of the region during the second session. «If you look at the global energy market today, you have a massive push for decarbonisation: [...] the future is going to be renewable and the energy is going to be increasingly electricity. [...] A new energy strategy and stronger interconnection grids have to be built», stated **Adnan Z. Amin** (IRENA Director-General Emeritus). Thus, economic diversification has to happen.

The last session focused on both the political turmoil spreading in the Maghreb and the increasingly insecure environment taking root in the Sahel, due to the deepening entrenchment of illegal trafficking, transnational criminal networks and terrorism. «Recent reports indicate that ISIS is relocating and replenishing in North Africa», warned **Mahmoud Karem** (Professor at the British University in Cairo and former Ambassador of Egypt to NATO and the EU). Jihadi ideology «must be addressed and faced collectively, not unilaterally. We need to unify our approaches and efforts especially on the definition of "terrorism", which must not disregard from its nexus with illicit trade in small and light weapons, and other lucrative commodities and narcotics».

Closing the event, the special concluding remarks of **Ahmed Aboul Gheit**, Secretary General of the Arab League, who addressed the audience drawing the attention on the aftermath that the Arab Springs left behind them after 2011, starting from the humanitarian cost of millions of refugees, economic recession and the security vacuum that led to the spreading of terrorism. The project pursued by ISIS in order to impose its control over territories and populations has been defeated, he stated. And yet, it continues to survive as an ideology in the mind of lots of young people.

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