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ARAB GEOPOLITICS 2022

A region between conflict and normalisation

OPENING REMARKS

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Every year for a while now, NATO has been sponsoring this important conference: Arab Geopolitics. There is a reason for that: it is the only existing conference approaching the dynamics in the Arab world with a NATO outlook. And for NATO, particularly at this crucial moment in our history where peace in the Euro-Atlantic has been shattered by Russia's brutal, illegal and unjustified war against Ukraine, it is essential that we hear from all of you.

The consequences of the war on the region are profound: worsening food and energy security, an even more pervasive instability and fragility, emboldened misinformation and disinformation campaigns led by hostile actors. However, the war, and its consequences, should not overshadow the existing challenges and opportunities that existed and still exist through the Arab world.

Our last Strategic Concept dated back to 2010. At the time, Russia was described as a strategic partner and China did not appear anywhere in the document. Since then, these two elements have drastically changed: Russia is now considered a threat to the Euro-Atlantic area and China represents a challenge to our interests, values and security. And in the Arab world, things have drastically changed too. Since 2011, attempts at addressing challenges in governance, in economy, in human security, have failed.

In addition, a string of civil wars, for instance in Yemen or Syria, have taken their toll on the region, bringing more suffering, more violence, and more opportunities for radicalization and the growth of violent radical groups.

Our complex, ever evolving security environment is made much worse by the war in Ukraine. But to be clear, the geopolitical landscape in the region pre-war was already far from being ideal. From conflict spill-over from fragile and failing states to coups after coups and pervasive political instability. From Russian mercenaries continuing to create disruptive and highly volatile security conditions, to aggressive disinformation campaigns. From the multiplication of transnational terrorist cells to the continuation of flows of dangerous illegal trafficking in weapons, humans and drugs. And at the edges of the Arab world, Iran continues to be a disruptive force for its neighbours.

All these challenges continue to threaten the security of the Arab world, and therefore the security of the Euro-Atlantic, as they are so profoundly interlinked. That is why this summer, in Madrid, NATO Heads of State and Government met for a historic Summit. They approved a new Strategic Concept, which reflects the fundamental security challenges of our time, and sets a strong agenda to tackle them in the years ahead. They paved the road for two of our closed Partners, Sweden and Finland, to become full-fledged members of the Alliance. They agreed on the most significant change in our deterrence and defence posture to the East. And they reaffirmed NATO's key purpose and greatest responsibility: to ensure the collective defence of Allies, against all threats, from all directions. To do this, the Alliance fulfils three core tasks: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; cooperative security. Cooperative security is the cornerstone of our approach to the South of the Alliance. When we talk about cooperative security, we mean our partnerships: working with other nations and organisations to strengthen international security. At the Madrid Summit, NATO Allies met with two of our Southern partners, Mauritania and Jordan, testifying to the importance of MENA for Allies.

NATO's role in the region and the wider Southern Neighbourhood is critical and particularly through two partnership frameworks: the Mediterranean Dialogue, launched in 1994, with seven Partners around the Med; and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched in 2004, with four Gulf Partners.

The recent decisions at the Madrid Summit reinforced the need for NATO and its Southern Partners to continue to develop these unique cooperation frameworks. On terrorism, for instance, which remains one of the most pressing security challenges of our times, we provide crucial support to our MENA Partners, by collaborating with them on counter-IED capabilities and on border security, to name only two domains of cooperation.

NATO is uniquely positioned to support our MENA partners in tackling several of the challenges I mentioned earlier, including in supporting roles to other international and regional organisations and initiatives. Our partnerships have been key in better understanding the security environment, in facing the challenges described earlier collectively, and in drawing up a more sensible approach to the region by

our Alliance. By supporting the strengthening of our Partners' capacities to address security challenges, we automatically safeguard our own.

NATO is committed to enhancing the support it offers its Partners in MD and ICI countries. We are currently improving on the quality of our Mobile Training Teams, doubling-down on the participation of Partners to NATO exercises, expanding countries that receive our Defense and Related Capacity Building Initiative (DCB) packages – with Jordan, Tunisia, and now Mauritania being beneficiaries.

We are also addressing the profound and real lack of awareness of what NATO does, why it does it, and how, that exists in the Arab world, with a lot of false or misleading information out there. That is why we are also reinforcing our public diplomacy activities. It is by better explaining, by better communicating, jointly with our Partners, about our partnership and its role in preserving security and safety of the region and of the Euro-Atlantic, that we will be able to change perceptions and do better and more in MENA. All is not bleak: our cooperation programmes have led to substantial improvements in defence and security matters, political dialogue and practical cooperation.

Russia's war against Ukraine is a priority for NATO. We know that the security of the MENA region is fully intertwined with ours. We also know that NATO needs to be able to look at challenges coming from all directions: from the East, the North, and of course the South. That makes our practical cooperation and our political dialogue much critical. For instance, the MD was for a long time the only forum in which Arab countries would meet regularly with Israel to discuss issues of security and defence of mutual concern and exchange views on the topic. Now, there are the Abraham Accords. They will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the bilateral and multilateral relationship in the Arab world.

During this year's Arab Geopolitics, we will look at some of these improvements in the region and try to better understand how to capitalise on them and support these positive steps. From the Abraham Accords, reshaping relations in the Middle East, to a reinforced cooperation on defence matters and to confronting the challenges posed by the illegal trafficking of goods and persons: there is a lot to talk about and I look forward to participating in these discussions.