Security challenges in the MENA region and prospects for political stability

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Vincent PEILLON (S&D, FR) on the security challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the prospects for political stability. It noted that the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya and the increase in tensions in the MENA region were major sources of destabilisation of that region and that the **risks for European security, citizens and interests were serious**. However, stabilisation in the region was **not a security issue alone**, but also had economic, political and social implications, requiring the Union and its Member States to develop strategic global and multifaceted policies.

Members felt that, having been forced to take emergency measures in response to successive crises that the EU had failed to anticipate in the MENA region despite some signals, the **EU had been unable to analyse the key elements or deal with the complexity of the situation**, expectations and prospects created by the Arab uprisings of 2011. Above all, the EU had failed to respond to the need for a very long-term strategy to sustain and assist genuine democratic transition, economic development and political stability.

Addressing the threats and the security situation: the committee called on the EU and its Member States to **address the root causes** of the rapidly deteriorating situation across the MENA region through a holistic and ambitious approach. Whilst welcoming the action taken by the EU Member States participating in the international coalition against ISIS, it emphasised the need for better-articulated actions, which could be coordinated as part of a Common Security and Defence (CSDP) operation, and to this end, Members called on the EU to develop sufficient operational capacity and to **put in place a true common European defence.**

At the same time, they called on the EU to take on the role of **main facilitator of a regional dialogue** involving all regional stakeholders, in particular the League of Arab States (LAS), Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran, and address the legitimate demands of local populations, notably as expressed during the Arab uprisings of 2011. Members asked the VP/HR to ensure a constant high-level dialogue with the countries of the region. They went on to stress the following:

- the EU and the Arab world must assess the **root causes of radicalisation** and adopt a global approach, whereby inclusivity should be a guiding principle. Unless a practical, sustainable solution is found, any action to neutralise the threat posed by ISIL/Da’esh and other terrorist groups would encounter increased and persistent difficulties;
- the attempts to tailor EU humanitarian assistance to gender- and age-specific needs was welcome; Members noted the allocation of EUR 1 billion under the EU strategy entitled 'Elements of an EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da'esh threat', under which EUR 400 million had been earmarked for humanitarian aid;
- all EU Member States must increase their commitments in relation to the **refugee crisis** in terms of financial resources and resettlement of the most vulnerable refugees in the region, and special attention must be given to **Jordan and Lebanon**, which were absorbing the biggest share of refugees in proportion to their population;
- Member States should step up their efforts in **hosting asylum seekers** and in swiftly addressing the build-up of pending cases;

- the EU must actively engage in promoting confidence-building measures between **Iran and Saudi Arabia,** and step up the counter-terrorism cooperation with **Turkey,** which could play a major role in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh and in stabilising Iraq and Syria, as a member of NATO;
- conditions for a resumption of peace talks between **Israel and the Palestinian Authority** should be put in place for a definitive settlement of the conflict based on a solution enabling both countries to live side by side in peace and security, based on the 1967 borders and with Jerusalem as capital of both states.

Stepping up the global strategy for democracy and human rights: Members were convinced that the **lack of democracy** was one of the fundamental causes of political instability in the region. They stressed the need to enhance long-term stability in the MENA region through continuing **EU support to civil society**, notably though the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the ENI Civil Society Facility, as well as through new pro-democracy tools such as the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Member States were called on to provide the Endowment's budget with sufficient funding.

Whilst welcoming the broad consultation on ENP revision, the report stressed the importance of **preserving the current balance of distribution of funds** for the allocation of ENP funding. Countries making progress in implementing reforms should be granted decisive additional support, with particular attention to **Tunisia.**

Members called for a **special programme** for the support and rehabilitation of women and girls who were victims of sexual violence and slavery in conflict areas in the MENA region, especially Syria and Iraq.

They went on to stress the need to develop an **effective common European response by all Member States to jihadist propaganda** and to home-grown radicalisation. This counter-narrative should be based on the promotion of common values founded on the universality of human rights and should discredit the idea of a conflict between religions or civilisations. Members wanted EEAS to appoint staff speaking the languages of the MENA region to increase the effectiveness of communication.

The report also highlighted the central role of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), and reiterated the importance of revitalising the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly and reviving its political ambition.

Strengthening cooperation for economic development: Members took the view that strategic dialogue between the EU and the MENA countries should help to iron out inequalities and creating job and education opportunities, mainly for young people. They stressed the need to **facilitate access to the EU single market** for the MENA countries, while providing all necessary protection, as well as to **encourage European investments**.

Noting that the upheavals could jeopardise the **EU's energy security**, Members suggested that the EU engage more strongly in energy diplomacy in the MENA region, as outlined in the Energy Union. Supplying energy to countries in the EUs southern neighbourhood was important both strategically and in economic terms.

Lastly, the committee regretted that a minimum one-year period was necessary for the release of macro-financial assistance to countries in a very precarious financial situation and urged the deployment of a **new procedural dimension for EU aid**, both in regard to aid through EU external action financial instruments and at macro-financial assistance level. In addition, the EU must adequately assess the socio-economic and human rights impact of the measures requested from beneficiary countries in order to **ensure that such assistance does not constitute a factor of instability,** for example by undermining welfare services.