



## **Intervention at the NATO Defense College Foundation conference:**

**“Arab Geopolitics from turmoil balances, stability and regional order”**

**Rome, 5<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

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### **How to maintain a stable regional order in the Middle East**

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**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen**

**I wish to thank the National defense college for inviting me to this important conference. I wish it all the success.**

**About three weeks ago I went to Iraq in order to put forward an initiative that would provide a way out of the impasse between the Kurds and the central government. I met with the leaders on both sides and listened to their arguments- They both made sense, but the gap in trust between them was almost unbridgeable. Why? They would both give you different answers:**



**The Arabs see the Kurds as eager to secede and difficult to satisfy. The Kurds on the other hand see the Arabs as difficult to live with and eager to dominate them even within a federal context.**

**We can track these problems back to the beginning of the 20th century with the partition of the Arab Mashreq to border lines serving the interests of the major colonial Powers of the time- Britain and France. Sykes-Picot, for instance, was a partition plan that we were raised to abhor. Yet now I, like others in the region, call on preserving the very map that it produced.**

**The reason?**

**Because those lines gave us newly formed states that have transformed into nation states which in turn became integral parts of the Arab system. However, they were never able to seize on their multiethnic and multicultural nature, and at least some of these newly-formed states applied an overdose of Arab Nationalism which came back to haunt them, and all of us, in the process.**

**True that the Arab League was established in 1945 on the principles of Arab nationalism. But it was a light**



**dose of Nationalism that would help the societies under occupation to gain their independence and feel solidarity with each other. However, the excess of zeal in applying any type of Nationalism, as we witnessed throughout History, can create real tragedies.**

**And there is a great deal to be learned from the tragedies brought about by the extreme nationalism particularly in Iraq and Syria.**

**The biggest lesson of all is the following:**

**In a region that is multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious there is, in my view, no room - I repeat No room - for any form of Exclusive nationalism or Exclusive political processes. Only an Inclusive political formula has the ability to provide enough glue to hold such societies together.**

**At this day and age, the goal should always be to keep societies from unravelling. Fragmentation is not the answer. Division creates more problems. New equations and formulas will have to be devised.**

**One of the reasons why I am alarmed about the Kurdish separatism in Iraq is the negative repercussions it will have on the future of Syria, which has its mosaic of ethnic and religious minorities too. If**



**federalism, which after all is a new form of government in the Arab world, fails in Iraq, it will stand virtually no chance of success in neighboring Syria.**

**The Arab world may have inherited poisonous border arrangements from the colonial powers, but throughout the past century those inherited lines solidified themselves into the consciousness of the Arab peoples, thus creating realities –nation states- that are, in my view, impossible to change at this point---- at least not without a heavy price in blood and resources. Those new nation-states have become part of the basic structure of the Arab order.**

**The title of our conference today refers to the “regional order”. It is a concept that is rarely invoked those days. “Order” is no longer in vogue.. chaos seems more to be the characteristic of our region,**

**What is a regional order? It is basically and primarily a system of carefully put- together interests of states that is balanced and delicate, and hopefully well-rooted . In the region we call the “Arab World”, i.e. the Arab-speaking countries, the basic norm for keeping stability has been state sovereignty. The colonial not-so-distant past made sovereignty even more**



**cherished by the peoples of the region. Israel, in this context, was a threat to the system since its inception particularly because it usurped the sovereignty and independence of the Palestinian People. Similarly, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a blow to the regional order because it obliterated an independent country in one stroke. Recently, the flagrant interventions by the non-Arab regional powers, primarily Iran, in the domestic affairs of some Arab states threatens the system and creates turmoil because it simply infringes on the sovereignty of countries. Iran substitutes nationalism with sectarianism. In the process, it does not recognize political borders nor state sovereignty.**

**We have all seen how this Arab regional order has been shaken to its core in the last 6 years. Some nation-states were weakened and ceased to exist or function as unified political entities. The dire consequences of this phenomenon will not be confined to the borders of the fractured countries. Failed states produce:**

- a) health calamities, like what we see in Yemen,**
- b) refugee flows , like in Syria, and**



**c) safe havens for terrorist organizations, like the situation in Libya.**

**Failed states became an international problem, not only a regional one.**

**Today, it is with great sadness that we recognize that one in every two refugees in the world is Arab. The Arab refugee problem has even contributed to the radicalization of the political map in the EU. The displaced are in millions, and the refugees create pressures on the infrastructure of the destination countries. We have nearly 700 thousand cases of Cholera in Yemen. We have terrorist organizations wreaking havoc in Libya and Somalia. It is a human tragedy on a scale not seen for centuries.**

**What can be done?**

- 1.State failure tends to be contagious. It spreads from one country to another. The first step is to stop this pattern. Countries that are struggling to cope with spill-over effects from crises across the border should be supported and provided access to humanitarian assistance.**
- 2.Inclusive political formulas should be put forward as the only way out for the fractured countries, namely**



**Syria, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. Any such formula should rest on two principles: a central government that is fairly in control with a monopoly over the use of force, and a considerable degree of decentralization that entails devolving a range of powers from the central government to the local level allowing for ethnic and religious groups to enjoy some form of autonomy.**

- 3. Preserving the territorial integrity and state sovereignty of the countries should be the guiding principle in any political settlement to ongoing conflicts. Redrawing borders will open Pandora's box. For one, there is no clear criteria determining which ethnic or religious group should be entitled to establish a state of its own. Why Kurds but not Yazidis? Why Alawites but not Assyrians? History teaches us that separation and division usually creates more grievances and produces widespread violence and sometimes even ethnic cleansing.**
- 4. State sovereignty is not enough as a guiding principle for a stable regional order. It should be coupled with good governance, and economic viability. Sovereignty alone can't keep states from disintegrating or fragmenting. Sovereignty alone can't satisfy the**





**aspirations of the young who constitute the majority of the population in the Arab World.**

**5. Last but not least, the Palestinian problem cannot remain unsolved. It is a sore point in our region and our psyche. The establishment of the Palestinian state along the 1967 lines, is the only political move that could possibly have a deep and immediate positive transformative effect on the regional dynamics.**

*Let me stop here and I am ready to take your questions..*

*Thank you*