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“Political and Security Developments in the MENA region and Western Balkans”

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Report

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This report provides a brief overview of the main political developments and security threats in the Euro-Mediterranean region, as well as of the activities carried out by PAM in support of conflict resolution and humanitarian efforts in 2018.
2. The security situation in the Euro-Mediterranean region remained strained in 2018, particularly in those areas of the Middle East and North Africa affected by the last acts of the military war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the continued instability in Libya, and the lack of progress in the Israel-Palestine peace process.
3. Additionally, the relations between the Russian Federation and western powers have reached new lows since the end of the Cold War, contributing to a renewed climate of tension in Europe, resulting in reversals of strategic treaties.

II. SYRIA

4. In 2018, the war in Syria against ISIS terrorists continued in its 8th year, with many significant developments taking place throughout the year. The Syrian government, backed by Russian and Iranian military support, continued to build on its momentum, and made further territorial gains in parts of the country previously held by both rebel and terrorist groups.
5. In January 2018, Turkey launched operation “Olive Branch” in the Kurdish Afrin district of the Aleppo Governorate in northern Syria. This development added to the complexity of the situation, as the United States of America, Turkey’s NATO ally, has been providing direct military support to the non-government “Syrian Democratic Forces”, which are composed largely of Kurdish troops and exercise de-facto control over North-Eastern Syria, including the city of Raqqa, the former stronghold of the so-called Islamic State. Moreover, the announced withdrawal of US troops from the region and arrival of the Syrian Army alongside the Kurdish

community, open a series of question marks about the stability of that region, until a lasting political solution is put in place.

6. In April 2018, after a five year siege, government forces recaptured Eastern Ghouta, a territory close to the capital Damascus. Allegedly, on 7 April chemical weapons were used in Douma, killing 43 people¹. While the government denied involvement in the attack, on 14 April, the United States, France and the UK launched a series of strikes against Syrian government targets in response. This further escalated tensions between the different powers involved in the Syrian conflict.
7. In September, following a summit between Russia and Turkey in Sochi, an agreement was reached for a de-escalation zone in Idlib province, which remains one of the last strongholds held by the opposition. The agreement, which at the time of writing has largely held up, aims to avoid full-scale military confrontation.
8. The humanitarian situation resulting from this conflict continues to be dire. UN OCHA estimates that there are currently approximately 13 million people who will need assistance in 2019. The level of spontaneous return of Syrian IDPs may exceed the level of new displacement for the first time in 2019, but conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return are not anticipated to be in place across much of the country². The EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian Crisis has mobilized 1.6 billion Euros to help Syrian refugees and their host communities in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the Western Balkans.
9. Some international actors continued to push for a meeting of a UN-facilitated, Syrian-owned, Syrian-led constitutional committee, which should convene in the context of the Geneva process to implement UN Security Council resolution 2254. This calls for a political solution to the crisis in Syria. However, also in consideration of the new military situation on ground, at the end of 2018, the committee has yet to be convened. Meanwhile, UN Secretary General has appointed Ambassador Geir Pedersen of Norway as his new Special Envoy for Syria, replacing Ambassador Staffan de Mistura in early 2019. On his appointment, PAM reached out to Amb. Pedersen to support peace efforts.

III. LIBYA

10. Throughout 2018, due to the slow path in national reconciliation, Libya continued to be a major hotspot of instability in the MENA region, having a direct impact on the security of the entire Euro-Mediterranean region.
11. Lack of security in Libya continued to result in rampant lawlessness in many parts of the country, notably in the south. Taking advantage of the continued flow of migrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa, criminal organisations not only continued to facilitate the smuggling of

¹ <https://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/statements/2018/chemical-attacks-syria/en/>

² <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf>

migrants into Europe via the central Mediterranean route, but also to enslave traveling migrants, trafficking them into forced labour and sex slavery.

12. Clashes and fighting between rival factions continued to occur throughout Libya, notably in Derna, Sabha, and in the capital Tripoli, where an escalation in August-September left 120 people dead, including 34 women and children.
13. Terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS, strengthened their presence and activities in the country, staging a number of deadly attacks, notably including twin car-bomb attack in Benghazi on 23 January 2018, which left at least 33 people dead, and an ISIS claimed attack on the High National Elections Commission Head Quarters in Tripoli which took 13 lives on 2 May 2018.
14. In 2018, oil production reached up to 1.3 million barrels of oil per day, bringing in a total of 13 billion USD in revenue in the first half of the year. However, oil revenues did not manage to address the financial gaps in the collapsed public sector, and national institutions remained weak.
15. According to UN OCHA, there are 823,000 people in need of humanitarian aid, and the planned interventions to reach 552,000 people in 2019 will require 202 Million USD in funding³. The most vulnerable groups include both Libyans displaced and affected by the conflict, as well as migrants transiting through the country.
16. The Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), signed in 2015, calls for elections in the country, which were set for December 2018, but could not take place due to the prevailing situation. According to UN polls, 80% of Libyans however insist on having the election⁴. In his briefing to the Security Council on 9 November 2018, the UN Special Representative for Libya, Dr. Ghassan Salamé called for the House of Representatives to uphold their part of the LPA and to pass the necessary legislation for the referendum on the Constitutional proposal and Presidential and parliamentary elections⁵.
17. In November 2018, Italy convened a major conference in Palermo on the Libyan national reconciliation process, which included the country's key actors, and regional and global powers. The conference aimed to reset the stagnated process and at holding a National Conference of key actors on Libyan soil in early 2019, with the aim to hold elections in the following months.

³ <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO2019.pdf>

⁴ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/remarks-srsg-ghassan-salam%C3%A9-united-nations-security-council-situation-libya>

⁵ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/remarks-srsg-ghassan-salam%C3%A9-united-nations-security-council-situation-libya>

IV. ISRAEL – PALESTINE

18. In 2018, tensions remained high in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The main catalyst for the rising tensions occurred in December 2017 when the US President Donald Trump announced his decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to move the US Embassy there.
19. While a few countries supported the US decision, and undertook similar actions, this policy mainly received widespread criticism from most countries, especially Europe and in the Arab world. The decision has undermined the confidence of many actors on the US as the guarantor and facilitator of the Middle East Peace Process.
20. In March 2018, pushed by Hamas, hundreds of Palestinians living in Gaza began to hold “Great March of Return” protests on the Gaza border with Israel. These protests have sustained throughout the year, and often erupted in violence.
21. In November 2018, clashes between Hamas and Israel brought additional tension, as they were some of the most intense exchanges of fire since 2014. However, the escalation quickly ended in a controversial ceasefire. There were widespread demonstrations against the agreement among the Israeli public, and the Israeli Minister of Defence Avigdor Lieberman resigned from his post in protest, calling the ceasefire with Hamas “a surrender to terrorism”⁶.
22. According to the UN, between January and November 2018, there were 284 Palestinians killed and 28 336 injured in both Gaza and the West Bank, and the total for Israel included 12 deaths and 119 injuries⁷.
23. The humanitarian outlook for 2019 by UN OCHA shows that there are there are 2.5 million Palestinians who are in need of humanitarian assistance. The situation is further complicated by the US decision to stop its funding to UNRWA, leaving a major gap upwards of 400 million USD in the organisations budget. The international community, including PAM, has been working to advocate additional funding from other sources.
24. In late November 2018 Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon stated that the Trump administration’s peace deal proposal has been completed and is planned to be presented in early 2019, ahead of the Israeli elections, which are set to take place at some point during the year⁸. PAM delegates have already expressed their readiness to discuss the new US proposal on a regional inter-parliamentary level.

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/israel-defense-minister-avigdor-lieberman-resigns-over-gaza-truce-n936071>

⁷ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/monthly-figures>

⁸ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-trumps-middle-east-peace-plan-completed-to-be-rolled-out-in-early-2019/>

V. WESTERN BALKANS

25. PAM strongly believes in the need for promoting stability and cooperation in the Balkan region. In July 2018, at the request of the President of the General Assembly of United Nations, PAM co-organized with WTO, the UN productive cluster and the key international financial institutions, a meeting dedicated to facilitating trade and investments in the Western Balkan region. Purpose of the meeting was to utilize parliamentary diplomacy and economic integration to give impetus to a weak political dialogue in the region, particularly among that group of countries divided by a EU border, due to the slowness of the EU enlargement process.
26. Moreover, on 14 December 2018, the UN Secretariat issued a statement in which it was indicated that the Secretary General had taken note, with concern, of the adoption by the Assembly of Kosovo of three draft laws aimed at strengthening the role and capacity of the Kosovo Security Force. In his statement, the UN Secretary-General underscored that Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) provides the sole legal framework for the international security presence, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), entrusted with the responsibility to ensure a safe and secure environment in Kosovo. Hence, any restriction to the discharge by KFOR of its security responsibilities would be inconsistent with that resolution. In that regard, the UN Secretary-General called on all parties concerned to exercise restraint and refrain from actions that could raise tensions and cause a further setback in the European Union-facilitated dialogue for the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina⁹.

VI. THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARIANS AND PAM STRATEGY

27. The role of parliamentary diplomacy remains a crucial instrument of international relations in times of conflict and crisis, especially when tensions are too high at the inter-governmental level. Parliamentarians have the necessary flexibility in their mandates to engage with their colleagues and other stakeholders to contribute to conflict de-escalation, and to coordinate specific humanitarian actions.
28. For example, during the summer 2018, PAM Secretary General worked hand in hand coordinated with its Israeli and Palestinian delegates, as well as with the UN, to facilitate the delivery of much needed medical aid to Gaza. Additionally, PAM utilised its network to speed up the safe release of all the Druze hostages held by ISIS near the southern Syrian town of As-Suwayda.
29. PAM also remains committed to supporting democratic processes, as free and fair elections and strong democratic institutions are the cornerstones of peace and stability in the region. For this reason, PAM regularly deploys electoral observation teams to monitor national elections within its member states. In 2018, PAM monitors successfully observed political elections in Egypt, Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁹ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sgsm19408.doc.htm>

30. In 2018 political dialogue continued to be dynamic and constructive through PAM inter-parliamentary diplomacy and its active participation in a number of key events organized by the United Nations, NATO PA, ACFEA, IPU, Arab IPU, OSCE, OSCE PA, PACE, PABSEC, IPA CIS, Arab Parliament, OIC, SEECF PA, Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, as well as Moscow Forum on “Development of Parliamentarism”, UfM PA Speakers Summit, and Women Political Leaders Summit, among others.
31. In January 2018, PAM successfully organised another meeting of the Parliamentary Dimension of the 5+5 Forum – Western Mediterranean Dialogue, in Algiers, to review the security, economic and social challenges facing the Western Mediterranean region.
32. PAM continues to be the key platform for inter-parliamentary dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region, with full equivalence among its member parliaments. This platform serves as an uninterrupted channel of dialogue between parliaments, international organisations, and other key stakeholders. PAM delegates remain committed to utilise its structures for the support and promotion of dialogue, peace, security and cooperation in the region.