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SECURITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The OSCE 2015 Mediterranean Conference

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From October 20-21, 2015, the OSCE held its annual Mediterranean Conference focused on “Security in the Mediterranean Region – Challenges and Opportunities.” It included four distinctive themes: Session I: Common Security in the Mediterranean Region; Session II: Addressing Violent Extremism

and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism; Session III: The Role of Interfaith/Intercultural Dialogue; and Ses-

sion IV: Irregular Migration, Refugee Protection, Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking in the Mediterranean. The Conference was particularly

pertinent this year, given the volatile situation in the Middle East, and provided OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners



OSCE 2015 Mediterranean Conference / ©Thomas Koehler / photothek.net

the opportunity to share views and experiences with the goal of identifying avenues for concrete cooperation.

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What are the OSCE Mediterranean Partner Countries?

The Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation consist of Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. The OSCE maintains a special relationship with these countries as the modern incarnation of a long-standing recognition, going back to the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, that the security of the OSCE and Mediterranean regions are inextricably linked. As part of this relationship, the Mediterranean Partners are provided access to certain OSCE bodies, meetings, and events, despite lacking the status of participating States of the OSCE. The annual OSCE Mediterranean Conference is part this framework.

The OSCE 2015 Mediterranean Conference (continued)

The U.S. Delegation

The U.S. delegation consisted of Ambassador Daniel Baer, U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE; Ambassador David Kilgallon, Senior Senate Staff Representative of the Helsinki Commission; Arsalan Suleman, Acting U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Communities (OIC); Monica Greco of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE; Tim Sweet, Refugee Coordinator at U.S. Embassy Jordan; and Paul Massaro, Staff Associate of the Helsinki Commission. The event enjoyed the highest-level participation at a Mediterranean Conference in years. Foreign ministers attended the conference, including Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Foreign Minister of Germany, which currently serves as Chair of the Mediterranean Contact Group. Deputy foreign ministers were also in attendance, as were ambassadors from nearly every participating State and Mediterranean Partner.

The continuing conflict in Syria was central to the discussion on security in the Mediterranean Region. At the forefront in all four sessions, OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners expressed their priorities and strategies with regard to the resolution of the crisis and the many problems that have resulted from it. All participating States and Mediterranean Partners agreed that the root causes of the crisis must be addressed and a political arrangement must be met. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also central to the discussion, remaining a point of great contention.

Security in the Mediterranean

The first session of the conference, titled “Common Security in the Mediterranean Region,” did not have any official

speakers and was opened immediately to the statements of participating States and Mediterranean Partners. Participants expressed concern about the situation in the region, especially in Syria, and called for greater cooperation and solidarity in resolving the many issues that have arisen as a result. These issues include the migration crisis as it affects the primary destination countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, along with the periphery destination countries in the European Union, the human trafficking that has accompanied the crisis, and the terrorism that has resulted from political instability and oppression in the region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also present in the discussion.

Countries shared experiences of successfully combatting terrorism and building free and fair societies in the face of violent extremism, particularly Tunisia, the only country to emerge from the Arab Spring peaceful and democratic. These participants explored avenues for working together to achieve this. Malta proposed appointing a Special Representative for the Mediterranean. It was also suggested that the OSCE could apply its expertise in arms control concerning small arms and conventional weapons to the Mediterranean region. The need to build trust between OSCE participating States and Mediterranean Partners in order to encourage greater cooperation was emphasized, as was the need to change the narrative on migration from its often xenophobic form to a positive one, premised on the ability of migrants to contribute to and develop a society.

Addressing Violent Extremism

Session II focused on addressing violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism and evoked a lively discus-

sion on the experience of participating States and Mediterranean Partners with countering violent extremism (CVE). Central to the conversation was the role that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has played in exacerbating violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism through a highly effective propaganda campaign for the recruitment of foreign fighters. Emphasis was placed on best practices in CVE, the role of education in the radicalization process, and the need to cater to young people susceptible to radicalization. Switzerland also encouraged participating States and Mediterranean Partners to support the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF). Egypt and Algeria argued that the title of the session should have included “combatting terrorism” as well, instead of focusing solely on CVE. Whether the state or civil society should address the problem of radicalization and terrorism presented another point of contention.

Interfaith / Intercultural Dialogue

The role of interfaith/intercultural dialogue was the topic of session III. The speakers and discussion of this session were largely focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the role that dialogue has to play in resolving it, as well as countering radicalization and fundamentalism more generally. The limits of dialogue were also discussed, stressing the fragility of interfaith/intercultural agreements in the face of religious extremism and the need for both sides of a proposed dialogue to be open to pursuing it. Moreover, speakers highlighted the need for religious dialogue to be coupled with civic dialogue in order to be successful. Participating States and Mediterranean Partners also rejected the abuse and distortion of religion for

destructive ends and emphasized the central role of education and youth outreach in encouraging lasting interfaith/intercultural dialogue.

Refugees and Migration

The final session, on irregular migration, refugee protection, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking in the Mediterranean, brought the discussion back to Syria. Participating States and Mediterranean Partners once again agreed that the root causes of the crisis must be addressed in order to resolve the problems that have resulted from it. Speakers called for greater coordination and cooperation, as well as greater information sharing, in order to combat the human trafficking that has resulted from the increased demand for human smuggling associated with the crisis. Participating States agreed that the EU is on the forefront of the crisis and must develop a common strategy for addressing migration and human trafficking, while the Balkan states asserted that they have become ever more important as the situation has escalated.

This session included discussion of proposals that may be considered in the run-up to the Ministerial Conference in

Belgrade in December. Algeria requested that the Mediterranean Partners be consulted with regard to draft texts and proposals dealing with migration to be introduced at the Ministerial. Egypt agreed and also called attention to the work that had been done at a recent Horn of Africa conference, claiming that twenty concrete proposals had been agreed upon to combat human smuggling and trafficking.

Looking to the Future

The high-level attendance and large number of attendees at the 2015 Mediterranean Conference was impressive. Nonetheless, measures could be taken to create a more productive and engaging Conference in the future. Firstly, the format could be changed to be more discursive, enabling participating States and Mediterranean Partners to delve deeper into topics and comment on one another's positions. Secretary General Lamberto Zannier suggested at the conclusion of the Conference that it could move more in this direction in the future.

Secondly, the inclusion of civil society would inject much-needed subject expertise as well as an important voice into the discussion. Its exclusion from

the 2015 OSCE Mediterranean Conference and previous Conferences strongly limits the ability of participating States and Mediterranean Partners to discover concrete opportunities for cooperation, preventing the discussion from moving beyond a superficial level. The health and well-being of civil society in the Mediterranean region continues to be a concern.

The German Chair of the Contact Group and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan have done an admirable job with this year's Mediterranean Conference, facilitating a robust exchange of ideas that has yielded a number of specific recommendations and requests. The Conference's ultimate success will be determined by their implementation.

Submitted by Helsinki Commission Senior Staff Representative Ambassador David Killion and Staff Associate Paul Massaro.

About the U.S. Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries.

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