



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

SUMMARY

OF THE MEETING OF THE

MEDITERRANEAN AND MIDDLE EAST SPECIAL GROUP

Thursday 11 December 2020

Videoconference

215 GSM 20 E | Original: English | 2021

ATTENDANCE LIST

Ad interim Chairperson	Gilbert ROGER (France)
Rapporteur	Ahmet Berat ÇONKAR (Turkey)
President of the NATO PA	Attila MESTERHAZY (Hungary)
Secretary General of the NATO PA	Ruxandra POPA

MEMBER DELEGATIONS

Albania	Mimi KODHELI Myslim MURRIZI
Belgium	Dario HREBAK
Estonia	Theo FRANCKEN
France	Kerstin-Oudekki LOONE Joëlle GARRIAUD-MAYLAM Sonia KRIMI Patricia MIRALLÈS
Germany	Karl A. LAMERS
Greece	Marietta GIANNAKOU Andreas LOVERDOS Manousos Konstantinos VOLOUDAKIS
Iceland	Thorgerdur K. GUNNARSDOTTIR
Italy	Paolo FORMENTINI Luca FRUSONE
Luxembourg	Nancy ARENDT KEMP Sven CLEMENT Lydia MUTSCH
Poland	Przemyslaw CZARNECKI Michal Roch SZCZERBA
Portugal	José Luis CARNEIRO Ana MIGUEL SANTOS Marcos PERESTRELLO
Romania	Nicu FALCOI
Slovenia	Andrej CERNIGOJ
Spain	Zaida CANTERA
Turkey	Osman Askin BAK
United Kingdom	Bob STEWART
International Secretariat	Paul COOK, Director Anne-Laure BLEUSE, Coordinator

I. Opening remarks by Gilbert ROGER (France), Acting Chairperson

1. The acting Chair of the Meeting, GSM Vice President, **Gilbert Roger** (France) greeted members and welcomed them to the second online meeting of the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group. He lamented that members were unable to meet in person. He then declared the meeting open.
2. The Acting Chair thanked Philippe Folliot (France) for his work as Chair of this group and for his excellent special report on the Covid-19 pandemic in the MENA region.
3. The Acting Chair noted that the meeting would conclude with elections and indicated which officers would not be standing, as well as the names of those who had indicated an interest in standing for election.

II. Adoption of the draft Agenda [201 GSM 20 E rev. 1]

4. The Acting Chair asked members to adopt the draft agenda. **The Draft Agenda [201 GSM 20 E rev. 1] was adopted.**

III. Consideration of the draft revised Report Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region [042 GSM 20 E rev. 1] by Ahmet Berat ÇONKAR (Turkey), Rapporteur

5. The Acting Chair asked the GSM Rapporteur, Ahmet Berat ÇONKAR (Turkey) to take the floor to present his draft revised Report Development and Security Challenges in the Sahel Region [042 SM 20 E rev. 1].
6. The rapporteur thanked members of the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group for their comments on the first version of this report. The new version includes this input and accounts for significant changes in the situation. The rapporteur noted several small changes to the text to update it and to improve its accuracy. He read these changes to the members.

He then noted that the challenges in the Sahel include:

- a difficult colonial legacy;
- economic instability;
- extreme poverty;
- climate change and desertification;
- demographic growth, education gaps and pervasive youth unemployment;
- gender inequity;
- political and social fragility;
- corruption and poor governance;
- terrorism and ethnic violence;
- and now a debilitating global pandemic.

7. He suggested that Covid-19 has exacerbated many of the more enduring challenges confronted by the people of the region. The economic fallout of the pandemic has had a range of catastrophic impacts. At the same time, mounting terrorist attacks, inter-community tensions, self-defence militia and highway banditry all suggest that the regional security order is deteriorating.

8. The rapporteur highlighted two key problems: irregular migration and terrorism.

9. The security challenges in the Sahel and the irregular migration flows partly resulting from these have had serious political, social, and economic consequences for North African and European countries. He noted that the number of arrivals to Europe by sea fell significantly after 2016 but began to rise again in 2020.

10. He noted that terrorist groups in the Sahel are highly fractured. Some express allegiance to Al Qaeda and others to Daesh. But these allegiances often reflect tactical calculations rather than enduring ideological preferences. These groups have capably exploited the vulnerability of the region's population and the deep crisis of confidence and trust that has emerged between population and state. For some recruits, joining a terrorist group can mean multiplying their income by a factor of 20.

11. He suggested that purely military responses are bound to fall short and could, in some circumstances, even worsen the situation, insofar as poorly conducted counter-terrorism operations can inflict heavy costs on local populations. There are also very legitimate concerns that what is transpiring in the Sahel could spread well beyond the region. The report notes, for example, that Sahelian terrorist groups have forged links with Nigerian insurgent groups. Fighters from the Middle East have also begun to operate in the Sahel, particularly as their own room for manoeuvre in Iraq and Syria has diminished so substantially.

12. The rapporteur indicated that the second part of the report catalogues the numerous initiatives aiming to reinforce the security, social and political order in the Sahel region. It recognises the extraordinary commitment France has undertaken to build security in the Sahel. Since July 2014, Operation Barkhane has conducted operations in a territory the size of Europe. France has supported the G5 Sahel Joint Force and provided vital assistance to the Malian armed forces and MINUSMA. It has led many successful counterterrorism operations these last months. He said that members should also recognise the enormous price France has paid with the loss of 44 soldiers since 2013, including the loss of Senator Jean-Marie Bockel's son in Mali last year. The efforts of France and other allied countries to build security in Mali, however, have been undermined by the Malian political impasse.

13. The US military has also been a key player and provided much-needed intelligence, logistical and drone support to its French ally. Plans for global U.S. force restructuring now suggest that US Special Operations forces in Africa will be substantially reduced by 2021. He also discussed the creation of Task Force Takuba, which has engaged many allied countries including Special Operations elements from Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Greece, and Italy.

14. The rapporteur discussed a range of many other initiatives to reinforce regional security, social and political order in the Sahel region. These initiatives and a range of counterterrorism operations, he argued, cannot substitute for well-conceived political solutions. A new social contract is clearly needed between the Sahel states and their people. He indicated that the international community needs to focus on the causes of insurrection and not just on the insurrection itself. He also noted that the difficult situation in Libya has had direct implications for the stability of the Sahel. Restoring stability in Libya would significantly contribute to the efforts in countering terrorism, fostering economic development, and addressing irregular migration in the Sahel. Supporting inclusive political dialogue and reconciliation in Libya should be the aim of all NATO countries, he argued.

15. The Acting Chair thanked the speaker for the report. He said that his parliament had heard from a French General in charge of forces in the Sahel who had touched upon many of the themes in the report. He noted that France will launch a debate on Operation Barkhane in parliament. He then asked if members would like to take the floor.

16. Sonia Krimi (France) took the floor. She thanked the rapporteur. She offered suggested changes on paragraphs. She agreed to forward her suggestions to the rapporteur. Ms Krimi added that the amendments she had submitted had the support of the French delegation.

17. Mr Voloudakis (Greece) thanked Mr Çonkar for the report. He said that for NATO, the Sahel region is very important for security. Radical Islamic terrorism is a challenge and could be exported. Illegal migration is another source of concern. Both are covered in the report. In some paragraphs there is a reluctance to say that radical extremism is Islamic. This should not be a stigma of the religion itself. But it is a driving force in the Sahel and governments should not neglect this factor as they forge international responses to it.

18. The second point, he said, is that migration from the region has increasingly come to Europe through Turkey. Many of these migrants including some from Somalia and the Sahel are coming to Greece. He noted that this is a sensitive issue, but it should be discussed in this report.

19. Mr Çonkar responded that he had not heard all the changes suggested by Sonia Krimi but indicated that he would be happy to consider incorporating these into the report. He indicated that he was amenable to altering the text based on this input.

20. He then responded to the comments of Mr Voloudakis and indicated that he was very sensitive not to use the term Islamic terrorism as to link Islam to terrorism is a misrepresentation. This is not done when a Christian kills Muslims as occurred in New Zealand, he noted. This is because such violence it is not an act of religion. Although terrorist groups do exploit religious concepts in developing their ideologies, they also exploit other realms of human behaviour. For this reason, it is best to focus our attention on the extremist interpretations they apply to any of these categories, but not to see this as a religious phenomenon in itself. Islam is clear that terror is unacceptable, he argued. As far as terrorism in the Sahel, the report mentions that there is extensive research suggesting there are many other factors feeding into the phenomenon, including social and economic factors.

21. As for the migration issue, this is a matter of concern in Turkey. Turkey has more than 4 million refugees living in the country. It is a significant burden and Turkey seeks to cooperate with its neighbours, including Greece, to cope with this. He said that Turkey, like Greece, faces a serious problem of illegal migration.

22. The Acting Chair thanked the rapporteur and asked for members to vote for the adoption of the report as amended by Mr Çonkar and with assumption that the rapporteur would work to incorporate the suggestions of Ms Krimi after he had examined them more closely. **The draft report [042 GSM 21 E rev. 1] was adopted as amended.**

IV. Consideration of the draft revised Special Report *The Covid-19 Pandemic and the MENA Region* [095 GSM 20 E rev. 1] by Gilbert ROGER (France), Acting Chairperson

23. Gilbert Roger, the Acting Chair, noted that the previous Chairperson Phillipe Folliot (FR), had decided to produce a special report on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the Middle East and North Africa. He noted that the global health situation is very fluid, and the report provides a picture of the current situation. He noted that the new report includes references to the hope for vaccination. He also highlighted that members from the Turkish delegation had sent amendments and he said that he would respond to these, which he proceeded to do. The members had the amendments on the Kudo Platform. The Acting Chair accepted all of the amendments except the first one.

24. Mr Çonkar took the floor. He thanked the Acting Chair for the report and thanked him for incorporating the suggested amendments. He said that it would make the report more accurate and stronger.

25. The Acting Chair asked members to vote on whether to adopt the report with the amendments. **The draft report [095 GSM 20 E rev. 1] was adopted.**

V. Presentation by Giovanni ROMANI, Head, Middle East and North Africa, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, NATO, on Overview of NATO's Relations with the MENA Region, followed by a discussion

26. The Acting Chair introduced Giovanni Romani, the Head, Middle East and North Africa, Political Affairs and Security Policy Division, NATO, on Overview of NATO's Relations with the MENA Region, followed by a discussion. Both the presentation and the discussion were off the record.

VI. Elections of GSM Officers

27. The Acting Chair gave the floor to the Vice President, **Bob Stewart** (UK), to run the elections as the Acting Chair was standing for the Chair position. Mr Stewart gave the floor to Sonia Krimi (France) to discuss her candidacy and to Gilbert Roger to discuss his candidacy. **Members of the Special Group subsequently elected Sonia Krimi as GSM Chairperson.** Mr Loverdos (GR) took the floor and mentioned that he had been unable to vote due to technical difficulties but wanted to note that he had cast a vote for Sonia Krimi for the Chair position.

28. Mr Stewart gave the floor to the Acting Chair to administer the election of Vice Chair. Luca Frusone (IT) was elected as Vice Chairperson.

29. Members of the GSM then renewed the mandates of other officers of the GSM by acclamation.

VII. Date and place of the next meeting

30. The Acting Chair noted that in person activities were likely to resume only in the second half of the year. The Spanish delegation has expressed its willingness to organise a GSM Seminar. He said that the international secretariat will work with the Spanish to organise that seminar and will inform members in due course.

VIII. Closing remarks

31. The Acting Chair then concluded the meeting of the GSM. He thanked all members for their constructive participation. He also thanked the rapporteur for his excellent report.

32. On behalf of all the participants, he expressed his thanks to the interpreters and to Paul Cook and Anne-Laure Bleuse and their colleagues in the Secretariat for ensuring that this meeting ran as smoothly as possible.