Keynote speech  
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The Evolving Transition Process in North Africa and the Middle East  
Opportunities and Challenges for the European and International Community

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It gives me great honour to join you today in addressing one of the most pressing and dynamic issues on the global and European political agendas.

I am representing ICMPD, an inter-governmental organisation with solid European roots, which strives to promote sustainable and future-orientated migration governance on the basis of solid evidence and in close partnership with all relevant stakeholders.

To underline it at the very beginning of my statement:
I strongly believe that migration policy has to be a central element of a comprehensive European and international response to the recent events in North Africa, and potentially in the Middle East.

The evident shift in political and governance structures in our immediate neighbourhood unquestionably presents challenges and opportunities to the EU’s existing institutions and mechanisms and policy frameworks.

Consequently, it reaffirms the need for a concerted effort among EU Member States, as well as among European and international organisations, in addressing both the immediate and long-term ramifications arising from the changing political and socio-economic setup in North Africa and the Middle East.

To shed light on the unfolding reality on the ground, I note that since January 2011, the number of irregular arrivals from the shores of Tunisia (and to a lesser extent from Libya) into Europe has included some thousands of people, comprising a majority of Tunisian nationals, predominantly young males.

In contrast, within the region itself, the total number of migrants who fled Libya in the course of the armed conflict (since 17 February, 2011) has reached more than 750,000 people to date, most of whom have entered Tunisia through Ras Ijdeir Border Crossing Point, while smaller groups have moved into Egypt through Al-Salloum Border Crossing Point.
The majority of people involved in both movements are Egyptian and Tunisian nationals, albeit comprising a significant number of Sub-Saharan Africans (namely Eritreans, Somalis, and Ethiopians).

Effectively, this means that the percentage of people crossing the Mediterranean has been lower than anticipated; this is not to be misunderstood as undermining the challenges that have been posed before the main points of arrival in Europe, but rather that the (quantitive) challenge will represent a smaller scale effect than formerly predicted.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have to take note of the existing patterns and trends that are the following:

1. Irregular departures to Europe are shifting from Libya to Tunisia;

2. Migrants arriving from the region to Europe are, first and foremost, nationals of countries that underwent political change, combined with smaller numbers of people from vulnerable groups who were already transiting in the region, en route to Europe

3. Tunisian and Egyptian nationals (previously residing in Libya) will return, or are already returning, to their countries of origin, while no significant movement of Libyans out of their country is evident to date.

Beyond the figures, beyond the patterns, the core underlying message is that the direct result of political turmoil in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya was a sudden increase in the movement of people from one North African country to another, and in smaller, yet visible, numbers the movement of people from the region with a view to seeking asylum or immigrant status within the EU.

These movements are certainly rooted in a complex set of factors which require multi-faceted responses (specifically economic, political and social reforms), of which migration policy forms a central element;

Therefore ICMPD advocates a balanced and comprehensive European approach in addressing the emerging migration trends in the Mediterranean-Arab region.

Our “five-point plan of action” could be summarised as follows:

ONE: we need to address the immediate humanitarian concerns, including the provision of shelter, medicine and food supplies (among other urgently-needed materials and services) to cater for the increasing number of migrants who have been fleeing Libya, particularly at the relevant borders between Libya and Tunisia; most notably at Ras Ijdeir crossing point. Equally, there is a need to facilitate their safe return to their countries of origin or their resettlement.

TWO: we need to prevent the loss of life at sea, in light of the anticipated increase and intensification of irregular migratory flows across the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. Adequate responses to the departure of irregular migrants must be presented and implemented, not least in an attempt to prevent the risks taken by migrants. Ad hoc co-operation with countries in the region should be explored to this end.
THREE: we must anticipate an increase in the arrival of boats on European shores, despite the inevitable difficulty to accurately foresee the actual migration potential during the continuing change (and ongoing conflict). Early predictions and scenarios about the possible outflow of refugees and migrants from the crisis areas had been circulated, and, ultimately, these predictions may or may not be precise, yet one element is certain: it is most likely that the influx will not exceed current capacity. There will be more arrivals of migrants leaving the immediate crisis areas, and during this process, certain entry points to Europe may experience greater challenges in dealing with the sudden influx of people. However, European structures and procedures are in place to effectively address the likely developments.

FOUR: we need to revisit the Mediterranean Neighbourhood Policy. Although it is clear that migration does not represent the sole remedy in addressing the underlying challenges in the region, it has an instrumental and positive impact in reshaping perceptions, prospects and solutions within this emerging reality in ‘the New South’. Essentially rooted in socio-economic factors, the unfolding events reaffirm the crucial need to include migration in the overall dialogue within the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy. It is crucial to re-establish trust and dialogue between and among the relevant actors and institutions. Embedded in a revised solid overall policy framework, migration policy will play a significant role in addressing a number of root causes.

FIVE: we need to create synergies between Migration and Development for the benefit of democratic societies. It is widely recognised that migration can have a positive impact on the development process of countries and societies. Migrants’ remittances, the transfer of know-how and the acquisition of skills, as well as new frameworks for migration partnerships - which could include circular migration and similar arrangements - contribute positively to democratic societies. Therefore migration policies that take development issues into account must form part of the overall approach to the Mediterranean-Arab region.

Distinguished guests, there is a dire need to re-enforce a refined Neighbourhood Policy framework, incorporating first and foremost the global approach to migration.

Equally, there is an immediate prerequisite to reactivate solidarity among EU member states, and to work on trustful partnerships in the South, taking into account the opportunities as well as the security aspects of migration.

Effective European policy frameworks are largely in place to address the magnitude and scale of the crisis in our immediate neighbourhood, and the means to further activate these policies must be at the top of our agenda.

Dear colleagues and distinguished guests,

The time is ripe for fostering deeper partnerships with our neighbours in the South, in the interest of Europe as well as for the prosperity and stability of the region.

It is, therefore, our hope that this common vision will be based on a comprehensive approach.

We are committed to contribute to dialogue and action. I thank you very much for your attention.