

Ministerial Session on the Consideration of the Projected Impact of Withdrawal of Foreign Forces and Mercenaries from Libya on the Sahel and the rest of Africa

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Tomorrow (30 September), African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1035th session at a Ministerial level on the projected impact of withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya on the Sahel region and the rest of Africa.

Following the opening remarks of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Integration and Chadians Abroad of the Republic of Chad PSC Chairperson of the month, Ambassador Cherif Mahamat Zene, the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to make a presentation on the AU Paper on the projected impact of the withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya on the Sahel and the rest of Africa. Representatives of concerned countries and neighbouring countries as well as Regional Economic Communities (RECs), namely, Libya, Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are expected to deliver statements. The Special Representative of the Secretary General to the AU and Head of the United Nations Office to the

AU (UNOAU), Hanna Tetteh, and the Head of the European Union Delegation to the AU, Ambassador Birgitte Markussen, may also make statements.

Cognizant of the risks posed by the departure of foreign forces on the peace and stability of neighboring countries and the wider Sahel, it is to be recalled that African members of the UN Security Council and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (A3+1) initiated two events at the UN Security Council on the theme—an informal interactive dialogue on 29 April and the Arria-formula meeting on 18 June 2021. The Arria-formula meeting sought to address, among others, the threat that the ‘unsupervised departure’ of foreign forces from Libya poses to the stability of the Sahel region and how international and regional organizations could best collaborate to tackle this threat. Tomorrow’s session therefore brings the broader discussion held at the UN to a regional level and presents the PSC the opportunity to, among others, deliberate on the threat posed by withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libya to the Sahel region and the continent at large and explore ways and means to address the danger posed by the withdrawal of foreign forces and ensure a well-managed and orderly withdrawal.

It is estimated that there are some 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries in Libya mainly coming from Syria, Russia, Sudan and Chad. Though the October 2020 permanent ceasefire agreement reached by Libya’s 5+5 Joint Military Commission clearly envisages the withdrawal of all foreign forces by January 2021, eight months later, translating this commitment into action remains elusive. As the UN Secretary-General captured in his latest report on Libya issued on 25 August, the continued presence of foreign forces in the Libyan soil posed a significant threat ‘not only to the security of Libya, but also to the whole region’. Given that the departure of foreign forces constitutes a critical step for sustainable peace and stability of Libya and the broader region, the

international community, including the PSC through its communiqué adopted at its 997th ministerial meeting on Libya, has intensified its call for the 'immediate and unconditional' withdrawal of these forces from Libya. The issue of withdrawal of foreign forces had been also at the centre of the 23 June Second International Berlin Conference on Libya, co-organized by Germany and the UN that drew significant number of participants including AU. One positive sign towards the withdrawal of foreign forces as a follow up to the Berlin Conference is the reported discussion between Russia and Turkey, to pull out 300 Syrians from each side.

While the discussion around withdrawal of Syrian fighters and other private security companies in Libya is indeed a step forward towards the stability of the country, little attention seems to be given to the foreign fighters and mercenaries who hail from neighbouring countries, which have become a particular concern for countries in the Sahel region. These countries have been also drawing attention to the other dimension of the withdrawal process by raising the alarm about the implication of the withdrawal of foreign forces in exacerbating the security situation of the already volatile region of the Sahel. Pursuing the agenda of withdrawal of foreign forces from Libya without a clear strategy to steer the process is a threat to the stability in the Sahel and the rest of the continent. In this connection, the representative of Niger, during the 21 May 2021 UNSC briefing on Libya, captured the link between Libya conflict and the security in the Sahel stating that 'we fear that the arms being silenced in Libya may resound again in the Sahel'. It is also in recognition of such danger that the PSC, at its last session on Chad (1016th meeting held on 3 August 2021), requested the AU Commission to expedite the finalization of the 'AU Policy Paper on addressing the potential impact of the withdrawal of foreign troops and mercenaries from Libya on Central Africa region and the Sahel'.

A clear illustration of the danger is events unfolded in Chad that led to the death of late President Idriss Déby Itno. Chad rebel group the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), which has been reportedly fighting in Libya's conflict since 2016, launched attacks from Libya on the same day of the Presidential election (11 April 2021). Chad's military announced the death of Déby on 20 April due to the injury he sustained while fighting FACT rebels, which sparked the fear of destabilization to a country widely seen as key partner in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the region. It is to be recalled that the PSC, during its 996th meeting convened on 14 May 2021, attributed the security situation in Chad to the activities of mercenaries and foreign fighters from Libya in addition to its call for the 'unconditional and expeditious withdrawal of all mercenaries, and foreign fighters from Chad' based on the 1977 OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa.

One starting point to ensure an orderly departure of foreign fighters and mercenaries is perhaps to assist Libyan authorities to implement the terms of October 2020 ceasefire agreement including the one that requires to 'immediately start identification and categorization of armed groups and armed entities on the entire Libyan territory, whether they are integrated into state institutions or not'. This step would be critical particularly to venture on the task of the dismantlement of armed groups and entities in Libya. The other available avenue is through an effective support to a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process both in Libya and neighboring countries where foreign fighters and mercenaries originate. For DDR to succeed and bring the desired outcome, however, it must form part of a broader political and security reforms aimed at addressing root causes of instability such as security sector reform (SSR), national reconciliation, and peacebuilding programmes. A positive development worth highlighting in this regard is Chad's interim president invitation of opposition armed groups to

participate in the upcoming national dialogue, which is due to be held before the end of the year.

A related challenge of interest to the Council is the continued violations of the arms embargo established by UN Security Council Resolution 1970(2011), which contributes to the illicit transfer and destabilising accumulation of weapons in Libya. This, coupled with the porous borders of the region and high mobility of armed groups, is affecting the stability of countries in the Sahel and beyond.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. The Council is also expected to express its concern over the impact of unsupervised withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries from Libya to the peace and stability of the Sahel region as well as the rest of the continent. The Council is likely to stress on the importance of undertaking the withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries in an orderly and carefully designed manner to ensure that the peace efforts in Libya do not negatively affect the peace and stability of the Sahel region. The Council may further stress on the need for close coordination and complementarity of efforts between the sub-regional, regional and international actors including ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel, ECCAS, the Community of Sahel-Saharan Countries (CEN-SAD), Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC), AU, UN, and other international partners with the view to effectively manage the withdrawal process. In relation to addressing the multiple challenges facing the Sahel region in holistic manner, as indicated in the Concept Note prepared for tomorrow's session, the Council may call for the need to develop a comprehensive and integrated strategy by the AU, ECOWAS, ECCAS, UN, EU and neighboring countries for the Sahel region. In light of the growing threats posed by the departure of foreign forces from Libya, the illicit flow of arms and high mobility of armed groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin regions, the Council is expected to urge member states of the regions to effectively utilize the existing security

arrangements in the region including the G5 Sahel Force as well as the Multi-National Joint Task Force, as well as AU's Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA).