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Partnership for Peace, Prosperity and People Keynote Address Excerpts

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Looking back on the past year, the situation in the Middle East is still uncertain and fluid, fraught with a mix of old and new problems. As we are witnessing a daunting array of challenges, we are also seeing rays of hope in certain areas.

As a country that has a large stake in the developments in the Middle East, Korea is keeping a close eye on the situation on the ground.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains as intractable and elusive as ever. Over the last few weeks, the clash between Israel and Palestine is making headlines again.

The Syrian conundrum seems to enter into a deeper quagmire and we still do not see the light at the end of the tunnel. Moreover, the spread of violent extremism like ISIL has further complicated the situation. The expanding phenomenon of "foreign terrorist fighters" adds a new dimension to the complexity.

The mass exodus of refugees from Syria, as exemplified by the tragic death of the young child Aylan Kurdi, is posing a serious security threat to neighboring countries, Europe and beyond. This surge of Syrian refugees has pushed the number of global refugees to 60 million, making it the greatest humanitarian refugee crisis since World War II, according to the UNHCR.

Protracted instability in those countries in transition, such as Libya, Iraq and Yemen, are having far-reaching impacts throughout the region.

I do not want to be a forecaster of stormy weather, so I will repeat the time-honored adage that there is a silver lining in every cloud.

Tunisia, the epicenter of the Arab Spring, was the success story in peaceful political transformation. I hope the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the National Dialogue Quartet will inspire other countries in transition.

As I said just now, the current refugee crisis is no doubt of unprecedented scale and urgency. However, the international community can turn this challenge into an opportunity.

UNHCR High Commissioner Guterres has said, quote, "[The Syrian refugee problem] is not a crisis of numbers. Instead it is a crisis of responsibility, and more fundamentally, a crisis of values," unquote. As there is no one-size-fits-all solution, we should take a comprehensive and holistic approach to resolve this urgent global challenge.

In this regard, world leaders are mustering their political will to find a comprehensive solution to the Syrian conflict.

A Landmark agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue was reached after many years of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran. While there are diverse views about the deal, this demonstrated the importance of close international cooperation and persistent efforts to reach a negotiated settlement. From our stand point, the Iranian nuclear deal has raised international attention towards the North Korean nuclear issue. It was in this context that the leaders of Korea and the United States recently agreed to address the North Korean nuclear problem with utmost urgency and determination.

From refugee crisis to violent extremism, from domestic instability to socio-economic underdevelopment, what we are seeing in some parts of the Middle East is affecting other corners of the globe. In such a highly-connected world, no one is free from their impacts. Given the growing ties between our two regions, Korea also immediately feels the heat of unfolding events in the Middle East.

One good example is the recent case of MERS.

Earlier this year, the nation-wide outbreak of MERS was an untold health security threat to Korea. Fortunately, we were able to quickly overcome this crisis in close coordination with the WHO, U.S. and Saudi Arabian health authorities. Korea's experience of overcoming MERS received the spotlight as a success story. This experience led Korea to announce the "Safe Life for All" Initiative at the Second High-level Meeting of the Global Health Security Agenda held in Seoul last month. This project aims at assisting capacity building in health security for developing countries.

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Almost one year ago, I spoke at this Forum in Jordan. At that time, I suggested five points for stronger partnership between Korea and the Middle East. First, new economic partnership tailor-made for the post-oil age second, increased contribution to Middle East peace third, heart-to-heart diplomacy with particular focus on people-to-people and cultural exchanges fourth, strengthened cooperation with regional mechanisms and fifth, promotion of strategic communication through diverse means.

As part of our endeavors to translate these policies into action, President Park Geun-hye toured the Middle East last March for the first time since her inauguration.

The partnership that we wish to build can be characterized by three "I"s : "Involved", "Innovative" and "Interactive."

First are our efforts for stronger "Involvement."

Over the last few years, Korea has been expanding its contributions for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Korea's Cheong-hae ("Blue Sea") naval unit is participating in international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. During the height of instability in Libya in 2014, our naval vessel assisted in evacuation operations of civilians. Our Dong-myung unit is conducting reconstruction activities in Lebanon and the Akh Unit is assisting the UAE in building its capacity for national defense.

Korea is also investing in building stronger ties with major regional organizations. We held the first Ministerial level Korea-GCC Strategic Dialogue on the margins of the UN General Assembly in late September. We also held the Korea-Arab League Foreign Minister Meeting.

Humanitarian diplomacy is taking a larger role in our Middle East policy. For the last couple of years, my government has provided about 40 million U.S. dollars to help Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Yemen. Immediately following my visit to Za' atari Refugee Camp in December last year, my government pledged 10 million U.S. dollars for humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees. This was our single largest humanitarian project to date.

In the past few years, Korea has granted humanitarian status to 620 Syrian refugees to reside in Korea. They are beneficiaries of our refugee law enacted in 2013, the first in Asia. ?

Furthermore, we are actively taking part in the anti-ISIL coalition, including two Working Groups, for Stabilization and Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs). Korea has pledged one million U.S. dollars to the Stabilization Working Group.

Second is expanding our "innovative" partnership.

Four decades ago, Korean construction companies started their first participation in building the infrastructure of Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia. Since that time, the landscape of the Middle East has been transformed by Korean construction companies, as in the case of Burj Al Arab. The construction boom in the Middle East was one of the driving forces of the "Miracle on the Han River" since the early 70s.

Currently, the Sheik Jaber Bridge in Kuwait, which will become the world's longest bridge upon completion, is being built by a Korean firm. During her visit to the construction site, President Park stated that this bridge will be a symbol of cooperation linking our two regions.

As the Middle East transforms itself into a post-oil low-carbon economy, Korea can be an optimal partner for win-win cooperation. As I stated at last year's Forum, Korea is willing to work with those countries who wish to share our experiences.

Cooperation in health and medical services, nuclear reactors and IT will provide new engines for growth. The Khalifa Hospital, which is operated by Seoul National University Hospital, was opened last February. This hospital is hailed as a regional hub for high-tech medical service. The Baraka Nuclear Plant being built by Korea is the first in the Gulf region. We are discussing the export of our E-government system to Middle Eastern countries.

The last is heart-to-heart "interaction."

The Korean Wave continues to gain popularity and K-pop festivals are hot tickets in the region. The Korea-Arab Friendship Caravan, inspired by the Muslim merchants of the Silk Road, now carries Korean culture to the Middle East and vice-versa.

Peple-to-people exchanges between our regions are on the rise. According to the Passport Power Index, Korea is ranked second in the world, following the U.S. and UK, for having the largest number of visa-free destinations. Last year, a popular Korean TV drama filmed in Jordan raised the Korean public's interest towards the region.

The opening of Korean Language Departments in Ain Shams University in Egypt and the University of Jordan are welcome developments. And for me it was a pleasant surprise to learn that one out of five Korean high school students learn Arabic, the language of the Quran, as their second foreign language.

To enhance the understanding of Korean culture in the Middle East, we will continue to open cultural

centers, in addition to the one in Cairo and the one planned in UAE, to serve as bridges between our regions.

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Some pundits say that at the heart of the region' s security dilemma is a clash of visions and that the Middle East region as a whole is now in the middle of searching for a new equilibrium. Whether we agree with this or not, we believe the answer ultimately lies in humanity and human dignity.

At the 70th UN General Assembly, President Park presented our vision for an enduring partnership towards humanity. In this regard, human dignity can serve as the bond that will bind us, Korea and the Middle East, stronger together.

Throughout our history, Korea and the Middle East have had a lot in common. For millennia, the Middle East region was a beacon of knowledge and a cradle of invention. Korea has also nurtured a flourishing culture that was connected to the Middle East by the Silk Road in ancient times..

Yet, the modern history of both regions has been rife with geopolitical challenges. As we both continue to overcome these hardships, Korea and the Middle East should work together in solidarity.

Rain or shine, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." Korea and the Middle East will embark on a new journey as trusted Rafiq, or companion, towards our better future.

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