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Report – Soft Launch

“Centre for Middle East & Africa”

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The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a Soft Launch of its new Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA) on April 30, 2020. Additional Secretary Africa, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, Mr. Ali Javed, and Director General Middle East, Syed Zahid Raza were also present on the occasion.

Amina Khan Director CMEA, in her opening remarks expressed deep gratitude to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, and thanked Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry for giving her the opportunity to head the newly established CMEA. Introducing the Centre and her team, she stated that several countries in the world face concerns that call for shared responsibility and collective action, but at the same time it is also imperative to study different regions and countries in order to better understand their respective challenges and responsibilities.

In the case of Pakistan, it is important that research becomes focused on regions that are significant for Pakistan's foreign policy, and also on those that are ignored despite repeated slogans of their high potential, such as the ME&A region which is of immense importance for Pakistan. Hence, realizing this importance and keeping this perspective in mind, the Institute under the able leadership of its Director General, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, has decided to establish the Centre for Middle East & Africa (CMEA). As is evident from the name, CMEA aims to promote and provide quality research, analysis, policy input and dialogue on issues related to the Middle East and Africa, two very important regions as envisaged in Pakistan's foreign policy. Fostering closer comprehensive ties with Muslim countries in the Middle East and identifying areas of mutual interest between Pakistan and Africa in keeping with Pakistan's 'Engage Africa' policy are key priorities that underline the vision of CMEA.

She further stated that in addition to studying political issues, CMEA will focus on the potential for economic cooperation, cultural sharing, and potential for collaborations on other fronts such as multilateral forums. Moreover, CMEA also seeks to constitute an Advisory Board, consisting of experts from academia, think tanks, former diplomats, government and official departments that would guide, inform and enhance the quality of outreach that CMEA aims to obtain.

With such cross-cutting research, it is anticipated and hoped that Pakistan's policymakers will find CMEA a useful and effective partner, and an avenue that can be used to establish greater

understanding and collaboration with the ME&A region. She also stated that in these testing times of social distancing, CMEA's focus will be on conducting webinars and online events where scholars, researchers and experts from around the globe will be invited to present their views on issues related to politics, economy and security of Middle Eastern and African regions.

She then invited Ms. Arhama Siddiq, Research Fellow CMEA, ISSI to give a power point presentation introducing vision and functions of CMEA and to give an overview of CMEA's program of work for the current year.

Arhama Siddiq, Research Fellow, CMEA briefed the participants on the role, functions and vision of CMEA. She said that the **functions of the Centre are to:**

Observe latest developments in the Middle East and Africa and their significance for Pakistan and the international community.

Contribute in-depth research and analysis of issues related to the Middle East and Africa, particularly issues of overlapping and mutual interest to Pakistan with the aim to strengthen regional and state level ties.

Organize and promote dialogue and debate on political, security, economic, and social aspects of the Middle East and Africa countries, with the focus on relevance for Pakistan; and to identify areas of convergence through national and international seminars, conference, roundtables and workshops.

Maintain a data bank of the salient aspects of the Middle East and Africa countries for ready reference.

Establish contacts with relevant experts, practitioners, organizations and think tanks of ME&A regions.

Disseminate publications of the Centre widely through research projects, articles, reports, papers, monographs, books, newsletters as well as a weekly monitor on the latest developments.

She also briefed that for 2020, the Centre plans to work on one major event to formally inaugurate CMEA, as well as organize national and international conferences, seminars, public talks, in-house and roundtable discussions and workshops.

Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry congratulated the CMEA team and the research faculty at the soft launch of the new Centre. He narrated how the vision for establishing CMEA first came from the Honourable Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi when he initiated Pakistan's 'Engage Africa' Policy. He also held a meeting at Nairobi discussing this ground breaking outreach program following which, a 10% increase in Pakistan's exports to Africa has been noted. Ambassador Chaudhry noted that with reference to the idea of combining the Africa with the Middle East, it was felt that there was a natural overlap between the two regions, particularly ME and North Africa. It was only logical since in this manner a larger pool of experts will be engaged who can combine their expertise and resources for better cooperation.

The Government of Pakistan, he informed, is working on establishing ties with the African countries as a top priority. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi is very keen in this respect. This in itself symbolizes the importance the African region has for Pakistan. Likewise, he said, the Middle East has always been of extreme significance to Pakistan due to its historic and religious commonalities with our country as well as a long history of friendly ties with almost all countries in the region. He hoped that CMEA would deliver on this front and work closely with the government in this regard.

In his remarks Mr. Ali Javed, Additional Secretary Africa, MOFA said that having taken up the Africa assignment only two months ago; it is already quite evident that the African region has been dealt with negligence. He said that the success of any outreach program depends on the key role played by the civil society. With regards to Africa, he said that Pakistan has a very special relationship with the African countries. However, the full potential of this friendship has not yet been achieved. He emphasized the importance of maintaining ties and refreshing contacts with communities in Africa via Pakistani embassies and missions in different countries.

He stressed on the significance of keeping in touch with the alumni from the region trained at the Foreign Service Academy (FSA) in Islamabad to translate the relationship into concrete benefits

for all sides. He spoke of the shortcoming and gaps in communication, coverage and cooperation that undermine the significance and efforts of joint events and outreach programs, for example in the coverage and report of Pakistan-Africa Trade Conference in Nairobi that was held a few months ago. He hoped that CMEA would play its role in covering these gaps.

Taking stock of the lost opportunities, he said Pakistan in the past stood shoulder-to-shoulder with African countries in their fight against apartheid, but to keep that memory fresh is the real challenge. MOFA, other ministries and Pakistan's missions in Africa have to come together with this CMEA to work efficiently. He said work in this regard needs to be done in a less traditional manner to keep abreast of the rapidly changing times which will mean utilization of new channels and tools of communication and cooperation.

He said a scientific approach will have to be taken in order to collect data and statistics in a more organized manner. Another oft ignored aspect of outreach to Africa has been publicity of the events that we hold as well as an intelligent follow-up of agreements, initiatives and decisions announced on these occasions. He said that CMEA would hopefully be extremely helpful to the Africa Division at MOFA in this regard. He also suggested that CMEA's formal launch must be an elaborate affair with widespread media coverage unlike the Nairobi event. He also spoke of the importance of celebrating 'Pakistan-Africa Friendship Day', the need for greater facilitation of information between different government departments and expressed his hope that CMEA would deliver in this regard.

Syed Zahid Raza, Director General Middle East, MOFA expressed his gratitude and congratulated ISSI for launching CMEA. He stated that Middle East is an interesting area in which we have a lot of interest not only in terms of political, defense, and economic ties but also with reference to our diaspora residing over there. He stressed that with respect to Middle East, finding a balanced approach towards the individual countries and towards the Middle East region as a whole is very challenging. The interplay among all regional countries is very interesting and demanding. We need to deal with the region very carefully to safeguard our interests which are based broadly on our dependence on power supply, trade, and the diaspora which is residing in these countries. Moreover the religious affinity with the Middle Eastern countries has a major role in our ties with the region.

He stated that in order to formulate our foreign policy towards Middle East and individual countries, we seek support and input from ISSI. Along with this, we should be prepared to deal with the aftermath of coronavirus because more people will be coming back to the country after this. So we need to have preemption of future challenges to formulate the policy. For this, we look forward for constructive engagement with ISSI and CMEA team.

Ambassador Khalid Mahmood Chairman BOG, ISSI, in his concluding remarks stated that this is a happy occasion for the Institute. He also highlighted how over the years, Pakistan has helped African countries especially during their period of decolonization. The African continent is one which is increasing in importance. He said that CMEA should develop greater linkages with African community in Pakistan and keep them abreast of all developments pertaining to Pakistan-African relations.