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**SUMMARY OF THE PREPARATORY STAGES FOR THE AGREEMENT
ON INTERNATIONAL ROADS IN THE ARAB MASHREQ**

1. Because international transport is essential to commercial exchange operations, the issue of the facilitation of transport, and of transboundary transport in particular, has acquired additional significance in the light of contemporary developments such as globalization, the increasing number of calls for the formation of regional economic blocs, the establishment of free trade zones and the consequent work involved in reducing obstacles to international commercial traffic.
2. States members of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), meeting in the twentieth session of the Commission on 27 and 28 May 1999 in Beirut, therefore issued a declaration in which it was agreed that work should start on the development of an integrated transport system in the Arab Mashreq (ITSAM), and that an integrated transport network should be adopted by the ESCWA Committee on Transport as the first step towards that system.
3. The ITSAM network is the guiding vision for the integration of the various means of transport. The aim is to form the roads of the States of the ESCWA region into a network with a view to encouraging intraregional traffic on the one hand and, on the other, to linking those States with neighbouring regions and serving international and transit commerce.
4. All transport-related activities in ESCWA are aimed at facilitating the flow of commodity transportation systems and the travel of persons using a regional network. In order to achieve this goal, the secretariat is focusing on a range of issues that include the harmonization of specifications for the basic transport infrastructure. The Commission resolved to work on the harmonization of regional road network specifications by preparing an agreement on international roads in the Arab Mashreq.
5. To this end, the ESCWA secretariat prepared the first working paper on the draft agreement and submitted it to the Expert Group Meeting on Harmonization of Transport Norms and Legislative Instruments for Regional Cooperation in the ESCWA Region, including EDIFACT, held in Beirut from 16 to 18 November 1999.
6. On the basis of the recommendations made by that meeting and the views of member States and, in particular, the Ministry of Transport of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Ministry of Transportation of Palestine, ESCWA prepared the first version of the draft agreement in May 2000.
7. This draft was sent to the relevant ministers in member States for their consideration and comments. It was also sent to the Office of Legal Affairs in the Secretariat of the United Nations in New York for consideration of the legal aspects of the agreement's articles. The outcome was the second version of the draft agreement, which was issued in September 2000.

8. The second draft was submitted to the Expert Group Meeting on Coordination of Transport Policies to Facilitate Transboundary Flows within the Global Context, held in Beirut from 26 to 28 September 2000. At the meeting, regional working papers were presented on the degree of conformity between the draft agreement and what was being applied in various member States. In addition to the oral statements that were made, written statements on the draft were presented by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic, and a second exhaustive discussion of it was held. The participants expressed their appreciation of the endeavours that had been exerted in order to produce the draft. After three days of discussions, the experts recommended that the requested amendments should be made to the articles and annexes of the agreement.

9. The amended articles of the agreement were again sent to the Office of Legal Affairs in the Secretariat of the United Nations in New York, which made its opinions and comments available in December 2000. In consequence, the third version of the draft agreement was prepared and sent that same month to all the relevant ministers in the region as one of the documents submitted to the second session of the Committee on Transport, which was held in Beirut on 6 and 7 February 2001. States were requested to authorize their delegations to the Committee on Transport to approve the agreement.

10. After consideration of the written proposals submitted by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and exhaustive discussions conducted by experts from all the countries concerned, in which representatives of the Office of Legal Affairs in the Secretariat of the United Nations in New York and the ESCWA Committee on Transport also participated, and once additional amendments had been made, the Committee on Transport prepared the technical aspects of the draft agreement.

11. Certain delegations gave notice that they had not been authorized to approve the agreement. Having discussed the matter, the Committee decided to recommend that the final form of the agreement should be submitted for adoption to the twenty-first session of ESCWA, to be held from 8 to 11 May 2001. It could then be opened for signature on 1 August 2001.

12. Preparation of this agreement therefore took more than 18 months and involved a complete review of all the agreements and specifications on international roads adopted by the Economic Commission for Europe, Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), League of Arab States and Gulf Cooperation Council, in addition to the agreements and specifications actually applied in the majority of member States. By the time the fourth version of the draft agreement was prepared, all the written and other views and proposals put forward by member States were reflected. After exhaustive discussions had been held at three regional meetings, the last of which was the second session of the Committee on Transport referred to above, and the foremost experts on transport and roads in the region had been brought together, including States' delegates to and representatives at those meetings, the agreement was ready for adoption at the twenty-first session of ESCWA.

13. This agreement, the first to be adopted by the Commission, may be considered as the beginning of a long period of sustained endeavours to keep up with what has been achieved by other regional Commissions: the Economic Commission for Europe, for example, has concluded 54 transport-related agreements covering many transport-related issues.
