

142nd Bergedorf Round Table

Conflict Management in the Middle East: Regional Solutions for Regional Problems?

March 20–22, 2009, Beirut

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

This summary contains those points of the discussion that we consider to be of particular importance in the current policy debate. An edited and authorized version of the whole discussion will be published in 142nd Bergedorf Protocol.

I. Conflicts in the Middle East

US and Iran

Many participants asked the US and Iran to enter into direct talks. However, it was noted that they should not start before the Iranian elections in 2009. Also, direct talks bore considerable risks of worsening relations between both countries: If Iran declined US offers to talk, the US needed to take negative steps and if talks failed, the situation would worsen, too. As a precondition for a rapprochement, Washington and Tehran should change their vocabulary of “carrot and stick” and “the great satan” and had to recognize each other. Some claimed that talks should start at low governmental levels and with tackling issues where interests of both countries coincided, such as Afghanistan, energy or drug trafficking. Others stressed that talks needed to address the difficult issues within a strategic framework from the very beginning in order to prevent the failure of talks when unexpected incidents occurred. Also, it was stressed that for the Gulf states, the peace process in the region was no exclusive US-Iranian issue; they feared that the US would give Iran too big concessions.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

One participant demanded that all parties—the US, Iran, the Arabs, and Israel—had to agree on moving ahead on the basis of an explicit commitment to the equal and simultaneous rights of all parties; the weakness of past mediations had been to take Israel’s security concerns as a starting point. Furthermore, the rights of the refugees from 1948 had to be acknowledged—a major concern for Hamas—and the settlements had to be stopped. The US and Europe were asked by some to exert pressure on Israel to engage in a peace process. Another participant said the only viable outcome was a two-state solution. He presented five priorities for any peace process: (1) Implementing the post-Gaza ceasefire. (2) Dealing with the humanitarian aftermath of the Gaza situation. (3) Rewarding the Palestinians in the West Bank for not having become violent against Israel

like Hamas in Gaza. (4) Implementing the Road Map. (5) Establishing a framework or a plan to negotiate. However, others doubted whether all these proposals would be workable: Everything had been tried to come to a solution, but without success; a two-state solution was not implementable, because it was not really accepted either on the Israeli or the Palestinian side; all five points suggested were contested.

II. Regional Actors

Turkey

There was agreement that Turkey had been a successful mediator in the region—some thought this was because the Islamic AKP government had credibility, and some thought this was because it was not a party to any conflicts. Others said that Turkey’s mediation role disguised the fact that it was a party. Yet others argued that a mediator could be both biased and effective; e.g. everybody calls for US mediation in the Middle East even though they knew that the US is biased. Two limitations to the Turkish role were identified: the Kurdish question and the fact that another government would not engage so actively in regional conflict management. The Islamic dimension of the current Turkish government was the reason why many actors accepted Turkey as a mediator—this could change with another government. Also, participants doubted whether Turkey could remain an important mediator in the future, because it lacked real influence over important actors such as Hamas or Hezbollah.

The Arab League, Qatar and Egypt

Whereas many criticized the Arab League to be weak, others emphasized that its attempts to mediate in Lebanon and Somalia had been constructive but undermined by the US and France. The strength of the Arab League was that it talked to everybody relevant to the conflict, its weakness that it was a voluntary organization dependent on political will. It was positive that it had no agenda. Also, participants demanded for the Arabs to enter into direct talks with Israel and to develop a peace strategy. Without talks with Israel, the Arab Peace Initiative could never be implemented. Until now, the only successful mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict had been accomplished by the US—regional actors had played no role. Participants disagreed on Qatar’s future role in mediation. Some thought that it only had the money and the political will to mediate but not the manpower and the institutions to sustain long regional intervention; others stressed its good relations with Iran and Syria and its reputation of being frank with everybody and were less sceptical about its future role as a mediator. Egypt was estimated to be a weakened actor that was now being forced to act on an agreement regarding the Palestinian issue, because it was the only player that could speak to both parties.

Non-state Actors

There was dissent about the significance of non-state actors such as Hamas or Hezbollah. With regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one participant asked not to focus on Hamas but on the

Palestinian Authority. Governments should talk to governments and to differentiate between the “good” and the “bad” guys within the government would not work. Others highlighted the significance of Hamas and Hezbollah that were “semi-state actors:” They were the most powerful resistance movements in the modern Arab world. Not the Arabs but only they could make peace or war with Israel. A ceasefire or reconstruction in Gaza was not possible without Hamas. Therefore they had to be integrated. It was emphasized that for Hezbollah, it would be possible to meet with officials from Europe—even if Europe had to review its Middle East policy—but not with US officials. In this regard, it was stressed that the difficulty was not to meet with Hamas or Hezbollah but to negotiate with them.

III. External Actors

The US

Participants disagreed on the US role in the region. Some saw it losing in influence and being unable to address the important issues; to foster peace agreements in the Middle East, the EU, Russia and China had to step in under the UN umbrella. Others objected that US power was not diminishing and that there was still no way around it. Also, there was dissent about what may be expected from the Obama administration. Some hoped that now the US would change its approach to the region: Instead of trying to win the conflicts against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, it would give diplomacy and politics the chance to resolve them. With Obama, the US should approach peace in the Middle East with initiatives like Carter’s Camp David Accords in 1978 or Bush’s Madrid Conference in 1991. As Obama sought regional solutions, he wanted to integrate Iran. However, others feared that the new administration would not change their policy or show more leadership than the Bush administration. Obama would spend a lot of time considering his re-election and the Middle East was no issue for re-election. Also, the difficulties in developing a US Middle East strategy have existed since the end of the Cold War and not only since the Bush administration; the goal of regime change in Iran and a comprehensive US embargo had been adopted under Clinton and not Bush.

The EU and China

Most participants agreed that Europe was a weak player in the Middle East. However, some highlighted that the EU had provided the intellectual underpinnings for conflict resolution in the region and that it had played an important role in facilitating conflict management in the past. Like the EU, China did not want to assume a proactive role in the Middle East, which proved that economic strength did not automatically translate into influence.

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