

The 148th Bergedorf Round Table

Transition in the Arab World: Implications for Gulf Security

11–13 March 2011, Muscat, Oman

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

This executive summary contains the salient points of the discussion at the 148th Bergedorf Round Table in Muscat, Oman. The discussion took place against an extraordinary backdrop of sweeping changes engulfing the Middle East.

In view of the profound changes gripping the Gulf region, the initial focus of the Round Table to discuss traditional security issues had shifted to discussions on the socio-political challenges facing the region, and pertinent issues such as the ongoing conflict in Libya.

I. Responses to the Political Upheavals

There was a consensus among the participants that the unfolding political upheavals in the region were motivated by the demands of the masses for **social equality and political participation**. The ‘unorganised changes’ were being led by the middle-class and not the have-nots. Arab participants underlined that the unrests were not the result of Islamic ideology, Palestine conflict, Pan-Arabism or Anti-Westernism. Instead, the masses were agitating for greater participation in the political process. Some participants went so far as to suggest that the biggest loser of the uprisings in the region would be the Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism.

Participants were cautiously optimistic about the prospects of the region’s transformation. Nonetheless, some participants wondered whether new governments in **Tunisia** or **Egypt** which did not have more resources than the old regimes could deliver to the people’s needs and aspirations. More ominously, some participants also expressed concerns that the incitements could break into sectarian conflicts in the region.

Noting the Arab world had debated on the issue of political and social reforms in the past 20 years, Arab participants recognised the need to step up human resource development, to combat corruption and to instil good governance in the region in order to build an inclusive society. There was a consensus that **strengthening regional cooperation**—in partnership with the international community—was pivotal to regional stability in the Gulf.

II. The Role of the International Community

Opinions were divided on whether there should be external interference or whether the international community should adopt a **hands-off approach**. Arab participants emphasised that it would be best left to the region to address the socio-political upheavals. Other participants added that

military intervention if any would not be a panacea for greater regional stability because regime changes might not necessarily engender social and economic progress. Also, the international community should exercise patience to enable the region to find their way out of this turmoil.

In response to suggestions by Arab participants that the West should produce solutions to support Gulf's stability, several Western participants said that this was the time for the Arab world to galvanise itself to develop **regional solutions** for the social problems arising from the unrest. Highlighting that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was the centre of the Arab world with political clout and soft power, GCC would be well placed to respond effectively to the ongoing regional turmoil. Western participants emphasised that the Arab world would need to contribute and play a more active role in the region if it wished to solicit greater support and the involvement of the international community.

Mired in domestic economic distress, Western participants reminded the Arab participants that the **West had limited bandwidth** to support the political reforms in the region. Fiscal pressure in the US had already led to debates on US military commitments globally, and questions on why the US had to keep international sea lanes safe for the rest of the world which did not directly benefit the US. It was therefore likely that the US would reduce its level of military presence globally and in the Gulf region. In view of the potential reduction of the **US military presence** in the Gulf region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had invited France to establish a naval base in the country. Western participants therefore argued that the Gulf states should adjust to the new paradigm shift in the West and not to expect the Western world to solve the problems of the region.

There were dissenting views on whether more **financial support** from the international community was needed in order to address the underlying social problems in the region. Some participants agreed that greater financial support from both within and outside of the region could resolve social issues. As part of the Western assistance to support Arab's transition process, it was suggested that the West should grant **greater market access** to states in North Africa. Other participants cautioned against "throwing at problems". The issues of high unemployment and mismatch of skill sets which was the result of the failure of the education system to meet the market demands were structural problems that could not be solved by money alone. Instead, some participants believed that greater **education and economic reforms** were needed to mitigate the social challenges.

Noting the large presence of India diaspora in the Gulf region, most participants agreed that **India** has a role to play to safeguard security in the Gulf. Participants commented that there was already a deep level of trust between India and the Gulf region because of the presence of sizeable Indian population in the region, and that India was home to the second largest Shia population in the world. Nonetheless, India would need to balance its relations between Iran and the GCC. While the GCC was economically more important to India, Iran was an equally significant partner, as Iran provided energy security and served as a transit country for India.

Likewise, it was pointed out that **China** also had a stake in the Gulf region because of mutual interests. China's position had always been guided by the principle of non-interference and thus had only played an advisory role in the Gulf region, as in Sudan and Myanmar, or when it brokered the six-party talks between DPRK and South Korea. China would focus its involvement bilaterally and less on the regional level. Pointing to the fact that 100 million Chinese people

continued to live in poverty, China therefore valued global and domestic stability and peace because this would enable China to focus efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the lives of its peoples.

III. Intervention in Libya?

Supporting external intervention in Libya, most Arab participants said that actions against Muammar al-Gaddafi would be ‘highly popular in the Arab streets, and any **help for the rebels** will be most welcome.’ One participant went further to suggest that the ongoing Libyan conflict was genocide, and called for the West to intervene. Another participant said that the international community ‘would have to be with the people, and we have to run very fast.’ There were strong views among the Arab participants that a **victory by Gaddafi** in the ongoing saga could inspire other dictators to crush their detractors with force. As such, there was a consensus among the Arab participants that foreign intervention would be viewed favourably if it was supported by regional states and it helped to prevent human rights violations.

Highlighting that past interventions including Iraq and Afghanistan and more specifically the no-fly-zones in Bosnia and Iraq had not produced favourable outcomes, some participants argued against a **no-fly zone** in Libya. Also, experiences had demonstrated that no-fly-zones were often used to conduct reconnaissance work, which formed the basis for further military escalation. Participants criticised plans to put Muammar al-Gaddafi on trial at the **International Court of Justice**. This could close the window of opportunity for Gaddafi to exit gracefully from the scene.

Western participants observed that should media coverage of Gaddafi’s incursions in Libya continue to intensify and Gaddafi’s forces successfully attacked the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, this might exert enormous **pressure on Western politicians** to take actions that would place a severe financial strain on Western governments. Given GCC had the military capabilities and experiences participating in international peacekeeping activities in Afghanistan and the region, participants urged the **Arab world to play a more active role** in resolving the Libyan conflict and to demonstrate its willingness to contribute substantially to any military intervention.

IV. Iran and the Nuclear Dimension of Regional Security

Participants expressed scepticism on the real objectives of Iran’s nuclear program. Acknowledging that Iran was part of the strategic reality in the Gulf region, it was pointed out that Iran’s behaviour was a major issue to regional stability, and no regional security system could be established without mutual trust and confidence. Most participants agreed that while the international community should seek to take **Iran’s security concerns** seriously, Iran would need to demonstrate its good faith as a regional neighbour before being invited to play a bigger role in regional and international affairs.

Participants from the region urged the West and the US, in particular, to play a more transparent role in enforcing a **nuclear free zone** in the Gulf region. Ongoing US support for Israel’s nu-

clear capabilities could only harden Iranian nuclear stance and trigger a regional arms race. US double-standards approach which involved calling for nuclear disarmament in Iran and the enhancement of Israeli capabilities was untenable. Other participants suggested that international negotiations with Iran on nuclear issues should involve Arab representations. Another participant welcomed the idea of China playing a mediating role in the US–Iran relations.

Imprint

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