

153RD BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE

Istanbul, 24 – 26 May 2013

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS – WHAT FUTURE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

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Executive Summary

- In the Middle East the old regional order is falling apart. Borders are going to have to be redrawn. Non-state actors are becoming more important.
- In Egypt there is still no consensus about the rules of the political game.
- The Geneva Conference on Syria may turn out to be a failure as various participants, among them first and foremost Russia and the US, are pursuing different goals.
- In the Middle East Turkey is increasingly coming up against the limits of its current foreign policy approach.
- The influence of Europe and the US in the region is on the wane. The smaller Gulf States are stepping in to fill the vacuum.

Are We Now in an Arab Winter?

Only a few Round Table participants were optimistic about what is happening in the Arab world. In fact, most of the assembled foreign and security policy decision-makers and experts painted a rather dismal picture of the current state of affairs.

“DO WE HAVE TO ACCEPT THAT NON-DEMOCRATIC LEADERS ARE ELECTED IN DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS?”

The initial euphoria about the changes in the Arab world has given way to disenchantment.

The political situation continues to be unstable. The economy in the states affected by the turmoil is devastating, and youth employment has risen in a quite alarming way. Furthermore, the recently elected governments in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya have not as yet managed to solve these problems.

Developments in Egypt and the Role of Political Islam

One of the participants voiced the opinion that in Egypt the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) has not displayed a great deal of political acumen. After the FJP’s electoral victory Mursi had not tried to meet the opposition halfway, and was attempting to implement his own agenda in a completely uncompromising manner.

There is a lack of reform initiatives. This was especially noticeable in the economic realm. In the medium term this would curtail the FJP’s room for manoeuvre. The economic stalemate was a source of social discontent. Current policymaking was seen in a negative light by the neighbouring states in general and the Gulf monarchies in particular. Furthermore, the political leadership was becoming increasingly isolated within Egypt itself. Neither the armed forces, nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, nor the judiciary supported the Muslim Brotherhood.

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The attainment of social justice was one of the main revolutionary goals of the Arab Spring. As one of the participants pointed out, large sections of Egyptian society were interested in how one could live a normal life, and not in Muslim exegesis.

Participants from the region emphasized that all of the parties involved still had to learn the rules of the democratic game. Respect or lack of respect for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities showed whether or not democratic elections were merely a political fig leaf and nothing else, and whether or not genuine pluralism was

no more than a figment of the imagination.

“EGYPT IS NOT ‘TOO BIG TO FAIL’ – IT IS TOO BIG TO BE SAVED BY OTHERS.”

Hitherto the Egyptian opposition has not managed to work together,

or to give the impression that it is a viable alternative to the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood. There was a great deal of frustration. Some of the participants noted despondently that there was now little or no interest in talking to the FJP. People were waiting for the party to fail. However, no one knew what might happen if this actually turned out to be the case.

It has become apparent that if the Muslim Brotherhood proves to be a failure in Egypt, this could change the role of politi-

cal Islam throughout the region, and might in fact strengthen the salafist groups.

Thus the West in general and Europe in particular should state quite unequivocally that they are not going to condone or support the idea of achieving stability by curtailing the freedom of Egyptian society, which is what happened in the Mubarak era. Some of the participants believed that liberal organizations and groups in Egypt should be given political support and significant economic assistance. This could enhance the credibility of the West in the region, and in the long term help to prevent the radicalization of its societies.

The War in Syria

The first speaker of the session pointed out that the war in Syria had completely destroyed the country’s economic structures, and its social cohesion. The participants were unable to reach agreement on the question of whether or not the fate of Bashar al-Assad was still crucial for the outcome of the war. One of the participants believed that there would be a significant shift in the balance of power if Assad were toppled. Another participant disagreed. Assad was of little or no importance, and his influence on the army was virtually non-existent.



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The discussions in Istanbul reflected the general feeling in the West that not much can actually be done about the situation in Syria.

None of the participants thought that the planned international conference in Geneva was going to be a resounding success. Moreover, many of the participants from Europe and the Middle East believed that there should be modest goals, such as a temporary ceasefire and access for humanitarian aid organizations.

“THE GENEVA CONFERENCE ON SYRIA IS DESIGNED TO FAIL.”

Some of the participants were of the opinion that the Geneva conference would provide Russia with a face-saving way of rescinding its obstructive policies. However, other participants thought that Russia was not going to back down. A Syrian participant pointed out that if the Geneva conference turned out to be a failure, this would not persuade the US to change its lukewarm approach to intervention in Syria.

After two years of bloodshed the Assad government continues to function, even though its demise has been proclaimed on numerous occasions. Thus it is time to come up with some pragmatic solutions. Some of the European participants believed that it would be possible to break the mili-

tary stalemate and increase the pressure on Assad by supplying arms to the insurgent groups. A third of the country was to all intents and purposes in the hands of the rebels, and government structures had crumbled and collapsed.

The European participants admitted that the EU Syria policy lacks a clear direction. What Europe should be doing is to try to persuade Russia to adopt a more conciliatory approach in the Security Council.

There were important reasons why Russia wanted to retain its influence in the country. It was not simply about its facilities in Tartus, the last Russian military base outside the territory of the former Soviet Union. As numerous participants were quick to point out, Russia’s current stance was designed to emphasize the fact that it was still a key player in international relations.

The Responsibility of Regional Powers

How can regional powers make a contribution to stability in the Middle East? What responsibility do they have for peace and security in the region?

In this context the spotlight was on Turkey’s special role. Arab participants repeat-



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edly referred to the fact that the Turkish system was a model worthy of emulation. However, the Turkish participants agreed that Turkey should not be seen as a role model.

Some of the participants pointed out that Turkey could not play a leading role in the region because its military capabilities were simply not large enough. And when it came

“TURKEY DOES THE REGIONAL ‘TALK’ BUT IT DOES NOT DO THE ‘WALK’.”

to soft power, Turkey was now less attractive on account of its domestic difficulties.

Erdogan’s Justice and Development

Party (AKP) had become a more or less Sunnite party. One of the participants thought that this was the reason why Turkey had lost some of its credibility when it came to dealing with regional conflicts. These often originated along sectarian lines. The net result of all this was that the nation-state, the traditional actor in international relations, was becoming less important. A Turkish participant bewailed the fact that Western actors tended to underestimate the significance of these developments, and to cling to traditional approaches. He pointed out that there were liberal groups and parties

“ARE THE GULF STATES READY TO RIDE THE TIGERS THAT THEY HAVE UNLEASHED?”

in all of the states in the Middle East. And these were the people we should be supporting.

The changes in the Arab world initiated by the Arab Spring have trans-

formed the role of the Gulf States. Participants from the region were of the opinion that they were now far more involved in the political processes that were shaping the Middle East. The small Gulf monarchies in particular used targeted financial assis-

tance in order to influence the politicians and rulers in the various different countries.

What Role Are Europe and the US Going to Play ?

The participants from the region emphasized that the EU should continue to focus on the provision of technical support for state-building. It was pointed out that there was an urgent need to improve Europe’s conflict prevention and mediation capabilities.

In the medium term people would have to face up to the fact that the US was going to be far

more selective with regard to what it was and was not prepared to do in the region. The Obama administration has said quite clearly that in future the US will align what it does in the area of security policy more strongly than in the past with its economic interests. The US is no longer as dependent as it used to be on energy imports from the Middle East. American economic policy now tends to focus on what is happening in Asia.

Moreover, the Europeans are not very keen on the idea of becoming involved in complex sectarian conflicts. European and American participants agreed that the fall-out from the financial and economic crisis and the cut-backs in spending in Europe and the US limited their room for manoeuvre in the area of foreign policy.

“THE EU IS STRUGGLING AT PUTTING VALUES OVER INTERESTS IN FOREIGN POLICY.”

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Trends 2020. Prospects for the Region

Finally the Round Table participants identified ten regional trends in the period between now and 2020:

1. The distribution of power in the Islamic world in the years to come will be determined by the success or failure of the current forces of political Islam.
2. By 2020 the liberal non-Islamic parties will be much better in organizational terms and in a position to win elections.
3. In the Middle East disintegration along sectarian lines will continue unabated.
4. Nation-states will become less important, whereas non-state actors will become more significant in security policy terms.
5. Water scarcity will be a crucial factor in the emergence of regional conflicts.
6. There will be social pressure for democratization in the Gulf monarchies.
7. Russia will continue to use the political turmoil in the Middle East in order to emphasize its importance in the field of international relations. Whenever Russian interests are at stake in a conflict, it cannot be expected to back down in the Security Council.
8. As they compete for energy resources China and India will exercise greater influence in the Middle East. The Indian diaspora in the Gulf States may well turn out to be of strategic importance.
9. On account of its pivot to Asia the US will act in a far more selective way in the Middle East. This trend will become more pronounced as time goes on.
10. Europe will continue to be preoccupied with its own problems and thus unable to play a central role in the region.



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