

**158TH BERGEDORF ROUND TABLE**

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**CONTAINING THE  
CRISES?  
A NEW QUALITY OF  
DISORDER IN  
THE MIDDLE EAST**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Executive Summary

- A policy approach that focuses on the containment of crises in the Middle East will fail. To prevent further expansion of the conflicts in the region the political, economic and social causes have to be addressed.
- The fact that IS has to be fought constitutes the lowest common denominator for an agreement between states in the region. However, agreement on this topic alone will not be enough to overcome entrenched positions or build sustainable new coalitions.
- Three fundamental issues will have to be settled before a stable order can be formed in the Middle East. (1) Tensions will have to be eased between Saudi Arabia and Iran; (2) a settlement will need to be found for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and (3) regional actors must be willing to create an inclusive regional security structure.

The Middle East is currently facing unprecedented challenges. Nation states are losing their importance and borders are becoming blurred. The Syrian civil war is in its fifth year; Iraq is sinking into chaos, and the Middle East Peace Process has reached an impasse. Moreover, IS terrorist militias currently control significant areas of Iraqi and Syrian territory.

The participants of the Bergedorf Round Table, who came from the Middle East, Europe, the US, Russia and China, agreed that the old order in the Middle East had fallen apart, but that new structures were hardly in sight. At the same time there was agreement that a general commitment to the existing borders would be pivotal for stability in the region. They pointed out that a pure military response would not solve the current conflicts and instead, stressed the need for political strategies that incorporated international and regional actors. Some participants underscored the importance of Europe finally ac-

cepting that common foreign policy towards the region was essential, and that only this could help prevent the effects of the conflict from further spreading to Europe.

## IS and the Appeal of Extremism

The participants viewed the continued successes of the IS militias as particularly alarming. Although participants from the region noted that the rapid advance of IS had been slowed with the help of the international coalition, they viewed the ideological dimension of the conflict as particularly worrisome. IS, they argued, continued to strongly appeal to the younger generation in the Arab states. Numerous participants emphasised that it was the responsibility of the Sunni-Arab states in the region to develop an opposing narrative and regain the authority to

define the meaning of an 'Islamic state'. They repeatedly pointed out that IS dictated the circumstances on the ground, and that other actors were merely responding to the militias instead of taking the initiative.

The participants argued that combatting IS would require more than just an ideological struggle. Furthermore, IS should no longer be allowed to profit from its economic and criminal activities. IS, it was noted, would find it far more difficult to achieve further military successes without recourse to extensive financial resources. Setbacks in its advance could also reduce the militias' attractiveness to the region's younger generation. The participants continued by highlighting intensifying cooperation and exchange of information between the secret services on the regional and international level as a means of facilitating the fight against the terrorist threat posed by IS.

Some participants were encouraged by the point that the fight against IS might represent an opportunity to build new coalitions in the Middle East. Many others, however, warned of exaggerating the strength of the perceived unifying power behind the struggle against IS. The levels of rivalry and mistrust, they countered, were still very strong. Nevertheless, the fact that IS had to be fought was viewed as constituting a "lowest common denominator" for an agreement among states in the Middle East. But it was also clear that IS represented a symptom of the region's underlying problems and not their cause.

## The Humanitarian Dimension of the Crisis in Syria

There was consensus among the participants that the successes gained by IS were particularly due to the on-going civil war in Syria. There was less agreement, however, on the role that should be afforded to Assad. Whereas some participants warned against using the threat posed by IS as a reason to reach out to Assad, other voices stressed that refusing to talk to the Syrian leadership would hardly expedite conflict resolution, and that it was essential that all options be left open.

Numerous participants underlined political inclusion and the participation of minorities in government as key to long-term stability in Syria and Iraq.

Nevertheless, they also warned that these factors had yet to be properly implemented.

Participants from the region criticised the international community's unwillingness to act on Syria. The Syrian civil war, they argued, was of high strategic relevance for Europe, and this meant it would be ill advisable to hide behind the passivity of the US. Furthermore, they pointed to the inestimable scale of the on-going regional humanitarian disaster, and reminded that the full political, economic and demographic magnitude of the current shifts would be felt over the coming decades. This led these participants to argue that national identities would have to be strengthened to prevent further division along ethnic and religious lines. Finally, the return of Syrian refugees was viewed as impossible without a minimum level of security in the country. One participant argued that security could only be guaranteed through

**"POLITICAL INCLUSION IS KEY TO LONG-TERM STABILITY IN SYRIA AND IRAQ."**

the massive use of military force or radical decentralization. Other voices stressed that military intervention in Syria would have to be led by Arab states. Moreover, any such action needed to be flanked by political initiatives, for example, in the form of a Syrian National Congress, or an international conference.

### Regional Power Struggles: Confrontation not Cooperation

One participant described conflict lines in the region as complex and volatile. Iran, it was suggested, sought a more important role in the region; Egypt prioritised the fight against IS over the fear of a strong Iran; and Turkey and Saudi Arabia lacked a regional strategy. Direct confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia was still absent, but increasingly being played out indirectly in the Levant and Yemen.

Over the course of the discussions, it became clear that rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran was unrealistic, even if an easing of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in addition to an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, represented an essential factor in any new regional order. Nevertheless, the Iranians emphasised their will-

ingness to work with Riyadh, particularly on the issue of Syria, and viewed preserving Syrian and Iraqi territorial sovereignty as reflecting Iranian interests. They also regarded the successful negotiation of a final nuclear agreement as opening up new possibilities for Iran's regional role. However, the Saudi Arabian participants emphasised that although they were not fundamentally against a nuclear deal with Iran, an agreement would open the door to regional proliferation of nuclear weapons. Moreover, they made it clear that Saudi Arabia would also expect the same scope for action in the nuclear realm as stipulated within the agreement with Iran. Some European participants interpreted this as a clear sign of dwindling levels of confidence in the security guarantees provided by the United States among the country's traditional partners in the region.

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## The Role of the US and Europe

Ever since military intervention in Iraq, actors in the region have expressed enormous levels of distrust in the US.

One participant, however, explained that although the current administration had no clear strategic vision for the Middle East, the

**“THE MIDDLE EAST HAS GREATER STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE FOR THE EU THAN FOR THE UNITED STATES.”**

US remained committed to its regional partners and the fight against global terrorism. The operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were described as having cast long shadows over US policy and as complicating further US military engagement in the region. Moreover, military intervention was currently being reassessed, as it had rarely led to sustainable successes. Furthermore, intervention had been aimed at maintaining a particular regional order that no longer existed; and a return to the status quo ante was no longer feasible. The US withdrawal from the Middle East was described in terms of a vacuum that various regional players were now attempting to fill. Finally, the EU was also seen as in a position to adopt a more significant role in the Middle East.

Many participants emphasised that geographical proximity meant that the Middle East had greater strategic importance for the EU than for the United States. This was not seen as reflected in European Middle Eastern policy.

European participants admitted that the EU currently pursued a very limited approach in the Middle East. The EU’s main priorities, they explained, were containing IS and solving the nuclear issue with Iran. They also pointed to limited willingness within the EU

to become involved in other conflicts. The EU’s humanitarian aid and selective military support, they argued, was more of a “feel good” strategy than part of a serious regional policy approach.

The participants noted that the threat of instability in the Middle East remained significant. Furthermore, the terrorist attacks in Copenhagen and Paris, as well as the high numbers of refugees pushing towards Europe demonstrated that the EU would finally have to take the situation in the Middle East seriously. Even if the EU’s means of involvement were limited, it could still adopt the role of mediator. The EU was seen as having demonstrated its capacity to advance negotiations in the Iranian nuclear file. However, it was also clear that this capacity was based on the existence of political will in Brussels as well as the capitals of EU member states.

According to one participant, the Middle East viewed the EU as playing no role in the Arab world beyond selective bilateral relations between some individual EU member states and a number of countries in the Middle East. Consequently, the region remained clearly focused on the policies pursued by the US.

Finally, the European participants noted the forthcoming revision of the 2003 European Security Strategy as a good opportunity for debate in Brussels about a new EU Middle Eastern policy.

## Visions of a New Regional Order in the Middle East

Towards the end of the debates, the participants discussed the structural requirements of a new order in the Middle East. These included: (1) political inclusion and civic responsibility; (2) respect for human rights; and (3) economic revitalisation.

One participant argued that establishing a new order in the Middle East required a strong focus on pluralism and transparent governance. Rentier statehood, it was argued, would have to be ended, and effective tax systems needed to be established. These were viewed as essential factors in the construction of modern, sustainable states that could provide their citizens with security and prosperity. Furthermore, decentralization, it was noted, had the potential to contribute towards good governance, and better integrate religious and ethnic minorities in political processes. Ideally, however, decentralization would have to occur without external intervention, and would come about as the result of extensive and inclusive peace negotiations.

In contrast, another participant emphasised that any new order in the region would require increasing awareness of the need for human rights, and particularly among young people in schools and universities. The Arab Spring, the participant reminded, had

demonstrated the existence of this awareness and that it could bring about change from below.

In contrast, other participants believed that a new order could only emerge in the Middle East through economic development. They pointed to a heightened focus on regional economic performance as an essential factor in securing people in the region with a long-term perspective, overcoming youth unemployment and depriving extremist forces such as IS and Al Qaeda of their roots.

In closing, many participants agreed that three minimum requirements would have to be met to provide any new regional order with stability: (1) detente between Saudi Arabia and Iran; (2) a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and (3) a willingness to construct inclusive regional security structures.



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