

Körber Dialogue Middle East

## A New Middle East?

### Policy Options for a Region in Transition

Berlin, 1–2 April 2011

The Körber Dialogue Middle East provides a platform for multilateral discussions on foreign policy and security issues relating to the Middle East. It seeks to bring together representatives of important stakeholders on a regular basis in order to foster an open and policy-oriented exchange of ideas. At the workshop in Berlin, high-ranking foreign policy practitioners and representatives of leading think tanks gathered in order to discuss the unprecedented wave of protest in the Arab world and to explore policy options for regional and extra-regional actors.

This summary contains a selection of individual arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy discussion. It is being distributed to the participants of the Körber Dialogue Middle East and selected policymakers.

## SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

### I. The Rebirth of Political Islam

Several discussants pointed out that **Islamic movements** of all sorts will come **to the fore** in the wake of the uprisings in the Arab world and will have to be dealt with by regional and Western governments alike. In contrast to the mostly weak and fragmented secular opposition, Islamic movements use their densely woven networks of social, educational and charitable organizations to mobilize voters. As in the case of Egypt, the spectrum of Islamic actors will become increasingly diversified. The majority of Islamic groups is likely to adopt a constructive role by being “**a building crane and not a bulldozer**”, as one participant put it.

According to another discussant, the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia proved that societal and political change can be achieved through peaceful means. As a result, the “Bin Laden paradigm” of violent struggle will lose its attractiveness. It was argued that the West should at last accept political Islam as part of the political landscape in the region, while at the same time drawing a clear distinction between moderate Islamic movements and radical forces with a Salafist or Jihadist agenda. Most participants agreed that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not serve as a model for the current wave of protest in the Arab world.

## II. Will Transition Lead to Democracy?

Participants agreed that the massive protest movement which has swept through the Arab world marked an **unprecedented break in the history of the region**. However, they differed with regard to their assessment of the consequences. Some discussants expressed their firm conviction that the current situation in the region is certainly preferable to the status quo ante despite the inherent imponderables. They were of the opinion that the revolutions in Egypt and in Tunisia conferred a sense of empowerment on the peoples of the region. As a consequence, the “republic of fear” concept is no longer effective.

Others warned of an **overly optimistic view of the “Arab revolution”**, maintaining that revolutions do not necessarily produce governments which are better than their predecessors. Some of the participants were concerned that the beneficiaries of the *anciens régimes*, such as the military in Egypt, may seek to undermine the democratization process and to concede no more than cosmetic changes to the political system. Others feared a massive destabilization of the revolutionary countries as in the case of Yemen. One discussant pointed out that the success of revolutions, among other things, also hinges on whether the international community decides to support them.

## III. The Way Ahead in Egypt

One of the participants outlined the **cornerstones of the political process** in Egypt for the next 18 months: parliamentary elections in September 2011; presidential elections by November 2011; establishment of the Constitutional Assembly by March 2012; adoption of new constitution in September 2012.

He described the timeline as challenging, especially for the new political parties which have as yet to consolidate their platforms. In contrast to this, the “Freedom and Justice Party” founded by the Muslim Brotherhood can use the well-organized structures of the latter for voter mobilization. Current opinion polls indicate that the “Freedom and Justice Party” may win up to 30 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections. One of the discussants stated that the Supreme Military Council headed by Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi would probably be willing to transfer power to the civilian authorities, while at the same time trying to retain its foothold in the system.

With regard to the **presidential elections**, the discussion focused on three candidates. On account of his popularity, especially in the rural areas of Egypt, Arab League Secretary General Amro Moussa’s prospects were viewed as being promising. According to one participant, Moussa is said to prefer a presidential republic to a parliamentary system. Despite his commitment to democratization and his vision for the future of Egypt, former IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei’s chances were considered remote because he lacks popular support. While Judge Hisham Al-Bastawisi had excellent credentials, he was seen as a candidate who had no hope of winning the presidential race.

Some participants said that, as a result of the current emphasis on the internal transformation process, **no significant changes in Egyptian foreign policy** are to be expected. However, in the medium-term perspective, Egypt’s relations with Iran, its involvement in the Middle East Peace

Process, especially with regard to the closure of the Gaza Strip, its role in Sub-Saharan Africa and its military cooperation with Israel will have to be subject to a thorough review.

With regard to Egypt's economic situation, one participant maintained that the country's short-term economic prospects are dire. Due to unprecedented losses in the tourism sector since the outbreak of the revolution, the Egyptian economy has suffered a severe setback. As a consequence, the **risk of state bankruptcy** in the coming six months has increased dramatically.

#### IV. What the West Should Do

Participants from the region stated emphatically that the wave of protest in the Arab world was a genuinely regional phenomenon in which extra-regional actors in general and the United States in particular had played no role. Against this backdrop, they called on Western governments to adopt a very **cautious and prudent approach towards the region**. As a first step, one participant proposed intensified cooperation between Western and Arab countries in the establishment of civil society structures and educational programs, and limited visa liberalization for vocational training, internships and training facilities. In the medium- and long-term perspective, the West should sign free trade agreements with the Arab countries to increase market accessibility for regional products and to improve their economic situation. Western governments should also encourage regional actors to establish a CSCE-type security organization in the region. Several discussants called on the EU to develop a comprehensive North Africa policy.

With regard to the current situation in Egypt, one participant maintained that it needs technical support in the transformation process which should be extended on a government-to-government level, and not through government-affiliated private institutions. As Egypt's economic situation is dire and likely to deteriorate even further, both Western and regional countries should help to boost the Egyptian private sector.

It was pointed out that the **unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict** is still considered to be a major grievance by many people in the Arab world. Therefore, one discussant demanded that the West should increase its efforts to reach a just, peaceful and sustainable solution to the conflict. As one participant put it, "In the end, it is the question of Palestine which makes friends and foes in the region".

There was general agreement that the "**Arab revolution**" is **not in Israel's interests** since its security environment is undergoing fundamental and incalculable change and the pressure on the country is likely to mount. Moreover, Israel may lose its status as the only democracy in the region. Participants argued that Israel's ability to respond to the recent regional developments is limited. A public endorsement of the Arab Peace Initiative as well as a temporary suspension of construction activities in the settlements and a symbolic contribution to helping to improve the economic situation of Israel's neighbor Egypt could send a sign of good-will to the Arab world. One participant added that, in light of the current domestic constellation in Israel, these propositions are not likely to be taken up any time soon.

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