

12TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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**THE MIDDLE EAST
AT A CROSSROADS:
TURMOIL OR
TRANSITION?**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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Executive Summary

- Iran and the US are prepared for a comprehensive deal following the principle of “big for big”. But the concerns of hardliners in both Tehran and Washington have to be taken into account from the outset.
- Geneva II has to be as inclusive as possible. Regional actors supporting different factions in Syria need to convince those that there is no military solution to the conflict.
- In Egypt there is now an unorganized democratic third force. It has already revolted against both the Mubarak regime and the MB-led government and will do so again if its demands for individual rights and better living conditions are not met.
- There is a growing feeling of anger and mistrust against the US across the region, especially in the GCC countries. Obama’s decision to call off a military response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria has severely aggravated this tendency.
- Western influence in the Middle East is limited. One of the few areas in which it might be able to make a contribution is supporting regional actors in the establishment of reliable mechanisms of regional cooperation.

Iran: Change Against All Odds?

The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran’s new president is expected to be a game-changer for Iranian foreign policy. This is particularly true, one participant explained, with regard to three issues: the nuclear conflict, Iran’s

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difficult relations with the GCC countries and, most importantly, Tehran’s dealing with Washington. He maintained that without a successful rapprochement between Iran and the US none of the other two issues was likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. While many

discussants agreed that recent events, such as the phone call between the two presidents, deserved to be called historic, there was no consensus on how good the chances for détente really were.

Those with an optimistic stance pointed to the large degree of popular support for Rouhani’s policies and praised the professionalism and sincerity of Iran’s new foreign policy team. They did not expect the Supreme Leader to block Iranian concessions during negotiations with the West either. They explained that Khamenei had always cautioned against trusting the US, but had not completely ruled out Iranian cooperation with the West in general. That is why the nuclear negotiation

team had full authority to broker a deal with the international community. The US, on the other hand, had proven its goodwill by officially renouncing regime change and proposing to revive relations based on common interest and mutual respect.

Others highlighted the challenges any striving for US-Iranian rapprochement would have to overcome. These included, first and foremost, the opposition to any comprehensive deal by foreign policy hawks in both capitals.

“CONCERNS OF HARDLINERS IN TEHRAN AND WASHINGTON HAVE TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.”

It was advised that the hardliners’ concerns be taken into account from the outset. In addition, many regional actors remained skeptical about Iran’s true intentions and could act as potential spoilers of any détente between Tehran and Washington. This is particularly true for Israel, but also for most GCC countries that continue to regard Iran as an interventionist and expansionist force. Some participants denounced that while making eyes at the US Iran had so far failed to reach out to its immediate neighbors. This was all the more important as no durable peace and security was believed to be possible without reliable regional cooperation across the Gulf.

With regard to possible forms of cooperation, a few participants referred to Hassan Rouhani’s 2007 initiative to establish an institutional framework for security cooperation between the GCC countries, Iraq and Iran. While many others remained doubtful about the chances to establish such an institution, one discussant proposed an agreement on a WMD-free Gulf as a first step towards closer cooperation. It was indicated that for the first time there was now a chance that a US ad-

ministration would give its allies in the Gulf green light to improve their ties with Iran. However, it was doubtful whether GCC countries even regarded closer ties with Iran to be in their interest. Quite to the contrary, they believed that any US-Iranian rapprochement would come at their own expense. This kind of zero-sum logic was criticized by some of the participants, who advocated for the GCC countries to rely less on US support and focus more on good relations with their neighbors. Either way, there was general agreement that the conflict in Syria remained the main obstacle for closer cooperation between Iran and countries like Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

Most attendees were in agreement that, compared to an improvement in relations between Iran and the GCC, the prospects of progress in the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program gave reason for cautious optimism. They pointed out that all members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) now expected Iran to be prepared for a substantial deal following the principle of “big for big”. Within this framework, one participant predicted, the Iranian negotiation team would be willing to agree on confidence-building measures like capping uranium enrichment at five percent, remaining short of “breakout” capacity and making its program transparent even beyond the requirements of the Additional Protocol. In return it would expect the West to begin lifting its sanctions and allow Iran to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.

“IRAN AND THE US ARE PREPARED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE DEAL FOLLOWING THE PRINCIPLE ‘BIG FOR BIG’.”

Syria: A Chance for Peace?

Although the civil war in Syria continues to rage unabatedly, some of the participants expressed their hope that the Kerry-Lavrov deal on Assad's chemical weapons and the ensuing UNSC resolution could be a game-changer for the entire conflict. For the first time, they explained, there was now a common approach among all permanent members of the UNSC.

“FOR THE FIRST TIME RUSSIA HAS ACCEPTED OWNERSHIP IN THE PROCESS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN SYRIA.”

It was equally the first time that Russia had accepted ownership in the process of conflict management in Syria. The international community should therefore make use of the momentum in order to bring about a political solution. To one of the attendees, the chemical weapons deal also showed that Assad was not as powerful as he tried to portray. All of these factors could play a central role in reviving the preparation for the “Geneva II” conference. This was all the more important as, in the long run, a successful disarmament of Syria's chemical weapons was deemed impossible without a ceasefire and the beginning of a political process.

Many discussants agreed that, in order for Geneva II to succeed, it was crucial to include all relevant parties in the negotiations. This was true for both domestic and regional actors. On the domestic level, one participant recommended, it was important to support the non-jihadist elements of the opposition, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and parts of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. He emphasized that the only way to marginalize the ever more influential jihadists, many of whom were not of Syrian origin, was to en-

sure the success of the non-jihadist opposition. Other attendees backed this view and suggested that Turkey use its leverage on Syrian opposition groups in order to convince them to support a political solution and participate in Geneva II.

All attendants shared the assessment that jihadist groups such as the Al-Nusra Front or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued to gain ground at the expense of non-Islamist opposition fighters. This was explained by their superior training and easier access to weapons. It was also agreed that groups like ISIS were now mainly concerned with establishing an “Islamic Emirate” in those areas of Syria and Iraq where the respective governments had ceased to assert control. As a consequence, the removal of the Assad regime was no longer at the forefront of what these groups were fighting for. This was underlined by the recent armed clashes between ISIS and parts of the FSA near the Turkish border. One participant called these clashes a “war within a war” and claimed that there were now a number of wars within the Syrian opposition. He concluded that neither a military nor a political solution of the conflict was conceivable without the jihadists. The open question remained whether it was possible to include them in any kind of negotiation process.

On the regional level, one of the discussants noted, it had been a mistake not to have Saudi Arabia and Iran at the table during the first Geneva conference. That is why it was all the more important to invite both countries to Geneva II. But while there was a general view that the current situation was quite

“THERE WILL BE NO POLITICAL SOLUTION UNLESS ALL DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL ACTORS ARE PART OF GENEVA II.”

favorable to Iran, many participants pointed out that most GCC countries were unhappy with the Obama administration after it had called off military intervention in Syria. Saudi Arabia in particular had deplored the Kerry-Lavrov deal and the American veto against Riyadh's and Ankara's plans to deliver heavy weaponry to the Syrian opposition. This frustration may well cause the GCC countries to decide collectively not to be present in Geneva.

All in all most attendants believed that a political solution was possible, although they considered its chances to be rather slim. To increase them it was important, one of the participants demanded, to convince all parties involved that there was no military solution to the conflict. This was primarily the duty of regional actors supporting the various parties to the

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civil war. If they succeeded, and if an inclusive Geneva II conference came to some sort of political understanding, this could lead to a best-case scenario in which a “Bosnia-type” stabilization and confederal order might clear the way for peace. There was no consensus on how likely such an outcome was. But it was generally agreed that a breakup of Syrian statehood would have disastrous consequences for the region and that the future of Syria was thus essential for peace and security in the entire Middle East.

Egypt: Counter-Revolution Victorious?

The political turmoil in post-Morsi Egypt was a cause for great concern among most of the participants. Uncertainty about intentions and skills of those now in power, the deep polarization of the Egyptian society and the ongoing violence cast doubt on the prospects of a successful transition. Analyzing the performance of the interim government, one of the discussants asserted that none of its components – neither civilians nor representatives of the security apparatus – had fully lived up to expectations.

What is more, the fierceness of the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) had led to a securitization of the government, which had left its civilian component largely marginalized. The Brotherhood, which one attendant called a “fascist organization”, would continue to try and win back the sympathies of some parts of the anti-Mubarak “January 25 Coalition” by calling for the return to constitutional order and democracy. They did not, however, expect to have a real chance of reversing Morsi's removal.

Although the current “June 30 Coalition” was said to be much broader than the “January 25 Coalition” in early 2011, it was also believed to be more fragile, with opposition to the Brotherhood as its lowest common denominator. The army's role in the current intricate situation continued to be one of the most controversial issues at hand. While some of the discussants claimed that the military was still the main obstacle to a more democratic future, others pointed out that it remained largely

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popular with many Egyptians and that General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi would easily win presidential elections should he decide to run. In their view, the military would not suddenly become a driving force for democratization, but would not prevent it in the end either.

Another issue of debate was the question whether there now was a third element in the Egyptian society that opposed both the authoritarianism of the ousted Morsi government as well as the perspective of enduring

“IN EGYPT THERE IS NOW AN UNORGANIZED DEMOCRATIC THIRD FORCE THAT WILL CONTINUE TO REVOLT IF ITS DEMANDS ARE NOT MET.”

military rule. One of the participants advocated the idea that such a third element, albeit so far without an organized outlet, had become a force to be reckoned with. He even went so far as to assert that this “democratic cloud” now formed a powerful majority. Having already revolted against both the Mubarak regime and the MB-led government, it would do so again if its demands for individual rights and better living conditions were not met. To underline this assessment, he pointed to a cultural change – fueled by Egypt’s very young population – that had made autocratic rule much more difficult. Others cited Egypt as an example to demonstrate that, in light of widespread turmoil and chaos, many Arabs now yearned for a charismatic leader. If there was indeed a third force in Egypt, they maintained, it was more likely to consist of representatives of the Mubarak-era “deep state” than of a “democratic cloud”.

Against this backdrop, three possible scenarios were brought up during the discussion. In the long run Egypt could 1) become even more fragile and degrade into a hub for jihadists, 2) regress into a Mubarak-style

police state or 3) successfully complete its bumpy transition towards democracy. Which of these scenarios was the most probable remained an unanswered question. One of the attendants voiced the opinion, however, that it might be necessary for Egypt to go through the stage of a police state in order to become democratic eventually. He argued that, at any rate, the establishment of generally accepted ground rules, which were supposed to guarantee basic freedoms and protect the rights of the opposition, was fundamental to any democratic order. This was exactly what the Muslim Brotherhood had failed to accomplish when they had pushed forward a constitution that many liberal Egyptians could not identify with. In order to support democratic transition, the West should rather insist on the institutionalization of such ground rules than “pick winners”. In the end, many attendants agreed, a successful transition largely depended on the rather unpredictable behavior of the military.

Most participants shared the view that, as of now, Egypt continued to be especially prone to foreign influence. Massive financial support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait had already prevented the Egyptian economy from collapsing. The US decision to cut its assistance to the Egyptian military, on the other hand, may well prove to be a turning point in Washington’s relations with one of its key Middle Eastern allies, given the large degree of frustration with the US among Egypt’s current political elite. Although being far less significant in size and efficiency, European aid had its distinct symbolic value, one of the discus-

“THE WEST SHOULD INSIST ON THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF GROUND RULES INSTEAD OF PICKING WINNERS.”

sants explained. Cutting it would be counter-productive, since it was mainly being invested in the civil society and thus helped project the image of Europe as a standard-setter for democracy.

From Western Helplessness to Regional Solutions

The aftermath of Morsi's removal in Egypt and the Western reaction to the use of chemical weapons in Syria pose the question of what kind of influence the West is still able and willing to exert in the Middle East. It was first and foremost Obama's decision to call off a military strike against the Assad regime that caused participants from GCC countries to call Washington's reliability into question. "We have invested so much in the US as our insurance company, and now it turns out to be unreliable.", was one of the assessments. Others shared the allegation of broken trust and bemoaned that the West had apparently lost interest in the Middle East it had played a central role in shaping. In refraining from intervention in Syria, the US had missed a golden opportunity to polish up its image in the region after leaving Iraq in a quagmire and "betting on the wrong horse" in Egypt.

However, this judgment was challenged by other discussants who advocated more self-confidence. How is long-term stability in the Middle East possible, they asked, as long as relevant regional actors routinely turned to the United States for support instead of searching for regional solutions? The one thing the West could do was to assist in the creation of institutions and mechanisms for regional cooperation.

While participants from different countries disagreed about the desirability of continued Western influence in general, they shared the assessment that there was presently no consistent Western strategy for the Middle East. They also agreed on the fact that Europe had much less means of making an impact than the US. One of the discussants estimated that, if one day Washington actually implemented its self-declared "pivot to Asia" or the present Sykes-Picot order collapsed, the Middle East would turn out to be "too big for Europe". He therefore recommended that Europe become more selective in its initiatives in the region, refrain from proclaiming a single grand strategy and focus on realistic policies based on a case-to-case approach.

"THE WEST SHOULD ASSIST REGIONAL ACTORS IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIABLE MECHANISMS FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION."

About

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 current developments in the Middle East.

This summary contains a selection of arguments which we consider to be relevant to the current policy debate. It is being distributed to the participants of the KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST and selected policymakers.

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