

**13TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST**

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**A NEW REGIONAL  
ORDER IN THE  
MIDDLE EAST?**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Executive Summary

- Europe should use its influence to secure a successful conclusion to the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue and encourage reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh.
- Jihadist groups such as ISIS are currently more focused on consolidating and expanding the areas under their control in Syria and Iraq than overthrowing Assad.
- Given the foreseeable failure of recent negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, some participants favored a more intensive search for alternatives to the two-state solution.
- As long as Egypt can rely on financial support from the Gulf States, the West will have limited influence on the government in Cairo.
- Although the United States has narrowed its commitments to the Middle East, it is not planning a strategic withdrawal from the region.

## Iran and Saudi Arabia: The Undeclared War in the Gulf

The conflict between Iran and the Arab Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, poses one of the biggest challenges to security in the Middle East. One participant described the situation as representing ‘the key conflict of the first half of the 21st century’. This is a conflict that has already cost the lives of tens of thousands of people and more or less destroyed Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. Furthermore, neither Tehran nor Riyadh was viewed as in the position to gain long-term hegemony, nor were they considered appropriate role models for other states in the region. However, a peace process could only begin if one were to acknowledge that the two countries are at war. Other participants described the conflict as a cold war with a number of ‘hot’ aspects in Syria.

The negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program were discussed against this background. One important point concerned the fact that Iran and the E3+3 countries tended to tune out the regional dimensions of the conflict and avoid other issues during negotiations. On the one hand, focusing on the nuclear program was considered by some to provide an opportunity of achieving agreement on this central issue; in turn this could provide a basis with which to tackle further disputes. However, some participants viewed this as a dangerous approach, as neglecting the immense tensions between countries in the region

**“IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA ARE IN A COLD WAR WITH A NUMBER OF ‘HOT’ ASPECTS IN SYRIA.”**

could potentially threaten any agreement on the nuclear issue. Moreover, a settlement with the West might actually lead Iran to assume it had no further need to engage with its Arab neighbors.

Iran is widely perceived as being in a position of relative strength. While Saudi Arabia views the current relations of power in Syria with great concern and tends to focus on domestic issues such as suc-

**“IRAN IS CURRENTLY IN A POSITION OF RELATIVE STRENGTH.”**

cession arrangements, Iran was said to have an adaptable political system, to possess a high level of human capital, and to be in a position to act independently on questions of security. At the same time, the Middle Eastern policy of some international actors tends to reflect Tehran’s interests. This includes developments such as the supposed US strategic withdrawal from the Middle East, Russia’s current assertiveness, and China’s and India’s growing influence. Be this as it may, the current internal political problems in Iran could weaken the country’s relative power. In addition to the deep social and political divide between conservatives and reformers, the country is also faced with a difficult economic climate. Accordingly, Iran places great importance on ensuring that sanctions against the country are lifted, which should improve the likelihood of a settlement on the nuclear issue.

There was consensus among the participants that the civil war in Syria was the main obstacle to an Iranian-Saudi rapprochement. Despite recent signals, including the invitation of Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to Riyadh, one participant argued that relations between the two states were unlikely to change as long as Iran contin-

ued its current policy towards Syria. Consequently, reconciliation could only be expected if the leadership in Tehran were to reduce the Iranian presence in the Levant and end direct and indirect intervention (via Hezbollah) in the Syrian conflict. However, considering Iran’s current relative strength, this was viewed as unlikely to happen in the near future. Furthermore, other participants accused Saudi Arabia of refusing to acknowledge that Iran might be willing to change its policy, and they feared that this was blocking developments towards closer relations between the two countries.

One participant stressed that a permanent agreement on the nuclear issue would also be in Europe’s interests. However, this would only remain the case as long as Iran used its influence to help stabilize security in the Gulf region. Consequently, Europe needed to ensure the successful conclusion of negotiations on the nuclear issue,

while promoting a rapprochement between Iran and the GCC countries. This was particularly the case regarding an Iranian-Saudi understanding over Syria, as without similar positions on Syria, it would be unrealistic to expect tensions to ease between the two countries.

**“THE CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA IS THE MAIN OBSTACLE TO AN IRANIAN-SAUDI RAPPROCHEMENT.”**

## Syria: A Way Out of a War Without Winners?

A peaceful solution to the conflict in Syria seems further away than ever. One participant argued that although government forces have recently experienced a number of mili-

**“THE WAR IN SYRIA IS A ZERO-SUM GAME; THERE CAN BE NO WINNERS. A PEACEFUL SOLUTION SEEMS FURTHER AWAY THAN EVER.”**

tary successes, the war in Syria is a zero-sum game: there can be no winners. Moreover, whereas external military intervention and regime change were considered unrealistic,

a return to the previous status quo was viewed as impossible. Instead, it was highly likely that the war would continue in the same manner, and that this would increase the threat of terrorist spill-overs to neighboring countries and advance the disintegration of the Syrian state. Within this context Jihadist opposition groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are currently more focused on consolidating and expanding the areas under their control in Syria and Iraq than overthrowing Assad.

Despite the failure of the Geneva II Conference, there was broad agreement that a negotiated solution was the only way of avoiding such a scenario. However, some participants warned that a diplomatic solution would only be possible if the military balance were to shift towards the opposition. This situation could be brought about by providing the moderate Syrian opposition with anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, as the regime’s military successes were merely due to the technical superiority of its weaponry. Finally, these voices offered a reminder that Saudi Arabia was ready to supply the necessary weapons,

but that the United States was preventing it from doing so.

The debate on who should be involved in the Syrian negotiations proved a highly contentious issue. Most participants agreed that negotiations would have no chance of success without external mediation. At the same time, some countries in the region have begun showing more willingness to compromise. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, for example, no longer demand Assad’s resignation as a precondition to their involvement in negotiations; however, Saudi Arabia has yet to follow suit. The majority of the participants expressed the view that diplomatic efforts would fail without the constructive involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia. In addition, a number of other countries were also proposed as possible mediators, and these ranged from the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5), to Syria’s neighbors such as Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, and neutral countries without substantial interests in the region, such as Norway and South Africa.

The participants emphasized that the only realistic goal of

negotiations could be an agreement similar in form to the Taif Agreement. However, agreement in Syria would be more difficult than in Lebanon in the 1980s as the various ethnic and religious groups in Syria lacked strong political leaders in a position to implement an agreement. One of the participants outlined a roadmap for the negotiations. Before negotiations could take place, an understanding would have to be reached with the relevant external actors on the basic principles behind an agreement. This understanding

**“THE ONLY REALISTIC GOAL OF NEGOTIATIONS CAN BE AN AGREEMENT SIMILAR IN FORM TO THE TAIF AGREEMENT.”**

would be followed by a ceasefire and humanitarian aid, before a transitional government involving all conflicting parties would be put in place. The transitional government would then begin negotiations on a power-sharing agreement, which would close with internationally monitored free elections.

### Israel and Palestine: What Next After Kerry's Failure?

There is currently no negotiated solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in sight. One participant argued that the recent initiative by US Secretary of State John Kerry had been condemned to failure from the outset because

**“THERE SHOULD BE A MORE INTENSIVE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES TO THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION.”**

the minimum conditions demanded by each side's political mainstream were unacceptable to the opposing side. However, it was in neither party's interest to interpret this as the

collapse of the peace process. A continuation of talks without substantial results was viewed as particularly in Israel's interests, since maintaining the status quo was far less detrimental in the medium term than is often assumed. Similarly, a cost-benefit analysis would also lead Ramallah to conclude that no agreement was better than a bad agreement. The participants assessed the current situation as characterized by increased Palestinian attempts to gain international recognition, and Israeli responses aimed at limiting the resulting damage.

There were different views on the question of the viability of a two-state solution to the

Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Some participants reaffirmed that there was no realistic alternative to this solution. Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state was viewed as having the potential to change the political dynamic within Israel and perhaps even reopen the path to negotiations. Others maintained that Israel no longer viewed the two-state solution as a serious option. However, since Israel would never agree

**“WESTERN ACTORS SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THE COLLAPSE OF THE PEACE PROCESS AND PROVIDE NO FURTHER SUPPORT.”**

to a one-state solution either, some participants argued that a form of federal or confederal structure according to the principle of ‘neither one, nor two states’ was the only possible long-term settlement. However, doubt was expressed as to whether regions such as Kurdish northern Iraq could act as a model for this process. Moreover, although there is increasing support within Israel for a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank, this option is currently unrealistic. This is mainly due to Israel's negative experiences with the unilateral measures it deployed in southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.

With the recent failure of the Kerry initiative, the participants viewed an active role for the US and Europe in the negotiations with skepticism. One participant proposed that Western actors should now acknowledge the collapse of the peace process and provide no further support (including financing) for future negotiations. This would force Israelis and Palestinians to take control of their own conflict. However, the majority of the participants argued that this would have little effect on the current situation and that without a game changer (such as a third Intifada, an electoral victory for Hamas or the Pales-

tinian termination of the Oslo Agreements) there was no reason to expect any particular change. However, a third intifada would certainly not increase Israel's willingness to compromise. Instead it would probably lead to the further entrenchment of opposing positions.

### Egypt: Re-establishing the Ancient Régime

Days before the Egyptian presidential elections, the participants discussed the political situation in the country. One participant explained the situation in Egypt in terms of a complete re-establishment of the old regime – only that now even harsher controls and mechanisms of repression were in place than under Mubarak. Egypt, it was argued, did

**“EGYPT WITNESSES A COMPLETE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE OLD REGIME – ONLY WITH HARSHER CONTROLS AND REPRESSION.”**

not merely lack an independent judiciary, but functioning state institutions in general. At the same time, the army was said to hold an un-

touchable position, and would continue to intervene in future crises whenever it viewed this as necessary.

Of all the challenges facing President Sisi, the economic crisis was likely to be a high priority. Importantly, the Egyptian budget provides very little room for effective poverty reduction, and in a country in which half of the population lives below the poverty line, this could quickly prove dangerous to the new government. This would especially be the case if Egypt were required to implement painful reforms in order to receive

credit from international donors such as the IMF. At the same time, even Sisi's seemingly convincing election result will not change the fact that the new president is viewed as lacking legitimacy, particularly by young people, who constitute the vast majority of the Egyptian population.

**“PRESIDENT SISI SHOULD FOCUS PARTICULARLY ON THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND HIS LACK OF LEGITIMACY AMONG THE YOUTH.”**

However, the participants agreed that

Sisi could rely on comprehensive financial assistance from the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and particularly Saudi Arabia; as such, Egypt would avoid economic collapse. The differences over foreign policy between Cairo and the Gulf States were viewed as having no effect on the provision of this financing. In particular, Saudi Arabia's fear of the Muslim Brotherhood in its own country, and ultimately the threat posed to the Wahhabi monarchy, were viewed as crucial in ensuring that Riyadh will continue to provide comprehensive and substantive support to President Sisi. Accordingly, as long as Cairo can be sure of assistance from the Gulf States, the West will only have limited influence over the Egyptian government.

### The US: The Withdrawal That Wasn't?

One of the most heated debates was sparked by the question of the future role of the US in the Middle East. Above all, participants from the GCC countries emphasized that President Obama's response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria ('the red line') had deeply

shaken the confidence of many Arab states in the current US government. Obama was viewed as neither willing nor able to adequately assume the leadership role called for by Arab partner states in the Middle East. Furthermore, the US was also accused of failing

**“THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION IS NEITHER WILLING NOR ABLE TO ADEQUATELY ASSUME THE LEADERSHIP ROLE CALLED FOR BY ARAB PARTNER STATES.”**

to sufficiently coordinate Middle East policy with its allies in the region.

One participant summarized this view by arguing that growing energy independence in the

US, the country’s ‘pivot to Asia’, the sobering conclusion of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its general focus on domestic issues all demonstrated that the US was likely to significantly reduce its engagement in the Middle East. Despite this, not only will the Middle East continue to be of paramount geopolitical importance, increased engagement in Asia need not necessarily be interpreted as a ‘withdrawal’ from the Middle East. A superpower such as the US, it was argued, could not ignore a region characterized by diverse conflicts with large potential for escalation. Importantly, the US government

also vehemently denies the conjecture about a US withdrawal from the Middle East.

Due to notable US engagement in the region (economic investments, arms sales, etc.) some participants expressed the view that the discourse on the US withdrawal was less reflective of reality and based more on a perception that exists in the Middle East. This perception is related to the current relative weakness of the US and a belief that Obama lacks resolve. However, both the ‘Obama factor’ and the US focus on domestic policy, which for the most part is due to economic problems, were considered temporary phenomena that provided

**“THE US IS REBALANCING ITS INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, BUT THERE IS NO PLAN FOR A STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL.”**

no evidence of a strategic withdrawal from the Middle East. Instead, the US was said to be rebalancing its global engagement, and this included redefining its interests in the Middle East, and developing a form of engagement that is more strongly characterized by discretion and sustainability than in the past. These changes, it was argued, should not be misinterpreted as a withdrawal from the region.

## 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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