

**11TH KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST**

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# **PROSPECTS FOR A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST: SCENARIOS AND ASSESSMENTS**

KÖRBER FOUNDATION  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## Executive Summary

- Syria has essentially ceased to exist as a state, and will have to be remodeled after the end of the civil war. A confederation is the only way to end ethnic and sectarian violence. International assistance is needed to broker the requisite negotiations.
- “Assad is no longer an issue.” Bashar Al-Assad’s resignation is no longer a precondition for negotiations. Nor would it automatically lead to the end of the military conflict. A coup d’état might in fact aggravate sectarian strife.
- In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood government has so far failed to meet the needs of a deeply divided society. Instead of intervening on behalf of certain Egyptian factions, other countries should persuade the Egyptian government to become more pluralistic and inclusive.
- In contrast to other parts of the region, the Arab revolutions have not strengthened the forces of change in the Gulf. In fact they have helped to stabilize the existing regimes. The UAE has made most of the economic gains, and Qatar has benefited most in political terms.
- Both the US and Europe have lost some of their influence in the Middle East as a result of the Arab revolutions. Europe in particular has failed to live up to its promises, and needs to invest more in the region, both in economic and in political terms.

## The End of Syria as We Know It?

As one participant put it, “Syria will be at the center of Middle Eastern problems for years to come.” With regard to the situation on the ground, most of the discussants agreed that Syria had already ceased to exist as a state. In de facto terms it had been divided into different areas with varying degrees of self-government. There was a general consensus that this division was mainly along ethnic and sectarian lines. One participant even went so far as to predict that these lines coincided with areas which would see more massacres and other atrocities.

Without coordinated Western intervention, which, the participants believed, was not on the cards, the current situation was probably going to get worse. Many attendees believed that the “battle for Damascus” was in the offing, and that it would plunge the entire country into even greater chaos. Against this backdrop one participant pointed out that two important factors were going to determine the medium-term scenario in Syria: 1) the degree to which the state continues to collapse and 2) the intensity of sectarian strife.

Most participants subscribed to the view that a best-case scenario in which most government structures were still intact and sectarian violence was reduced to a minimum was already highly unlikely. On the other

**“ANY SOLUTION WILL HAVE TO INCLUDE THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SYRIAN STATE INTO A CONFEDERATION.”**

hand, a worst-case scenario could not be completely ruled out. This included the total fragmentation and “Somalization” of both the state and society. However, there was no consensus on the likelihood of such a scenario. Some of the participants argued that the degree to which the state would continue to disintegrate depended on the military success of the opposition in general and the forthcoming “battle for Damascus” in particular, and on the ongoing collapse of the Syrian economy.

There were no objections to the view that the radicalization of and divisions within the Syrian opposition were becoming increasingly apparent. With regard to the composition of the opposition forces, one of the discussants asserted that radical groups such as the Al-Nusra Front had gained ground at the expense of the Free Syrian Army after Saudi Arabia and Qatar had withdrawn their financial and logistical support for the latter. In political terms the opposition groups disagreed primarily on whether or not it was possible to achieve a non-violent resolution of the conflict. The Sunni business community in Damascus, which had remained neutral for a long time, was now part of the opposition, and was at the forefront of those who wanted to continue to explore the possibility of embarking on a political process.

It was generally believed that a third scenario, which posited that most government

structures would continue to function despite a further escalation of Syria’s sectarian violence, was highly unlikely. Most of the discussants in fact emphasized that any solution would have to include the transformation of the Syrian state into a confederation. Such a confederation was also part of a fourth and less improbable scenario. As in the case of Lebanon after the Taif Agreement, there would be a very weak central state, and the country’s various ethnic and religious groups would enjoy a large degree of autonomy, which would reduce their penchant for sectarian strife. Some participants were convinced that such a scenario would be in the interests of many different countries, e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States, and in those of other regional actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

One of the discussants believed that the existing level of sectarian strife prevented the different Syrian factions from reaching a political solution on their own, and that the conflict could be resolved only with the help of the international community. Countries with no obvious interests in the region, though with good connections and the requisite experience in brokering such negotiations, could play a vital role in supporting Lakhdar Brahimi and putting the political process back on track.

Many of the participants were of the opinion that such a solution presupposed a lower level of violence, including an end to air strikes, the creation of safe havens, and an increase in humanitarian aid. International mediators could then help the regime and the different opposition factions to negoti-

**“THE SUCCESS OF A TRANSITIONAL PROCESS NO LONGER DEPENDS ON THE FATE OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD.”**

ate the conditions for a transitional process. One of the attendees believed that the success of such a process no longer depended on the fate of Bashar Al-Assad. He claimed that if Assad were toppled by a coup d'état carried out by members of the regime, the situation might become even more complicated, since it would automatically exacerbate the level of sectarian violence.

### Towards an Ever More Divided Egypt?

Although it is far less dramatic than what is happening in Syria, the situation in Egypt also gave the participants good cause to be pessimistic. President Morsi and his government were criticized for failing to deal with the worsening economic malaise, to make substantial progress with the transformation process, and to reconcile the various groups in what is a deeply divided society. While some of the participants maintained that it was still too early to judge the Muslim Brotherhood's performance, and that it would be a good idea to give the Morsi government the benefit of the doubt, others simply stated that Egypt had turned out to be "too big to be governed by the Muslim Brotherhood alone."

Although one of the discussants said that he was more disappointed by Egypt's liberal opposition than by the Muslim Brotherhood, most of the participants did not want the National Salvation Front (NSF) to boycott the forthcoming parliamentary elections. However, some of them expressed the view that the NSF was far too heterogeneous to run for election as a single block, and predicted that it would split up. With regard to the other end

of the political spectrum, the attendees were unable to reach agreement on the Salafists and their political parties. One of the discussants emphasized that all of the regional powers and the West had a common interest in supporting moderate Islamist forces as opposed to more radical groups such as the Salafists. Another participant disagreed, and called the Salafists the "most benign of Egypt's Islamic forces." Someone else pointed out that there was a growing number of Islamists who were neither Salafists nor members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The role of the army in post-Mubarak Egypt proved to be one of the most controversial issues on the agenda. Some of the participants believed that as a result of the electorate's disenchantment with the Morsi government, the army was regaining some of its former popularity. One of them even voiced the opinion that the army would soon be back in power by popular demand. Other discussants cast doubt on the army's problem-solving abilities, and believed that a military coup was bound to lead to another revolution. Although it was far from being a unified block, the Egyptian judiciary was generally much more critical of the Muslim Brotherhood than the military. However, there were doubts about whether it can prevent the Brotherhood from consolidating its power.

As a result of Egypt's massive domestic problems, foreign powers have started to interfere in its internal affairs more than ever before. Many of the discussants shared this assessment and pointed out that a number of foreign governments were pursuing their own interests in Egypt. The Muslim Brother-

**"EGYPT HAS TURNED OUT TO BE TOO BIG TO BE GOVERNED BY THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD ALONE."**

hood was considered to be a loyal ally of Qatar and Turkey, and it was Iran's partner of choice in Egypt. The Salafists were supported by Saudi Arabia, and representatives of the old regime are said to have close ties with the UAE. When compared with these regional actors, the West seems to be rather reticent when it comes to interfering openly in Egypt. Whilst most of the participants were of this opinion, there was no agreement about the question of what the West *should* in fact be doing.

**“THE WEST SHOULD ENCOURAGE THE MB-LED GOVERNMENT TO BECOME MORE INCLUSIVE AND PLURALISTIC.”**

One of the discussants thought it was a mistake to overestimate the influence of the US and Europe, and pointed out that no Western country openly opposes the Muslim Brotherhood. Since both the US and Europe have a vital interest in a stable and prosperous Egypt, they are compelled to give their support to those who have come to power legitimately. Other participants believed that the West should encourage the MB-led government to become more inclusive and pluralistic. In fact, without pressure from the West the Muslim Brotherhood would continue to be just as autocratic as it appears to be today.

Against this backdrop one of the participants outlined a best-case scenario that would involve economic stability and successful democratization. Since both of these factors depend to a large extent on other actors in the region, especially when it comes to foreign investment in the Egyptian economy, many of the participants remained skeptical about the prospects for such a scenario. One of the participants claimed that Egypt was already in the midst of a worst-case scenario in which its increasing dependence on foreign sources

of finance would lead to a severe economic downturn. Eventually this might even lead to the total erosion of government structures, and this in turn might prompt the military to intervene. Although not all of the participants subscribed to the view that such a scenario was a distinct possibility, many believed that the general outlook for Egypt was rather bleak.

### Regional Power Dynamics in Year Three of the Arab Spring

The Arab revolutions have led to fundamental shifts in the regional power dynamics of the Middle East. Despite the fact that some of these short-term shifts may not actually become long-term changes, most of the participants agreed that there were a couple of clear-cut winners and a few obvious losers as a result of the Arab Spring. In the case of other countries and non-state actors the situation was rather more complicated.

It was difficult to disagree with the view that Turkey and the GCC countries in general (and Qatar in particular) have benefited from what has happened in the region since the beginning of the Arab revolutions. Even though one of the discussants believed that Turkey had for some time tended to overestimate its diplomatic clout, most of the attendees agreed that Turkey's strong economy, great military strength, and its close links with both the West and political Islam were the reasons why it has become a role model for many other countries in the Middle East.

All the participants were of the opinion that in the course of the last two years Qatar has acquired a great deal of soft and hard pow-

er. However, some of them pointed out that Doha's influence may already have reached its peak. The revolutionary events in Egypt,

**“WHILE THE UAE HAS MADE THE MOST ECONOMIC GAINS, QATAR HAS BENEFITED MOST IN POLITICAL TERMS.”**

Tunisia and other countries have not led to similar upheavals in the Gulf region. In fact, there was general agreement that the forces of change in the GCC countries had become weaker in the course of the last two years. However, the governments of most of the smaller GCC countries had managed to consolidate their power domestically, while at the same time stepping up their involvement elsewhere in the region. One of the participants summed up the consequences of the Arab Spring and said that while the UAE had made the most economic gains, Qatar had benefited most in political terms. However, the attitude to the Muslim Brotherhood was the biggest difference between the two countries. The UAE quite openly opposed it, whereas Qatar lent massive support to the Brotherhood and MB-related parties in other Arab countries.

The idea that Egypt and Israel were also among the winners was deemed to be far more controversial. With regard to Egypt, there was general agreement that the failure or success of the Egyptian transformation process would have a huge impact on other players in the region. However, there was some disagreement about Egypt's prospects, since it was going to have to deal with some very major challenges. One of the participants claimed that Israel could actually be described as the surprise winner of the Arab Spring. Initially the Arab revolutions had been a cause of great concern to the Israeli elite. However, Israel's loss of soft power has

been more than made up for by an increase in hard power, and this was demonstrated by its strong economy, its robust military deterrence, and its growing energy independence. Other participants disagreed and pointed to the increased security threat that was due to the uncertain fate of Israel's neighbors such as Egypt and Syria. One of the discussants stated that, although they still looked like potential winners, the Muslim Brotherhood and other representatives of political Islam had not as yet proved their worth.

None of the participants disagreed when Syria and Iraq were dubbed the obvious losers of what has happened in the last two years. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Iran were seen to be winners by some and losers by others. One of the discussants claimed that Saudi Arabia had managed to repel the threats to its stability and was now looking forward to an even brighter future. A number of participants rejected this assessment and pointed to the cleavages in Saudi society and the enormous challenges with which it was confronted. Saudi Arabia's current practice of dealing with these challenges was referred to as “muddling through.”

**“EUROPEAN COUNTRIES HAVE FAILED TO LIVE UP TO THEIR PROMISES.”**

With regard to Iran, those who thought that the country was one of the region's losers stressed that the turmoil in Syria would probably lead to the loss of Tehran's most important Arab ally. They also pointed to the harsh consequences of the international economic sanctions, and claimed that Iran was suffering as a result of the growing sectarian divide in the region. On the other hand, some of the participants believed that the very fact that Assad's pro-Iranian regime had survived

much longer than most observers had expected and that Tehran had not knuckled under on the nuclear issue meant that Iran was a winner.

Among the non-regional actors with important interests in the Middle East, the record of the United States turned out to be the most controversial. Most of the participants agreed that as a result of the Arab revolutions the US had lost some of its ability to exert influence in the Middle East. As an example of this loss of leverage one discussant cited the fact that it had not been able to prevent Riyadh, its close ally, from sending tanks into Bahrain. Another discussant looked more closely at the threats to Washington's core interests in the region and came to a different conclusion. Since Israel's security, the isolation of Iran, reliable energy supplies and sup-

port for market economies and democracy were the most important issues, he believed that the situation did not look all that bad as far as the US was concerned.

When asked to define the future role of Europe in the region, one of the participants deplored the fact that European countries had failed to live up to their promises. They had not invested enough in the Arab Spring countries, and they had not managed to bring about a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria. And this was the reason why Europe's influence throughout the Middle East was on the wane. The discussant suggested that if Europe resolved its own crises, it would once again be a credible actor. And instead of "picking winners", it should give its support to regional initiatives designed to achieve an inclusive political solution in Syria.

## 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 scenarios for Syria and Egypt as well as to take stock of the changing power dynamics 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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