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IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB SPRING: DEMOCRACY – AND CHAOS?

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In the Wake of the Arab Spring: Democracy – and Chaos?

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 state of play in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring and in particular the current situation in Syria.

Summary

Heading for “Somalization”? Actors and Trends in the Syrian Crisis

After 21 months of violence, Syria is faced with the total fragmentation of state structures, and this may ultimately lead to a “Somalization” of the country. Many of the participants agreed with this assessment, and some of them stated that the progressive decentralization of the Syrian Army (“Every regional military leader is more powerful than Bashar”), the ongoing disintegration of local administration and the absence of economic activity (if one disregards the local level) were leading to the rapid erosion of the central government’s monopoly on power. Several discussants went so far as to say that we were “witnessing the beginning of the end of the Assad regime.” The point was made that, although the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has not been able to win a decisive victory on the battlefield, the opposition has gradually managed to expand its political power. According to one participant’s estimate, 35 percent of

Syrian territory is now under the full control of the opposition, and another 30 percent is under its political control, even though there are occasional incursions by the Syrian Army. Some of the participants emphasized the fact that new administrative structures were emerging in the “liberated” parts of Syria as a result of concerted efforts by civil society activists.

“SYRIA IS FACED WITH THE TOTAL FRAGMENTATION OF STATE STRUCTURES.”

Other discussants believed that there could well be more interethnic clashes such as those that have erupted between Turks and Kurds in the Idlib region, and issued a note of warning about the mounting influence of radical Islamic groups. It seems that the *Al-Nusra Front*, a jihadist paramilitary group with ties to *Al-Qaeda*, is already in con-

trol of several villages. However, the participants were unable to reach agreement about the actual strength of jihadist groups in Syria.

“WE ARE WITNESSING THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE ASSAD REGIME.”

Several attendees were critical of the support given to the various Islamic groups – including radical Salafists – by some of the GCC countries, and pointed out that this sort of factionalism was likely to prolong the conflict instead of bringing it to an end.

The majority of the participants believed that a successful coup d'état against Bashar Al-Assad and the formation of an interim government would be the best-case scenario. However, it was far more likely that the Assad regime would gradually collapse, and that there would be a protracted civil war with a strong sectarian component. One participant stressed the fact that Syria's Alawite community was in a state of crisis and that a growing number of senior officials were making desperate attempts “to find their way out.” However, it seems that approximately 25 percent of the Syrian population continues to support the Assad regime.

The Cost of Action – and Inaction: Towards More Robust Conflict Management in Syria?

In the Syria crisis most of the alternatives to the use of force, including coercive diplomacy and sanctions, have already been tried, though to little avail. At the same time the situation on the ground is becoming more and more intolerable. Whilst most of the participants were of this opinion, there was no agreement when it came to the question of what the international community should actually be doing.

Against this backdrop one of the discussants voiced the opinion that a “Libyan scenario” in which a coalition of external actors, including the US and a number of major NATO states, would intervene on behalf of the Syrian opposition was a distinct possibility. If this were the case, there would be two options: 1) a shift from non-lethal to lethal support for the FSA, or 2) aerial intervention. As far as the US was concerned, an air campaign seemed to be the more likely option, taking into account the fact that the US administration appears to be unwilling to supply the FSA with portable anti-aircraft missiles. The discussants pointed out that an air campaign with US participation could be implemented only once the following preconditions have been met: 1) a request for assistance submitted by the Syrian opposition; 2) regional support; and 3) backing from major NATO member states. They did not believe that a UN Security Council resolution was absolutely necessary.

“MOST ALTERNATIVES TO THE USE OF FORCE HAVE ALREADY BEEN TRIED, THOUGH TO LITTLE AVAIL.”

Most of the participants agreed that an aer-

ial intervention, i.e. either a no-fly zone or air strikes designed to destroy the Syrian Air Force, would constitute a significant “game changer” in favor of the opposition. However, there was disagreement when it came to the question of whether external military intervention was actually a good idea. Thus

“AN AERIAL INTERVENTION WOULD CONSTITUTE A SIGNIFICANT GAME CHANGER.”

one of the participants stated that “any post-intervention scenario would be better than the current situation,” whereas others urged people to be wary of “easy analyses.” They pointed out that the impact of military intervention was wholly unpredictable, and that it could easily lead to further escalation.

More Change to Come? Outlook on the Arab World in the Wake of the Arab Spring

The “winds of change” will continue to sweep across the region. Most participants supported this assessment of ‘post Arab Spring’ trend lines in the Arab world. One of the discussants stated that when it came to regional stability, there were five potential drivers of turbulence:

1. The ‘stolen revolution’ phenomenon, i.e. disappointed young activists may be tempted to challenge elected (and non-elected) authorities if their demands are not met
2. Transformation failures in the transition countries, especially in the areas of economic and governance reform

3. The failure of mainstream Islam, i.e. the gradual rise and predominance of radical Islamic strands at the expense of a more moderate ‘mainstream Islam’
4. The deteriorating situation in Syria and the spillover effect on neighboring countries
5. Geopolitical conflicts with a strong regional dimension, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the standoff over the Iranian nuclear program

With regard to the emergence of a new geo-strategic order, some of the participants predicted that there would be greater competition for regional hegemony between Muslim Brotherhood-led Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They were also of the opinion that Israel’s strategic posture had changed significantly as a result of the Arab

“EUROPE WILL BE DOING SOMETHING – OR ELSE NOBODY WILL.”

Spring. One of the participants argued that for the time being Israel should “weather the storm” and adapt its policies to the new realities at a later stage. Some of the discussants were of the opinion that Israel was trying to freeze the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus the implementation of the two-state solution was going to become increasingly difficult.

There was general agreement that, in spite of its limited room for manoeuvre, Europe had a role to play in the transformation process of the Arab world. In the light of the perceived US disengagement from the region some of the participants stated that “Europe will be doing something – or else nobody will.” A basic lesson learned from the Arab Spring is that stagnation can never generate stability. That is why a European contribution should help create the general conditions

for political, economic and social reform by providing “money, mobility, and market access.”

Some of the discussants welcomed the practical cooperation between Western administrations and the new Islamic governments, but they also urged Europeans and Americans not to get involved in intra-Islamic strife, e.g. the competition between mainstream Islam and more radical Islamic strands. They believed that attempts by extra-regional actors to “pick winners” had always been counterproductive. There was a heated debate about the “real” intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood. While some of the participants believed that the Muslim Brotherhood was pursuing an agenda of gradual

Islamization that would culminate in the establishment of a new caliphate, others pointed out that after it had come to power the Brotherhood had displayed a great deal of pragmatism. They thought that the movement should be seen as an actor with a large range of different positions, and not as a monolithic bloc.

And they were of the opinion that trying to ascertain the “real” intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood was a futile endeavor, since power and circumstances often change an actor’s attitude.

**“AFTER COMING TO POWER
THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD
DISPLAYED A GREAT DEAL OF
PRAGMATISM.”**

KÖRBER DIALOGUE MIDDLE EAST

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