

Emerging Trends and New Threats in MENA Region

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TRT WORLD
forum
2017

CONFERENCE REPORT

Emerging Trends and New Threats in MENA Region

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PUBLISHER
TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
DECEMBER 2017

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Emerging Trends and New Threats in MENA Region

This is a report on a public session titled “Emerging Trends and New Threats in MENA Region”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of speakers and participants present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

Day 1

Session 2

Emerging Trends
Challenges in MENA

- What are the structural factors that drive and sustain instability in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region?
- What are the prospects of building democratic institutions? Can decentralisation help solve problems in the region?

What platforms could be provided for

- countries to rebuild their economies and social institutions after years of war?
- How can regional institutions - such as the Arab League, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation)- help remedy existing crises and pave the way for a more stable MENA region?

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Friends and New MENA Region

by Nicholas Powell

mediate

Panel

Ibrahim Kalin

Spokesperson to the
President of The Republic
of Turkey



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Summary

TRT World Forum hosted an esteemed panel under the title of 'Emerging Trends and New Threats in the MENA Region.' The panel session delved into topics most pertaining to the Middle East today and which have affected the course of events regionally and globally over the past six years.

The panel session started with a speech by Rached Ghannouchi, who spoke of his perspective of the Arab world, the current situation and where he believes the Arab world is headed. Ghannouchi stated that the Arab world is in a process of democratic transition, and despite the challenges it has and is facing, it will eventually overcome - and the revolutions which engulfed the Arab world in 2011 - will succeed.

The panel discussed the need for the region to take agency and regain its ownership over its stories and events: the need for the decolonisation of the MENA region in the political, linguistic, social and intellectual sphere. This also led to the discussion of the role of theology and religion within the MENA region, and if Islam is compatible with politics. As such, İbrahim Kalın tackled the sectarian focus within the discussion,

stating that states today exploit sectarian issues for the sake of their national interests. Ghannouchi on the other hand, approached the issue from a governance perspective, claiming that governance in Islam does not require Muslims to create completely new systems of governance, nor does Islam require them to rule as per the past; rather that Islam came with guiding principles, leaving the intricacies of a system to be decided by the people of the time.

It is also worthy noting the discussions that took place on the impact of military intervention in the Arab world and the abandonment of the Syrian people. Jonathan Powell argued that there was a lack of nuance in the West's strategy regarding their intervention in Libya, stating that the West learnt the wrong lessons from Iraq and instead of assisting the Libyans properly in their democratic transition - they left halfway, leaving a vacuum for terror and chaos to thrive. Tarik Yousef capitalised on Powell's point, and went further to state that a unified entity containing powerful actors in the MENA region, similar to that of the European Union, needs to be established. By establishing a unified alliance between MENA countries, the region would be able to claim agency and take back control of its own matters.

Concluding, the panel explored both theoretical and practical aspects of the threats and trends the MENA region is passing through at the present time. A question from the audience prompted Ibrahim Kalin to remember Ibn Khaldun, claiming that the lack of 'Asabiyya' - or group solidarity - in MENA based societies today is one of the main contributing factors for the region's problems. The lack of unity amongst MENA states and their people, speaking their stories in languages other than theirs, approaching their problems via Western countries, and looking outwards for scapegoats to blame before reflecting inwards - is what has driven the MENA region to the state it is in, more than any outward threat such as terrorism and Western intervention. For this to change, Middle Eastern states will need to look within, and trust that their issues can be solved first and foremost by regaining control, and unity.



Director of the Brookings
Doha Center

Director, Inter Mediate

forum

Rached Ghannouchi, Co-founder of the Ennahdha Party, Tunisia, points about the French Revolution, and stated that for every revolution there will be a counter-revolution, but just as life goes on, so does the system - and eventually Syria will be free, as will the rest of the Arab world.

Emerging Trends and New Threats in the MENA Region: A Report

The Middle East and North African Region (MENA) has undergone significant changes throughout history, and indeed in the past seven years specifically. Having transitioned rapidly from a region of stability manifesting in forms of dictatorship and oppression to a region of instability, many factors have come to play in either exacerbating the situation, being a direct reason for it or a result of it.

Delving into the current situation in the MENA region is an endless venture in which one would not find an end to, given that much of the issues at hand are layered with historical and political complexities. With this in mind, there is still an urgent necessity to examine the trends in the region, in order to be able to pace ourselves for future developments and endeavors. It is in this backdrop and understanding that the TRT World Forum hosted a panel on 'Emerging Threats and Trends in the MENA Region', in October 2017, inviting leading thinkers and politicians specialised in this region to discuss the current situation. The panel consisted of Tunisian politician and leader of Al-Nahda party, Rached Ghannouchi, Presidential spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, Doha Brookings director, Tarik Yousef and ex-British minister, Jonathan Powell. Whilst many topics were touched upon in the 90 minute session, the most prominent of them which this report will expand upon are: democracy and revolution in the Arab World, Islam's compatibility with politics, narrative and regional cooperation, Western intervention and its implications, and finally the role of the diaspora in the current and future climate.

A Perspective on Colonial Rule



The make-up of the Arab World prior to 2011 was one primarily consisting of monarchies and dictatorships. Tracing back the emergence of tyrannical regimes in the Middle East finds us at the forefronts of European colonialism, and the devastating effects it had on the region. Much of it starts with the Sykes-Picot agreement which led to the demise of the Ottoman Empire; in which a line in the sand suddenly uprooted entire communities, forcing upon them a new identity in a period of confusion, where a resident of Damascus did not know if he was Ottoman, Syrian or Arab. The identity crisis was confounded by the imposition of new modes of governance under the French, British and Italian mandates. There are many factors one could speak about when dissecting the effect of colonialism in the region, and indeed an entire discipline has been attributed to this period in history, however - what has rarely been discussed is the tyrannical regimes of the Arab World as a direct result of colonialism during the interwar period.

The intention of the British, French and Italian was to 'divide and rule', they believed that breaking the bond of the Arab tribes and communities would allow them to gain and maintain power, as well as sow the seeds of discord between them. The irony in such strategy in the Middle East was that even though the Arabs as an 'entity' with a strong hold over

their identity at the time was not a very prevalent concept - given their very recent Ottoman past, the colonisers inadvertently sparked the reemergence of this concept, giving birth to a child they never intended to conceive: Pan-Arabism. In brief, an ideology which sought to unite the Arabs of the newly founded Arab states, Pan-Arabism provided a utopian vision to an otherwise fragmented reality. Of course pan-Arabism was not the only pan-ideological or ethnic movement to find ground in that period, or before it - as support for a Pan-Islamist movement was also reviving, in addition to the gradual rise of nationalism. Throughout the colonial period, movements of any civic sort were repressed by the colonisers in the Arab world for fear that it would lead to revolt, and even though the leaders of said pan-movements eventually drove the colonisers out of the Middle East physically, their legacy remained.

The legacies of the colonisers did not help nor give the Arab world a chance to prosper - one of the reasons pertains to them not leaving behind any culture of governance. As such there was no transition of power - so the military generals and commanders who had fought for independence took over the countries with little concept of how to democratically administrate it. The fear of being thrown out in the same way in which they threw out the colonisers paved way for once revolutionaries to become authoritarians, consolidating their power through dictatorial military rule - and the military has never upheld the values of democracy within its rule. Another colonial legacy was the purposeful placement of certain factions in power prior to leaving certain countries, so as to ensure their foreign policies would remain intact once they departed. This took place in countries such as Syria, where the French ensured the empowerment of a minority over a majority, whom have remained in power till this day, causing the eventual rebellion against their oppressive rule.



İbrahim Kalın, Spokesperson to the President of Turkey, stated that the lack of 'Asabiyyah' in MENA based societies today is one of the main contributing factors to the region's problems.

Democracy in the Arab World



The history of the Arab world is incredibly diverse, as each country went through its own ordeals and experiences in order to overthrow the colonialists and establish an independent nation state. A common misconception looms around the 'failure' of Arab Uprisings, given the general lack understanding of the region and the countries independent setting. This point was referred to by Rached Ghannouchi who affirmed that every state will eventually reach 'the course of democracy', albeit at their own pace once they overcome their unique struggles; that said however, Rached Ghannouchi also contradicted this by criticising the Syrian and Libyan revolutions and comparing them to that of Tunisia. Whilst one can understand the temptation for comparison, to do so lacks the nuance of context and reduces the revolutions to an idealised concept which fits certain circumstances. Ghannouchi condemned the militarisation of the revolutions in the respective countries, implying that their success and failure is based upon this factor. Such analysis bodes more one-dimensional and fails to address the specific events and necessities that turned the uprisings into armed rebellions. In his concluding remarks however, he mentioned the international pressures upon certain countries such as Egypt and Syria have been very different to that on Tunisia, which have been part of the reason for the different results.

The Arab Uprisings and their quest for freedom was the main discussion point of the panel session, of which all panellists contributed to. Ultimately, the general consensus amongst all four panellists was that the Arab world will in due course achieve what it set out to achieve in 2011, despite all its current domestic and international obstacles of set agendas, counter-revolution and terrorist groups. Whilst İbrahim Kalın reaffirmed the stance of Turkey in supporting the Arab peoples in every way they can, Jonathan Powell stated that it was his firm belief that the Arab world will find the freedom it has been searching for, in which the international community started off with high hopes for and have now turned pessimistic about. He reiterated Ghannouchi's previous points about the French Revolution, and stated that for every revolution there will be a counter-revolution, but just as life goes on, so does the system - and eventually Syria will be free, as will the rest of the Arab world.

Narrative and Regional Cooperation

The need for regional cooperation and solutions in absence of international efforts has been a recent topic of both discussion and action. As we have seen with the Astana process, regional powers have taken it upon themselves to broker peace settlements, whether the deals have been successful or widely accepted is debatable – however this initiation within themselves is important. Being of Libyan descent, Tarik Yousef spoke of the let-down of the international community regarding Libya – and the rest of the region's case. His statement about the international community was that after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and World War I, it was them who put the current regional order in place and which has only brought instability and volatility to the region since. Whilst he believes that the Middle East as a region has not 'genuinely tried' to engage in open discussions yet, he would indeed be happy to see regional powers finding a way to accommodate their interests and come together to put a framework that works for the region. He further added that as a Libyan who has witnessed what his country has been through, he is compelled to believe that the future regional security arrangements would include countries from the region and those with vested interest in prosperity – and only then would the vision for hope and change, based on inclusiveness and democracy, be possible.

The panel not only discussed the concept of regional cooperation regarding diplomatic efforts, but also on every other effort – linking it back to the concept of colonisation. In simple terms, the MENA region is in need of decolonization in every aspect and taking agency over their political, linguistic, social and intellectual sphere. Ibrahim Kalin weighed in on the discussion by stating that it is time the countries spoke to each other directly, rather than about each other, to foreign powers or media outlets. He contended that it is this lack of direct communication which results in a lack of agency over their own stories, since not only are they not narrating to the right audience – but also narrating in a borrowed language which does not fully capture nor encompass the region's culture and issues. Inspired by history, he referred to the concept of 'unity in diversity' – which theologian and mystic Ibn Arabi spoke about, implying that the MENA region have much to work with, and many strengths to capitalise on – if only they recognised the strengths in what is currently being branded as weakness.

Role of Theology and Religion in MENA - Islam's Compatibility with Politics

The panel further delved into the role of theology and religion within the MENA region, and if Islam is compatible with politics. As such, İbrahim Kalın tackled the issue of sectarianism, stating that states today exploit sectarian issues for the sake of their national interests. He commented further on the theoretical aspects of the threats and trends in the MENA region, referring back to the 14th century Arab historian and historiographer, Ibn Khaldun, who spoke extensively of the concept of 'Asabiyyah,' which means 'group solidarity'. Kalın stated that the lack of 'Asabiyyah' – in MENA based societies today is one of the main contributing factors to the region's problems. The lack of unity amongst MENA states and their people, speaking their stories in languages other than theirs, approaching their problems via Western countries, and looking outwards for scapegoats to blame before reflecting inwards - is what has driven the MENA region to the state it is in, more than any outward threat such as terrorism and Western intervention. For this to change, Middle Eastern states will need to look within, and trust that their issues can be solved first and foremost by regaining control and unity. Rached Ghannouchi on the other hand chose to approach the issue from a governance perspective, claiming that governance in Islam does not require Muslims to create completely new systems, nor does the religion of Islam require them to rule as per the past; rather that Islam came with guiding principles, leaving the intricacies of a system to be decided by the people of the time. His vision for Islam in politics is one that is championed by many in the region who know better than to categorise those who see religion playing a part in the MENA as 'Islamist' – without a nuanced differentiation between the many groups who may fall under this anglicised term. As such, and relating back to Kalın's point about the region speaking about itself and its troubles in 'borrowed language', through the eyes of the foreign outlets – it is essential to ensure that the rhetoric of religion and Islamism is not one that is borrowed, but rather one that is authentic to the region and the long-standing experience of the people of the region with religion. It is evident that Islam, as with all other religions, must play an important role in the MENA region – given how central it is to the societies, histories and geographies of each country – the question of 'how' however, as the panellists agreed – goes back to the people of each country to decide.

Western Intervention: Lessons from Iraq

Foreign intervention has always been a contentious issue across the world, with the intervention in Iraq being the most disputed one of them all in recent history. Two main camps have emerged over the last few years regarding Western intervention in the MENA region, one which condemns intervention – deriving their reasons and causes back to the catastrophic results in Iraq justified by imperialism, and another which believes that the case with Iraq was radically different to the cases present today, and that in fact the situation today demands intervention at any cost to save the lives of people. With this backdrop, the panel discussed the impact of military intervention in the Arab world and the abandonment of the Syrian people. Since Obama's failed 'red line' in 2013, when the Syrian regime committed a chemical attack massacre on Eastern Ghouta, no state has taken decisive action against the Assad regime to stop the killing once and for all. Whilst the same cannot be said about Libya, the intervention in 2011 did not lead to most desirable of results as it appears that the West – then – keen to help without repeating mistakes of Iraq, ended up doing quite the opposite by immediately withdrawing after assisting the Libyan people with removing Gaddafi from power. Jonathan Powell argued that there was a lack of nuance in the West's strategy regarding their intervention in Libya, stating that the West learnt the wrong lessons from Iraq and instead of assisting the Libyans properly in their democratic transition – they left halfway, leaving a vacuum for terror and chaos to thrive. Tarik Yousef capitalised on Powell's point, and went further to state that a unified entity containing powerful actors in the MENA region, similar to that of the European Union, needs to be established. Only by establishing a unified alliance between MENA countries, the region would be able to claim agency and take back control of its own matters. The question of intervention in Syria however remained – and remains – open, albeit complicated. Whilst many will contend that intervention in Syria four years ago would have saved many lives, nobody truly knows what happens now given the matter being heavily intertwined with Russia, Turkey, Iran, USA, International Coalition Forces, local rebel groups, civil society and terrorist organisations from every side – with the Syrian people falling in the middle of all of them. It may be nigh time to begin approaching the concept of intervention from different aspects which would better benefit the Syrian people, as well as add nuance to a discussion bigger than just its military perspective.



Jonathan Nicholas Powell, Director, Inter Mediate, argued that there was a lack of nuance in the West's strategy regarding their intervention in Libya, stating that the West learnt the wrong lessons from Iraq and instead of assisting the Libyans properly in their democratic transition.



Tarik Yousef, Director, Brookings Doha Center, spoke of the let-down of the international community regarding Libya – and the rest of the region's case.

Role of Diaspora

From the onset of the uprisings in the Arab World, the question of the diaspora has been asked, both before and after the refugee crisis. It would be wrong to assume that those who left their home countries decades ago do not play a role in the ongoing politics of the region today, as it would be wrong to omit them from any future vision and process. It was Tarik Yousef who remembered the diaspora towards the end of the panel session, who – in his opinion, have never ceased to organise, mobilise and innovate. Indeed, the Palestinian diaspora over the last few decades have been of the most effective diaspora groups in the world and who play an active role in the future of their respective country, as is the case with most diaspora groups who have either been exiled for political reasons – such as with Libya and Syria's case – or who moved many years ago for different economic and social reasons. With the refugee crisis, a new diaspora has been added to the mix around the world, one which has also sought innovation and life in such a short period of time – bringing new opportunities with them where possible. As Tarik Yousef concluded in his closing remarks, it is this group that will be the 'bridge' between East and West, and who will be the future of the region – in rebuilding and reconciliation efforts, for the richness of their exposure and experiences, even if perceived as unfortunate in the present moment.

Conclusion

The experiences of each country to date have been vastly differing due to many factors, not least historical, economical and geographical; and whilst the ends the nations set to achieve are similar- the struggles remain incredibly unique. The panel session at TRT World Forum 2017 enriched the current discussion about the emerging threats and trends in the MENA region, in such way, however, that it posed the threats into means and opportunities. Whilst a vast array of topics were explored and touched upon, the overwhelming message throughout the session was one of hope and optimism. The uprisings that erupted across the region seven years ago are not perceived as having gone in vain, despite the massive human destruction that has taken place - and though the response to the revolutions has been counter-revolution and terrorism on both state and non-state actor level, their message have been wide-reaching as have their implications. The events in the MENA region have shaken up the world, and though many stand divided on the course of action necessary, none doubt that it is on its way to a better and brighter era.