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11th GCSP / Crown Center
GRC Annual Conference
"The Middle East: Change
and Upheaval 2013"

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The Middle East: Change and Upheaval 2013

As the Middle East continues to grapple with challenging questions of continuity and change, a group of distinguished thinkers on the region's politics and society met in Gstaad, Switzerland, to analyze current political dynamics and their implications for the region and beyond. This 11th Annual Conference organized jointly by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), the Crown Centre for Middle East Studies at Brandeis University, and the Gulf Research Center (GRC) aimed to take stock of developments in the Middle East over the previous year and bring about a greater understanding of the complex problems faced by a perplexingly disordered region. Following on the 10th meeting in 2012, the primary focus of the discussion was on the Arab revolutions, their overall significance and outlook as well as their impact in the region with a specific emphasis on Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. In addition, Iran's domestic politics and its international security implications; the GCC states and their place in the broader Middle East; as well as Israeli-Palestinian relations also featured prominently. The meeting opened by looking at the broader geopolitical and regional dynamics and concluded with a session considering policy implications in relation to present regional political dynamics. This report summarizes discussions held in the course of this meeting and in the tradition of previous reports on this Conference series, no direct, personal attributions are made herein. The Conference's program is attached.

Geopolitical and Regional Dynamics: An Overview

The first session on geopolitical and regional dynamics began by noting the prevailing perception of the waning of US power in the region, due – in part – to the past 12 years of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that have led to unsatisfactory results and heavy economic costs. On the one hand, it is clear that there is little appetite in Washington for further engagement in the Middle East with a parallel being drawn to the 1920s when the US withdrew from international affairs in the aftermath of the First World War. On the other hand, it was argued that a complete recalibration of US foreign policy including the much-touted US pivot to Asia was unlikely. The United States remains the predominant power in the region even if, by some accounts, its power has declined as new emerging powers – Russia, China, India, and Turkey – strive to challenge its preponderance.

While the US will therefore continue to provide the security umbrella for the region due to lack of current alternatives and its own strategic priorities, it was also noted that regional states have remained distrustful of US policies with even the Arab Gulf States lacking confidence in the current US direction. As far as the GCC states are concerned, there is a lack of confidence in the prolongation of US power and action in the Gulf. This skepticism is accompanied by a degree of wariness regarding the US. Besides, the prevailing view in Washington seems to be that the crisis in the region is too complicated to be resolved through active US involvement and that the best policy for the moment is containment that prevents spillover effects throughout and outside the region.

President Obama's aims in Syria – of preventing the country from becoming a Jihadist haven, ensuring that any WMDs do not fall into the 'wrong' hands, and protecting Jordan from any negative fall-out – has led to a US reluctance to arm the rebel forces. One view – not uncontested – was that this reluctance reflects a lack of strategic vision and a vacuum in political leadership in an international system that seems more and more to be a non-polar rather than a unipolar one. For Russia, the lessons from the international community's controversial use of force to affect regime change in Libya had predetermined its opposition to similar involvement in Syria and its reluctance to cooperate with any attempt to resolve the Syrian situation. Russian diplomats ask whether suppression of civil liberties and disproportionate use of force against internal opposition constitutes a sufficient basis for foreign intervention. In Russia's view, issues that were once considered to belong to the internal affairs category are increasingly being turned into global issues. As this is coupled with lack of a strategic architecture and an agreed framework for external powers' involvement in the Middle East, there seems to be little prospect for addressing effectively the intractable conflicts in the Levant.

Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime has fueled the internationalization of its internal conflict by its inability to realize in time the need to change the existing political system and to avoid a forceful response to peaceful demands for reform. If the 10-year civil war in Algeria (1992-2002) was the result of a too hasty reform of the political system, then Syria is a classic example of how the stubborn attempts of the rulers to preserve a system that has outlived its usefulness can lead to catastrophic consequences. The Syrian conflict has caused a clash of interests – a kind of 'proxy war' – not only between Russia and the West, but also between the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and Iran. Spiraling out of control, violence in Syria is developing its own dynamics – including a Sunni-Shiite rivalry – which is becoming hard to reverse.

Overall, the Middle East is in the midst of growing upheavals in so many respects that it can be viewed as becoming unhinged. Often underestimated, the increasing importance of global resource demands and its impact upon commodity prices means that people are facing extraordinarily high prices for staple products such as bread and wheat thereby intensifying economic contestation. Egypt – the most densely populated country in the region – remains the largest wheat importer in the Middle East at a time of persistent instability, negatively impacting particularly the very poor section of society which depends on those products. Similarly, the Syrian uprising, now seen as the leading catalyst of the unraveling of the regional order, was preceded by the severest drought crisis in that country's recent history.

The ongoing power struggles in the region can be seen as a symptom of the aforementioned factors of uncertainty and unpredictability. The concern is that present conflicts will not be easy to contain and will instead lead to an 'Arc of Conflict' stretching from the Mediterranean region to the Gulf, even putting into the question the viability of present border arrangements and the future of the Middle Eastern nation-state. Spillover effects can already be seen when it comes to Iraq. Suggestions of closer Turkey-Kurdish ties and moves by the Kurdish regional government to cement their autonomy status threaten the integrity of the Iraqi state with subsequent implications for Iraq's Sunni community. This represents a monumental crisis that can lead to the de-territorialization of the state. While Iraq could still be a loose federation, the Syrian crisis could lead to a cantonization. As such, the Middle East is going through uncharted territory with Syria being the detonator of a regional crisis. Israel could be further drawn into such a crisis. Yet the region alone cannot address the Syrian conflict; the Gulf States are trying but failing to put together a unified Syrian opposition force.

The balance of power struggles are not uniform; they present all actors with an overlapping matrix of challenges. In this environment, regional actors aim to maximize their national power and serve their national interests. The regional balance of forces from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabian Gulf largely depends on the outcome of the struggle between the leading regional players, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt. One view is that in this respect the situation in the region is not unprecedented and that the current crisis has a resemblance with situation in the 1950s, when local powers invited external powers to come into the region. But the similarity is incomplete; the Middle East then was under the shadow of the Cold War and the strong grip of the superpowers. With the Cold War having ended, however, the international system lacks clear organizing principles leading one commentator to argue that one is currently faced with a global system that is hard to read in terms of future developments.

Domestically, the mass uprisings of the last three years have changed political configurations within states. In the ongoing transition, it is not entirely clear what development models will be applied. There are many examples showing the revolutionary pendulum swinging too fast in the opposite direction of autocratic rule leaving a security vacuum with devastating consequences for the people and the state. There are historical precedents to this. Indeed, more than once, the history of world revolutions witnessed power coming to those who managed to ride the revolutionary wave rather than to those who were pivotal in bringing about the revolutionary changes. The Arab Spring that began with democratic slogans falls in this historical pattern.

The new generation of Arabs impressed the world with their passionate calls for upholding human dignity, social justice, the right to a better life, and national development. Nevertheless, Islamist groups adhering to slogans of Islamic renewal, equality, and social justice, managed to seize the initiative and win a landslide victory in parliamentary elections. Subsequent persistent internal struggles over redistribution of power have contributed to state weakness and even to increasing the threat of failed states emerging in the region. For example, international terrorist groups are strengthening their support bases in North Africa, Yemen, and in sub-Saharan Africa and, in the last two years, in Syria. It is further witnessed in the failure of the state to adequately deal with minority rights and ethnic divisions, or establish strong state institutions. This state weakness is the most significant contributing factor to the lack of predictability in the Middle East, thus undermining the basis of regional and international security.

Yet the issue of state weakness is difficult to generalize. Iraq and Syria can certainly be classified as weak but Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and even Egypt suggest that not all states fall into this category. There is also a middle category that includes the smaller Gulf States. Even in Assad's Syria, the regime has proven much stronger than was anticipated with the opposition being in disarray. This raises questions about the utility of the weak-strong states dichotomy. In the long run, however, the course of transformative processes in other parts of the Middle East may well depend on the pattern of social development that will prevail in Egypt.

All this suggests that the Middle East may have entered a long period of instability with repeated political crises, economic decline, and state degradation. This also raises the possibility that we are only at the beginning of a 30-year war in the Middle East with all of its associated dire consequences. Some countries (Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria) have seen an increased risk of disintegration,

terrorism, and manifestations of Islamism of a radical nature. Meanwhile, the new ruling elites in countries like Egypt and Tunisia have not managed to consolidate power and demonstrate an ability to move forward or to realize the proclaimed democratic goals and ideals.

The Arab Spring has also confronted the entire international community with a new political reality: political Islam in power, not just in theory, but also in terms of practical politics and diplomacy. A key question remains, however, whether Islamist movements can meet the high expectations of the Arab Street or even whether their approach to governance allows for the establishment of modern democratic norms and pragmatism in politics. Instead, political Islam raised the fear that one dictatorship was merely replaced by another. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood forfeited its electoral promises to cooperate with all national forces, respect minority opinions, and establish a modern democratic and constitutional state, instead heading for the monopolization of power in the hands of the president. This was accompanied by the Islamization of the legal system, state apparatus, and power structures in all aspects of social life. Secular political forces and revolutionary activists have interpreted this as usurpation of power, with the president actually assuming dictatorial powers in the interests of one political force. As seen in Egypt, this situation has complicated the transition and the country has plunged into a whirlwind of revolutions and counter-revolutions. Other Arab states face the same risk.

The wide gap between expectations and lack of opportunities is very clear. In the absence of tangible results, the feelings of frustration and political apathy widespread in the public consciousness, particularly among the revolutionary youth, are increasingly turning into an aggressive, belligerent mood. In addition, without massive external support, Egypt, like Tunisia and other neighboring countries, is unlikely to emerge from the current crisis. Meanwhile, in the present state of the world economy, the possibility of providing such assistance is limited.

Arab Revolutions: The Evolving Context

The discussion on Arab revolutions brought to the fore the fact that while there is a sense of new empowerment this is combined with weak leadership and a lack of stabilization dynamics at play that could provide for a structured way forward. This is proving highly problematic within the context of building new states or within new phases of statehood given that one is witnessing a process of de-statization (weakening of the state) alongside the strengthening of non-state actors (in particular, the regeneration of Al Qaeda) and the re-mapping – in an open-ended way – of the region. Compared to the Mashreq, the situation in

North Africa appears to be more forward-looking. In Tunisia, the narrative is about constitutionalism; in Libya, it is about the pride of removing Gaddafi; and in Algeria, there is a sense of ‘we have been there during the 1990s Civil War.’ North Africa has also experienced two interventions, in Libya and Mali, giving rise to an unpredictable environment. In Libya, division appears to be along tribal and class lines although, by and large, there exists ethnic and religious cohesion. Libya’s small population is an advantage in terms of managing this transition phase and facilitating the evolution of the state. Nevertheless, Libya still represents a failed rentier state.

In Egypt, it has become apparent that an actor with the authority over institutions is essential for the effective running of the state. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) began working on the bureaucracy to take over state institutions but through their policies they made bureaucratic resistance within the institutions a self-fulfilling prophecy. Being aware of this resistance, the MB instigated inter-institutional competition, for example, competition between the judiciary and legislative/shura council, and between the army and the police. One of the effects was the creation of parallel institutions. For example, in addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Presidential Office would work on foreign policy and regional relations although it lacks expertise and efficiency. This attempt at domination, however, has fallen short and recent events have underlined that the Muslim Brotherhood cannot control the state or the street. In fact, the strategies they adopted have narrowed their legitimacy. Consequently, the army is the only institution to have a degree of authority both in the state structures and in the street. This cannot be equated with state stability, however, as the level and readiness to use violence in Egypt has increased dramatically throughout 2013. Yet how to hold power to account if institutions are thoroughly penetrated remains a key problem.

The patterns of politics since the uprisings began have led to competition across different levels. There are forces that want to maintain open political spaces and expand upon them while others want to restrict those spaces, showing that old habits of power die hard. Within this competition, the re-organization of power poses huge challenges including addressing the legacy created by the shadow vs. the public states as exemplified by the personalized nature of rule in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria. Another challenge is being able and ready to acknowledge the importance of young generations as a key component of society. The revitalization of economies as a means to limit the political effects of economic crisis and tackling class inequalities and existing privileges is yet another challenge. Under these circumstances, the rise of religiosity and the heightened

importance of ethnicity and nationalism can be real and threatening. In Egypt, for instance, did Mr. Morsi behave as the President of Egypt or as an Ikhwani (a member of Muslim Brotherhood)? By sticking to the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda, arguably he could not be seen as a symbol of nationhood.¹

The ongoing conflict over distribution of resources and access to power and privileges ensures a mobilized opposition that guarantees instability in politics. These coupled with conflicts over identity are prescriptions for violence being part of the equation. The types of violence include: communal violence – between fundamentally opposed identities; violence against failed expectations; and violence against established power. There is also violence of armed groups with Syria becoming a cause célèbre for many armed movements. These forms of violence pose tremendous challenges for external powers including, how do you deal with violence in a remote area perpetrated by unknown actors.

The Arab revolutions have further underlined that external dynamics follow from domestic configurations. These elements highlight the importance of state building and the challenges that come with it: how to work power sharing, build the machinery of the state and involve minorities; how to make a peaceful transition from the old regime to the new state; how to co-opt certain elements of the previous regime; how to prevent economic collapse; and how to deal with corruption. The Arab Spring can be interpreted as a delayed response to state-building with state-building domestically seen as separate from international-led state-building. Yet homegrown state-building might be an impossible task when the economy – including the private sector – is weak. In the Egyptian case, not only is there a high politicization of the Egyptian economy but foreign investments have left the country and assistance from the Gulf States is insufficient. In such circumstances, control of the country is indeed a hard task.

The discussion overall reinforced the importance of local politics. Any transition attempt is bound to have violent characteristics given its deeply threatening nature to the established order. But the transition is complicated by an inability to understand the state as it exists in the region and away from the notion of the state in the traditional institutional sense as developed by Max Weber. The Weberian understanding may not be wholly valid as regards the Middle East and North Africa where the focus has often been on state-building rather than nation-

1 A leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood and running as candidate of the Freedom and Justice Party, Mohamed Morsi was elected President of Egypt on June 30, 2012. He was deposed by the Egyptian military led by General Abdelfattah Al Sisi on July 3, 2013. His removal led to a violent and prolonged opposition between his supporters and those actors welcoming the coup.

building. There is also the transition to be accomplished from personalized to institutional rule. The fact that this debate remains unaddressed demonstrates the poverty of politics in the Middle East.

The Arab Spring and the Levant

Lebanon

While the 2012 Gstaad meeting considered the question of whether Lebanon would be affected by the Syrian crisis, the 2013 meeting was concerned with the question of how deeply Lebanon had been affected by the events in Syria. It has become clear that Lebanon cannot escape the Syrian quagmire and the suggestion was put forward that the current situation, from a psychological and military perspective, is similar to the situation between 1972 and 1974 on the eve of the Lebanese Civil War. While the Taif Agreement of October 1989 brought the war to an end and effectively froze Shia-Sunni competition while giving Syria arbitrage over it, this arrangement ended with the assassination of Rafik Hariri in 2005 for which the International Tribunal openly indicted the Syrian regime. Lebanon is thus affected by events which occurred before the Arab revolutions with the fault-lines and cleavages in the country also predating the Arab Spring.

Along the 375 km Syrian-Lebanese border, the altercation has become increasingly physical with rebel groups and individuals crossing every hour to join the fighting inside Syria. Within Lebanon, the relevance of the psycho-sociology of sects was referred to. Shia leaders feel – and they have succeeded in convincing their population – that what is happening in Syria is an existential problem. Given that Hizbollah maintains its own militia and has abundant access to power, the present paranoia has led to a zero-sum game both in perception and behavior. The Sunni community feels that state institutions have been hijacked or at a minimum undermined. Videos showing the Lebanese Army beating civilians have fueled fears that the army has been corrupted and turned into a vigilante organization of Hizbollah. This has led to calls for the Sunnis to build their own army, raising doubts about the continued viability of the Lebanese Army. Christians, who have served as a bridge between the two in the past, are completely divided between the Sunni and the Shia.

The role of Hizbollah in the Syrian conflict raises the question as to whether their behavior should be seen as that of a guardian angel to the Assad regime, or whether it was tremendous pressure from Iran that led to their direct involvement in the struggle. In either case, it is clear that Hizbollah is committed to the defense of the Syrian regime. If and when the Assad regime falls, Hizbollah will play for a fragmented Syria with territory being divided along factional lines. Meanwhile,

Israel is watching the situation carefully and debating when to possibly strike against Hizbollah.

Inside Lebanon, the impact of the Syrian crisis is exacerbated by the fact that there exists an opaque political situation with little indication of who is actually in charge. The interim prime minister is unlikely to form a new government, the President's mandate comes to an end soon, and as a legislative power parliament appears crippled. All this combines to create a vacuum in the realms of security and politics, a situation exacerbated by the lack of a functioning regional system that could defuse crises.

Jordan

While Lebanon appears to be on the precipice of a momentous crisis, the situation in Jordan is quite the opposite. King Abdullah has performed better than most anticipated and following the January 2013 elections and the introduction of some gradual reforms, Jordan has even emerged as a model of sorts for the rest of the Middle East. Opposition figures have been co-opted and a development policy was launched that utilized funds provided by the Gulf States. The government also took steps to deal with corruption. In addition, the security forces avoided being drawn into the upsurge of violence caused by a fuel crisis and stayed largely on the sidelines, thus diffusing some of the mounting pressures.

The King's long-term strategy appears to be slow reform and interventions, and these may have a transformative effect on Jordanian politics. At the same time, the King could face increased pressure due to a number of factors: the tension between him and East Bankers; the emergence of oppressive communalism whereby elites in parliament use existing political structures to secure their interests in conjunction with new laws dealing with corruption among parliamentarians; an economy that is far from stable; and some shifts in Jordan's foreign policy orientation linked with the possible intervention in Syria. Some media articles portray the King as a reformer while labeling the opposition as anti-democratic which, they say, has prevented the King from pushing through many of his reforms. Nonetheless, it was suggested that the King has fallen short and failed to display sufficient leadership at times. The assessment was that the successful elections have not gotten the King out of the woods yet.

Outside of domestic considerations, Jordan now has a geopolitical role to play due to the Syrian crisis. Clearly, if the west will intervene in Syria, Jordan will be the staging ground. King Abdullah believes that this has strengthened his bargaining position, especially with the Gulf States. Jordan has already been

extended offers including pipelines to Aqaba and large amounts of aid. The King does not want to break with America and Israel; instead, he seeks a more fruitful relationship with them. At the same time, he also seeks cooperation with the Gulf States and has argued that the security of Jordan and that of the GCC states should be seen as one. Yet the Syrian crisis also contains dangers and significant challenges for Jordan. A large number of refugees continue to spill across the border thus stretching facilities and increasing social tensions between the refugees and Jordanian citizens. In addition, there is the threat of a significant blowback from Jihadists in Syria who could infiltrate Jordan to conduct disruptive campaigns there.

Syria

At the outset, it was mentioned that Syria is an unwanted revolution in the sense that initially regime change was not the protesters' goal. If the regime had handled the protests differently, the west and other external powers would have reacted differently. Instead, Syria has begun to disintegrate with crushing poverty and deep cleavages developing in the society in addition to widespread criminality and lawlessness. Not only would all state institutions have to be rebuilt – the society as a whole would require reconstruction.

The Assad regime continues to believe that it will win the conflict. With the support of Hizbollah and Iran, it hopes that it will pull through to the 2014 elections where Assad can hope to get 70-75 percent of the vote. There is simply no way that the regime will negotiate away its power. Extremism is now becoming the regime's self-fulfilling prophecy; its behavior breeds extremism. Hundreds of jihadists have flocked to Syria and the fact that people on the ground feel abandoned by the international community has created a permissive environment for extremism to grow even further. The conflict itself is no longer exclusively between the regime and opposition; it is much more fragmented, with any number of local groups acting for their own interests.

As for the humanitarian aspect, there are already two million refugees. About one million are in Lebanon, where they constitute one third of the population. Given the situation in Syria, many of them are not likely to return. In Bosnia, nearly 20 years after the ending of hostilities, most of the displaced people have not gone back to their homes. Overall, half of Syria's population – some 11 million – can be considered as displaced both inside and outside the country.

The initial analysis sparked a wide-ranging debate. Clearly, the Syrian crisis has become a regional one, most evident in Lebanon and Jordan. For its part,

while Israel does not want to affect the balance of power inside Syria, it is determined to prevent what it considers to be the worst possible outcome – a victory of the Iran-backed regime or a take-over by the jihadist elements of the opposition. Saudi Arabia continues to support selected factions in Syria and is determined to do so with or without US cooperation as the alternative would be seen as a victory for Iran and Russia.

In terms of future developments, four scenarios were put forward: (1) continuation of the current situation in Syria, with no real winner, while the ongoing supply of arms to both sides would fuel a prolonged war of attrition; (2) a palace coup coming from within the military establishment; (3) a political solution possibly leading to a transition government led from within the military; or (4) a partition of Syria with all of its regional consequences. The latter scenario is not inevitable given that it might not be in the interest of the majority of the country's population. Syrians appear to be increasingly engulfed by a sense of anti-Westernism, believing that it is the West's policy to bleed Syria dry and allow for its eventual partition.

Iran: Domestic Politics and Security Implications

The discussion on the election of Hasan Rouhani as Iran's new president focused on how his election came about and what the corresponding prospects for change would be. The Iranian election campaign initially engendered little enthusiasm and only after former President Rafsanjani registered his name did polls suggest that up to 80 percent of eligible voters would go to the polls. At a time of a controversial foreign policy and deteriorating economy, the predominant perception was that Rafsanjani would be the right man for the office of President. Following his disqualification, and two days before the election, Rafsanjani announced his support for Rouhani. Coupled also with the endorsement of former President Khatami, this changed the momentum for the Rouhani candidacy. The BBC Persian service had a great impact on mobilizing the Iranian people. Rouhani further ran a smart campaign barely mentioning Islamic culture but focusing on Iran's relations with the West, on civil society, freedom of expression and the press, and the economy. With the prospect of a Rouhani victory, it also became clear that any attempt by the establishment to prevent such a victory or manipulate the numbers would have led to a repeat of the events of 2009.

Many believe that the Rouhani presidency is going to change domestic politics and social life in Iran. There is further hope that there will be space for the media, and that the Iranian people will have more social and civil liberties. As far as foreign policy and security issues are concerned, the office of the President

in Iran has its own limitations. The new president is an expert on Iran's foreign policy and security issues. He is characterized as a centrist, a focused person, a student of law; unlike his predecessor he is not ad hoc or impulsive. While he has kept his contact with the clerics, he has also projected the image of a modern and pro-Western man.

In terms of issues, President Rouhani could facilitate a shift in Iran's nuclear policy meaning that some forward movement might be possible.² It was stated that the nuclear program could serve as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the US and that the Iranian establishment will use it to win desirable objectives if they have to negotiate. At the same time, it was pointed out that the nuclear issue has become political football in Iran's politics. The nuclear dossier is used to weaken the other party and has become a metaphor for projection of a much bigger dispute related to power and the future of the country. All foreign policy is therefore related to domestic politics and is a reflection of domestic power struggles.

On other issues – ranging from Syria, to Israel-Palestine, to Iraq and Afghanistan, there is less ground for optimism. The unlikelihood of a shift occurring regarding Syria is tied to the fact that the present Iranian strategy is centered on ensuring the survival of the current Syrian regime. Other parts of its foreign policy are bargaining chips. The discussion ensued on Saudi Arabia as this actor was seen as key to improved relations regionally and beyond. However, the assumption of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia was questioned, as issues such as Syria, support for Hizbollah, and the nuclear issue continue to keep the two sides on opposite sides of the fence. Yet, while the main issues between Iran and Saudi Arabia are not likely to change, it was suggested that the international powers may have an interest in encouraging a dialogue between Rouhani and Saudi Arabia as an easing of tensions will provide the new president with leverage in domestic politics.

Overall, the most important challenge that President Rouhani is currently facing is to convince the Iranian establishment that there is a direct connection between economic, foreign policy and national security doctrines. At the same time, the new president is not out to disturb the configurative features of the system. Instead, he is likely to focus on shifting the paradigm and discourse within the country. Rouhani's election has brought back the same dichotomy

2 In that regard, President Obama and President Rouhani held a telephone conversation on September 28, 2013. This discussion represented the first direct talks between leaders of the two countries since 1979.

witnessed over past the century and a half: modernization, on the one hand, and traditional religious theory, on the other.

A problematic assumption continues to be the role of the Supreme Leader as an omnipotent leader. While he can be seen as the final arbiter of decision making in Iran, this should not be equated with an ability to control the system and being able to push through whatever agenda he might have. In this context, it might be useful to make a distinction between *nizam* (the system, referring to a clerical network and the way in which networks of power function) and the leadership. Not only can the *nizam* exist without the leader but part of it can consist of a very well-established democracy.

There is an additional notion that things happening in Iran are singular events with little stress placed on process and strategy. Due to a perception that former President Ahmadinejad had put the *nizam* in jeopardy, there emerged a consensus within the elites that the system has gone too far and that it needed to be brought back. Hasan Rouhani's rhetoric of rationality was therefore appealing and his talk of a reform campaign was not seen as a threat to the system. While it was mentioned that one should not refer to Iran's system as a clerical system given that out of 125,000 clerics in the country, only about 2,000 are active in politics, it is still necessary to look beyond the apparent soft rhetoric and posture as such appearances cannot mask an authoritarian system. In the end, the Supreme Leader will do all he can to maintain power.

All this led to the question whether President Rouhani can deliver on the expectations that have been tied to him. Domestically, the election is seen as positive as the new president provides a level of stabilization that for the moment is seen as the best possible outcome for the system. It was noted that Rouhani came to power because of consensus among both the population and the system. Still, the election of Rouhani was a surprise and he was not the Supreme Leader's candidate. Yet, he should also be viewed as a conservative leader whose priority is to maintain the system. In addition, the fact that he is a centrist who ran a generic campaign also means that he will necessarily disappoint people.

The US, Israel, and Iran: Will There be War?

In Israel, the Iran nuclear issue has been one of the most thoroughly debated issues during the 60 years of the state's existence. The debate comprises four sets of issues and related questions:

- (1) What are the assumptions regarding Iran? Is nuclear Iran an existential threat? Is there a deterrence fall out? Can Israel assume that a nuclear Iran will act rationally?
- (2) How close is Iran in achieving its nuclear ambition? The Iranians appear to have been careful not to cross the red lines. But, have they made a decision to weaponize? Will Israel know whether they have?
- (3) What would be the consequences of a nuclear strike? How would this affect the region? How would it impact a Hizbollah so deeply engaged in Syria?
- (4) What will be the implications of an Israeli strike on Iran in a situation in which the US position is that it is not time yet to strike?

The question is whether Israel can find answers to those kinds of complexities with the current political leadership. It was emphasized that if negotiations fail, these kinds of questions will be asked. Moreover, the issue of Iran's nuclear program cannot be seen as being only President Obama's call.

A potential war with Iran could occur because it is (1) deliberate, i.e., Iran's program has reached a critical threshold; or (2) indirect, a scenario in which something can go wrong in the Gulf region. If one adds the current Syrian crisis, it becomes clear how critical the regional situation is and how it may lead to a conflict that spills over to a stand-off between regional players. In fact, it can be argued that there is already a war going on between Iran, Israel, and the US. This is the war on terrorist associations, and cyber war. In this context, it is better to refer to raids and an ongoing shadow war. At the same time, it was argued that Israel's capabilities to undertake a strike on Iran should not be underestimated given that it has been working around the clock for 10 years contemplating such a scenario.

Regarding Iran, meanwhile, it was again emphasized that domestic political survival is key for the establishment and that Iranian policy flows from the perspective of regime maintenance. Iran does assume that the US will not attack them due to the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that leave no appetite

for further military engagement. If an attack does occur, the most likely response would be to suppress any possibilities that an emboldenment of the opposition could threaten the regime domestically. At the same time, there would be the hope that an attack would unite all domestic factions behind the regime.

In terms of regional issues, Iran wants to underline that no issue can be solved without its involvement. In that context, Syria and the Iranian support to Hizbollah are strategies of forward defense that give Iran a measure of strategic depth. On the nuclear issue, there is likely to be no rollback on enrichment and certainly no suspension of activities. One possibility is the ratification of the Additional Protocol but other additional steps are unlikely. Overall, the Iranian elites want to make sure that the decision on this issue is theirs alone. But a question that remains is whether the international community is playing for time and moving towards a sustainable stalemate.

Containment was mentioned as a sound foreign policy move from the US point of view and it was argued that as long as Iran does not move on weaponization, containment will remain the key feature of US foreign policy on this issue. This argument was, however, received with skepticism by some participants given that the perceived legitimacy of such a policy is critical for a pragmatic assessment of what the outcome will be. Instead, no one has articulated what a diplomatic strategy will be and for the moment there appear to be no good alternatives available. It was further observed that for the US, there are two red lines that no one can ignore avoid: Pearl Harbor, and 9/11. From that perspective, it is unlikely that there will be a crisis this year as on all sides there are also tremendous domestic pressures that militate against such a move.

Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC States

The impact of domestic politics on the regional and international arena was a constant theme of this conference with the case of Iraq as a primary example of this theme. It was reasoned that the statecraft of Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki has features that are producing problematic outcomes. These features include internal centralization and personalized rule. Mr. Maliki has cemented his personal rule by means of a massive system of patronage to the point that patronage has become part of the system. This has extended to control over the intelligence services and the army with trusted people in charge, in effect creating shadow states. Iraq today looks very much like the Iraq in the 1950s without the monarchy.

There are also sectarian dimensions that stem from this personalized rule resulting in the exclusion of large segments of the population from the wealth

of the country. The huge gap between the rich and the poor and widespread poverty has coupled with widespread violence to render the domestic situation highly explosive. In addition to the violence of the authorities, there also exists communal violence (when people attack the army or barracks); symbolic violence (such as the blowing up of a mosque); or targeted violence that is meant to send a particular message about, for example, the division of spoils in different areas. It was argued that Mr. Maliki has a more sectarian outlook than Saddam Hussein.

Ethnic alienation has been another outcome with the Kurdish population losing the sense of being part of an Arab population. Under present conditions, it is difficult for the Kurdish leadership to quell any demands for independence as the memory of what Baghdad could do to the Kurds is still very much alive in the minds of the Kurdish communities. There is resentment regarding appropriation of resources.

Considerations of the GCC states began with Bahrain and Kuwait. It was noted that crises in Bahrain and Kuwait are not likely to engage the world in the real sense. There are demands from the opposition for a government responsible to parliament which could be seen to mean that the Emir keeps his position but his relatives lose theirs. The fundamental issue is whether the government is going to be responsible to the parliament or whether the royal family remains in charge. If the prime minister comes from the Parliament rather than from the royal family, then this amounts to soft regime change. The one ruler who has such a capacity at the moment is the Sultan of Oman who is the only monarch to have marginalized his family. In Qatar, the recent succession has provided an image of change but it should be expected that the larger outlines of Qatar's foreign policy are set and will therefore not shift dramatically. The new Emir will not change the priorities of Qatar's foreign policy including maintaining a strong military alliance with the US and keeping Qatar's autonomy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, there exists a structural problem as the horizontal succession pattern of the past is coming to an end without a clear sense of how a future vertical succession process will be handled. Within the ruling Al-Saud family, there is still a common group feeling ('asabiyya), yet there is also a sense that some of these bonds might be weakening. This does not mean that royal members will take their disagreements into the public domain but greater divisions could become visible. What might happen instead, it was suggested, is the Kuwaitization of Saudi Arabia in the sense of an increasingly ineffective and paralyzed state characterized by more issues being discussed publicly and debates about the nature of power. Whatever decisions about the succession

process are made within the family, there is a real likelihood of a weak leadership for the kingdom. Coupled to this is the fact that so far the country has been fortunate with stable and relatively high oil prices. But if domestic unemployment, other domestic issues, and the regional environment and its challenges are not addressed properly, the kingdom will find itself under increased pressure on all fronts.

In terms of the regional environment, it was suggested that Saudi Arabia had no strategic calculation in relation to the events associated with the Arab Spring. While the GCC role in the case of Yemen can be considered as partially successful, in the other cases stretching from Libya, to Egypt, Syria and Bahrain, the picture is much more complicated. Initially, the pragmatic realization was that the regime under pressure could not survive and as a result Saudi Arabia did not oppose the movements in the region (it was argued that the kingdom's decision to grant refuge to Ben Ali shortened the time of revolution and saved lives). As the developments have become more chaotic, however, the GCC states have looked for a return of the status quo in terms of re-establishing wider security and stability in the countries impacted.

In terms of Syria, the Saudi government recognizes the implications of Syria's destabilization with the government urging the Assad regime repeatedly prior to the outbreak of violence to undertake reforms that would prevent the conflict from intensifying. The appalling human disaster that has resulted from the prolonged conflict as well as the interventions of Russia and Iran seen as having regionalized the crisis, however, constituted a turning point for the GCC states. This coupled with disappointment about US policy and the time that was lost due to American pressure against supplying weapons left an impression that the US arguably sees tactical merit in having Hezbollah be militarily exposed through its engagement in the killing fields of Syria. For King Abdullah there is a clear determination to settle the Syrian conflict on the side of revolution. And for this, there is agreement with Qatar.

As far as Egypt is concerned, there is a feeling among the GCC states that the Muslim Brotherhood had begun to hijack the revolution. While it was thought that they will be part of the government, it was not thought that they would be the government. The possibility of the Muslim Brotherhood exporting their revolution into the Gulf has emerged as an issue of major concern. Meanwhile, the record of Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf States is not linear. In Bahrain they support the state, in Kuwait they are in the opposition, while in Saudi Arabia, they were used for a while as a force against the communists.

Israel and Palestine

At the outset, it was postulated that there does not appear to be any urgency to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians at this time. Even US Secretary of State John Kerry's mission falls into the established pattern given that the US and the other parties continue to hold on to their positions: US neglect, Palestinian pre-conditions, and Israeli rejection of those pre-conditions. If the US decided to use its leverage on both sides, it might change the equation, but there is no evidence to suggest that Washington is thinking along these lines. The lack of urgency is a function of (1) the absence of an immediate threat of violence, and (2) a lack of opportunity. The 2007 Annapolis agreement, for example, came about when an opportunity presented itself, i.e., when Hamas pulled out of the Palestinian Authority (PA) following its Gaza takeover.

In addition to there being no urgent threat of Palestinian violence or a third intifada, it was argued that there is also no threat of an Arab Spring spillover that the Arab-Israeli peace process can address. Generally speaking, the Arab-Israeli peace process has not been affected by the Arab Spring. The Egyptian and Jordanian peace with Israel is intact, a ceasefire with Syria is in place, the Arab Peace Initiative continues to be reiterated, Egypt continues to try to rein in Hamas when there is escalation, and the security threats in Sinai are not new and they are easily manageable. As such, no realistic opportunity has presented itself since Annapolis. On the contrary, since 2009 things have become worse due to two reasons. First, the process is now more difficult to put together due to Palestinian pre-conditions and Mr. Abbas' weaknesses due to domestic factors related to his electoral legitimacy such as the failure to move Palestinian reconciliation further. Second, the substance of a peace deal is now more difficult to put together due to the right wing tendencies of the Israeli prime minister and his coalition, e.g., on the Jewish nature of the state, the Israeli military presence in the Jordan valley, and the issue of Jerusalem. It was suggested that if it was difficult for Palestinians to contemplate much more moderate demands from Mr. Olmert, why would they be willing to consider more extreme demands such as those from Mr. Netanyahu?

At the same time, there is a need to resolve the conflict and Mr. Kerry has in fact been talking quite explicitly about the viability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and of the two-state solution. These two issues are not separate but must in fact be seen as one. If the Palestinian Authority collapses so does the two-state solution. And if the two-state solution collapses first, then the Palestinian Authority is likely to dissolve itself or face the risk of humiliating collapse.

Two new issues that deserve mention and could impact on any movement are settlements and the economic crisis. If settlement activity and construction continues, by the end of the current term of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the settlement enterprise will almost certainly reach a point where it becomes impossible to negotiate a two-state solution. In the absence of negotiations, and with such continued settlement construction, the Palestinian Authority will have no alternative but to speed up the process of its international drive leading to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in less than a year which itself brings with it the threat of a PA collapse.

The economic crisis has also claimed victims. GDP and per capita GDP rates were lower in the West Bank but higher in Gaza in the first quarter of 2013 compared to previous quarters. Salaries have not been paid on time since 2011, and there have been times when salaries were not paid in full for several months. Consequently, these conditions have:

Put an end to Fayyadism – i.e., Palestinian self-reliance; bottom up state building/peacemaking; and strong public institutions that deliver services and create a balanced political system where, for example, Abbas is challenged by the prime minister and the government. Fayyad managed to assert these values due to (a) greater personal competence, his courage in challenging Fatah, (b) public satisfaction with his SSR, support for greater freedoms, greater law enforcement; and (c) great international support.

Generated public anger and demonstrations combined with union strikes which are leading to serious destabilization (for example, the events of September-November 2012).

Led to concern about growing repression; less tolerance of dissent; greater role for the president in all matters of government.

In the light of the above, it was suggested that Mr. Kerry's mission is doomed to failure even if he managed to bring the two sides to the table. The cost of such failure is unpredictable. The status quo therefore is one in which a one-state reality is developing on the ground with no viable negotiations; settlement expansion with plans to build in sensitive areas; a status quo tolerated by Israelis due to the ceasefire in Gaza and security coordination in the West Bank creating significant peace and quiet; and the Palestinians are satisfied or compelled to go to the UN as the only way to challenge the status quo but they do so knowing that this could lead to the collapse of the PA. It was stated that the US could act

to narrow the gaps and revive motivation. President Obama must further spend some of his political capital as restricting this issue to the Secretary of State is not sufficient. The US must also allow for a role for the President as going into negotiations under the present conditions would almost certainly lead to failure with unpredictable consequences.

In Israel, the domestic scene is more complex. There is still majority support for the two-state solution although the peace camp that supported Mr. Rabin is still recuperating from the two intifadas. Most Israelis have zero awareness of what is happening on the other side of the fence. In the last elections, it was the middle class which took to the streets protesting against economic difficulties. They tried to talk of economic issues as separate from others but instead the recognition has grown that these issues are not separate. Overall, the terminology Israeli-Palestinian conflict overlooks the fact that there interdependencies at play. For the first time, a newly accredited university published a poll according to which there is a drop in support for settlements. This, in turn, is increasing demands on Mr. Netanyahu to really attempt to bring closure to the Palestinian issue.

Keeping in view the preceding discussion, it was noted that the region will continue to grapple with instability in the foreseeable future. The US does not seem to be keen to actively get involved with a view to resolving regional problems. There seems to be no willingness in Washington to settle Middle Eastern disputes at the speed with which the region wishes. Differences between regional actors and the US appear to be widening. In the meantime, the American weakness strengthens the Russian and Iranian positions. In all of this the real losers are not the regimes, but rather the people. This regional instability is worsened by the lingering conflict between Israel and Palestine. The Palestinians have reached the limit of their concessions with 40 percent of the Palestinian territories being developed by Israeli settlers. The second Obama administration has cautiously resumed the mediation mission, although, as pointed out, the conditions for this have deteriorated significantly compared to the situation four years ago. Overall, US diplomacy in the Middle East has not yet managed to overcome the tension between commitment to the close relations with Israel, on the one hand, and the realization that the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict is becoming more and more detrimental to the fundamental interests of the US in the Muslim world.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

In the concluding session, a number of enduring themes in relation to regional Middle Eastern security were made explicit. Regarding the US role in the region, it was pointed out that there are always more expectations from US leadership, no matter what America offers the region and/or does to help it. It is ironic that the US is always blamed by regional actors irrespective of what America does to assist them. Dissatisfaction with the US role may have to do with deficiencies in regional alternatives. Yet, regional leadership requires a level of trust and cooperation that at the current moment does not seem to exist.

The conference noted the turbulence in the viability and sustainability of the nation-state. A range of terms were used to describe national governance but the typology of weak, failed, and failing states to describe current conditions of regional states predominated. A growing number of countries are becoming weaker such as Egypt, Yemen, and Syria and the impact of the latter can be felt on Lebanon and Jordan. The discussion noted that these countries' borders contain ungovernable spaces. The movement of people in these ungovernable spaces makes border control difficult and the outcome is a huge influx of illegal immigrants. At the same time, the discussion recognized also that there are realities in the Middle East for which borders do not provide answers. The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) is only a historical reference and the distinction between 'nation-state' and 'state' ought to be borne in mind. Identity questions are at play in the region right now but the identity of peoples and geography are not in alignment.

The conference went further to consider the viability of territorial units. The 'ghost' of history underpins many of such contemplations. Indeed, in the analysis of the Middle East, seeking identity and validity in the past continues to be a persistent line of thinking. When it is asked what regional boundaries will look like, past examples of Lebanon of the 1970s, Iraq of the 1950s, etc. are brought to bear. In the discussions regarding the possibility of the Kurds breaking away from Iraq, concerns for violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq are frequently raised. Alternatively, however, one can ask whether (possible) Kurdish secession might be seen as an inevitable outcome? In other words, can this matter not be thought in terms of an inevitable Kurdish state? If the case of the Yugoslav Federation is taken as a precedent, it can be noted that political entities are created due to irresolvable tensions. Sectarianism seems to have become a new political framework of analysis perpetuating the identity conflict in the region. This is not likely to go away, although a potential rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran could minimize the Sunni-Shia divide somewhat.

The wide range of themes discussed in the meeting attests to the fact that the political culture of the Middle East region is in profound transformation. There is more noise, more confusion but also greater appreciation of how societies are talking to themselves and to the outside world. Between the lines, one sees pieces of political culture in transformation. Some of this transformation is going in the direction of more liberalism. Without a doubt, these developments have profound effects.

It was pointed out that in evaluating regional events the matrix of measurement is qualitatively changing. This is so not only with regard to the role of regional actors but also with regard to the role of the international ones, primary that of America. The leadership role of the US in the region is bound to continue. But the critique of the US role may be seen as part of the changing culture. While such critique was not allowed earlier, now it is permissible to publicly air critical views.

It is interesting to note the arc of the Gstaad Conference series. After the attacks of 9/11, the discussion focused on the US (over)reaction and how that (over)reaction was changing the region. There was the discourse of America's hyper power, and the unipolar moment. The year 2012 witnessed the limitations of the role of external powers. But it should not be forgotten that the region itself did not want the US to have a stronger role. Now in 2013, with the Syrian conflict continuing, there is fear that the US does too little. The Iraq war has a Syrian effect with Iraq acting as a prism through which the US interactions are viewed. Key to understanding the US position in Syria are the triple 'NOs' regarding [whether there is] a US national interest involved in Syria, confidence that the conflict can be easily resolved, and comprehension. There is a wide belief in Washington that it is not within the US' ability to resolve Syria as, overall, the confidence about nation-building has been dropping.

In addition, the concluding session considered the agency factor. It was argued that external powers seeking to affect change in the region are viewed as problematic by local actors. If one couples this factor with ongoing regional changes and difficulties of reading change from outside, the observation that the region is becoming unhinged becomes more accurate. The conference referred also to the metaphor of the 30-year war, which led to the creation of the nation-states system in Western Europe that was exported abroad. This metaphor calls for changing the existing state structures. The difficulty involved here consists in the fact that regime change violates the cardinal principle of the Westphalian system. At the same time, oppressive communalism renders it difficult for outside

powers to intervene. Then there is the reality of sectarianism and patronage and how they affect change. Local actors might be keen to argue that ‘we have tried the external actors’ path, but how about taking the ‘internal route.’

Lastly, it was asked whether a new multilateralism is possible and to what extent the Middle East is an outlier region, in the sense of flouting the dominant trends in International Relations and established rules in the international system. The argument that the US foreign policy of containment of Iran provides the best available alternative was defended by stating that the US is offering assistance and support to the Middle Eastern countries and that it is providing multilateral diplomacy in Syria and nuclear diplomacy for Iran. Unlike the US, China is free-riding. Although authoritarian, China and Russia are not seeking to overturn the international system, but rather are trying to integrate in it. Our world, however, is not a G-zero world. Despite the growing relevance of rising powers in the international arena, US power is unrivalled. US leadership in the region is unique and it is bound to continue.

THE 11TH GCSP/ CROWN CENTER/GRC ANNUAL CONFERENCE THE MIDDLE EAST: CHANGE AND UPHEAVAL 2013 GSTAAD, 28 JUNE – 1 JULY 2013

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Saturday, 29 June 2013

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Ambassador Fred Tanner, Director,

Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Geneva

Prof Shai Feldman, Director, Crown Center for Middle East Studies,
Brandeis University, Waltham

Dr Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman, Gulf Research Center, Jeddah

Geopolitical and Regional Dynamics: an Overview

Arab Revolutions: The Evolving Context

Arab Spring and the Levant

Sunday, 30 June 2013

Turkey and Regional Dynamics

Iran: Domestic Politics and Security Implications

Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the GCC States

Israel and Palestine

Conclusions and Policy Implications

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