

## **Hannes Swoboda**

### **The Middle East: revitalized faultlines and conflicts**

#### **Stability without democracy**

The Mediterranean Sea was over many centuries characterized by movements of people and goods across the national borders of countries and across the sea. Some migratory movements were peaceful and contributed to trade and economic development. But many refugee flows were and are caused by conflicts, wars and occupations. Refugees tried to reach neighboring countries like the vast majority of Palestinians or the "North" as especially today with many refugees from Syria and Iraq. The moving divisions and faultlines across the Mediterranean Sea and the different countries bordering that sea created again and again turmoil and chaos. But there were also periods of stability and peace.

Strangely enough, in times of dictatorship and autocratic governance migration out of the countries was relatively weak. "Stability" inside the countries and the regions very often connected with undemocratic regimes which reduced the tendencies and/or possibility to leave the countries. But one has to add, that the North was not open for "normal" immigration and would not have welcomed people from the South beyond its own need for labour.

Stability was and is seen by many preferable to the dynamics of democratic development. But it must be recognized that that kind of undemocratic, authoritarian stability is always a false one, because it triggers dissatisfaction, unrest and revolt. Under the cover of stability many faultlines existed and developed into deeper gaps. Nearly all societies in the region have been ( and still are ) characterized by a strong division between the rich and wealthy on one side and the poor and un- or at least underemployed ( citizens or foreign labour ) on the other side. An over-boarding bureaucracy and a permanently present and watchful security observation prevented many necessary initiatives to be realized. The lack of a perspective to advance in the future lead many of the young to participate in the Arab Spring revolts.

What was and is still missing in addition is an extended trade relationship where the European and other developed markets are more open for goods from the South - from agricultural to industrial goods. And what was and is missing is the openness of EU member countries' educational institutions for students from the south. Both kind of openness would have helped and still could help to form a middle class which could support economic, social and democratic development. Unfortunately in many countries including the US there is an increasing resistance to open their universities to students from Arab/Muslim countries and the benefit of opening the markets for goods and services is not recognized.

#### **Lost stability**

Today we are far away from this kind of "false" stability on the one side and have not reached a well founded, sustainable stability on the other side. Several conflicts are overlapping each other and contradicting forces are interlinked and not easily to entangle. The West in the form of some European countries or the US have intervened militarily and/or have supported opaque military and security structures -

very often in connection with quick imprisonment and torture - in many countries. And that kind of alliance had not supported the West's credibility. It created additional chaos and "helped" to revitalize old faultlines and animosities.

In several countries the starting Arab Spring revolts have been suppressed or been reversed as in Egypt. Here we find the old "stability" reinstalled. It is only the small Tunisia where we find some successful transition into a more democratic system. But also the democratic stability in Tunisia is threatened by terrorist groups and domestic dissatisfaction due to lack of economic success which could improve the employment situation.

### **The Palestinian issue unsolved**

The relative "old" conflict inside Palestine proper, or between Israel and Palestine, is still unsolved and there is no recognizable way to find a path of peace and conciliation. "One State" and "Two State" solutions are discussed, but for the moment there is - at least with the present Israeli government - the "No State" non-solution en vogue. This conflict is momentarily overshadowed by other conflicts in the neighborhood, but one should not underestimate the explosive situation, which is contributing to killings every day. And due to the lack of progress towards peace, the constructive Palestinian authority and its President are weakened and a radicalization is not excluded.

In addition one has to remember the vast number of Palestinian refugees in the neighboring countries especially Jordan and Lebanon, two countries which are now in addition affected by a high number of new refugees from Syria and Iraq. In this fragile environment, time does not heal the old wounds, they can start to bleed heavily at any moment - in Israel, Palestine or also in Lebanon and Jordan.

### **Crisis hotspots: Iraq and Syria**

For years now the wars in Syria and Iraq, which are proxy wars and civil wars at the same time, are killing its own citizens, destructing its cities and villages and "producing" new refugees every day. Concerning Iraq the responsibility for the present situation is at least shared by some Western countries. The military intervention of some Western countries on the basis of false, intentionally produced, evidence created chaos in Iraq. In addition, the one sided actions against many Sunni officials including in the military by the US occupying power pushed many of them in opposition and even into the hands of ISIS. And this was supported by many discriminatory actions of the former Shiite led government of Prime Minister Maliki. In the case of the Iraq intervention, lead by the US as well as in the case of the Libyan intervention! lead by some EU powers, there was no exit strategy designed and formulated by the intervening powers. These interventions aggravated internal conflicts and divisions and gave terrorists a greater space for their deadly activities. The same is true for the indirect support to the revolt against the Assad regime in Syria.

### **Sunnis versus Shiites and vice versa**

The conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is clearly visible in Syria. The hope that the revolution of the "Arab Spring" would easily and quickly topple the Assad government has soon evaporated as many other hopes about the "Arab spring". Many

sympathizers and active supporters ( and financiers ) didn't see that President Assad had many supporters even outside the Shiite elite from which he was coming. Some other minorities had an interest of him - representing the Allevite minority - staying in power as well. The radicalization of some revolting groups was another reason for the lack of support of the anti Assad forces. And from the outside neither Russia nor Iran, and in the mean time also Iraq had and have an interest in the disappearance of the Assad government - with or without Assad as president.

On the other hand Saudi Arabia and then also Turkey had and have a big interest in a new Sunni led government. They are supporting the anti - Assad forces. Both are in competition which each other about a (or the) leading role amidst the Sunni countries. And Saudi Arabia - more than Turkey - competes with Iran about the leading role in the Middle Eastern ( Arab ) region. The nuclear agreement of the West with Iran has not yet changed the balance dramatically as Saudi - Arabia is at least trying to form a Sunni coalition against Iran, the efficiency of which cannot be evaluated yet. (And they have the tacit support of the present Israeli government for such an alliance.)

This intra-religious conflict is characterizing also other countries in the region. Every day political life in Lebanon is affected since many years by these tensions, although for the moment nobody seems interested in letting it explode. The different Christian groups in this country are partly balancing the relations between Sunni and Shiites. But one never knows how the group of old refugees from Palestine and the new Syrian refugees may change that fragile balance.

In the mean-time the conflict between the two major orientations of Islam is spreading to Yemen with many victims. And other countries with Sunni governments but strong Shiite minority or even majority are in danger of being destabilized. The countries of the region have not found a way of tolerance and acceptance of even Muslim minorities, not to speak of discrimination against Christian minorities. By the way, Syria was one of the countries in the region where tolerance versus and respect for Christians was relatively high. If and when that will be the case again, is very doubtful.

### **Which borders are sustainable?**

When we speak of states in the Middle East we have to recognize that many borders have been drawn only after the First and partly the Second World War. It is impossible to predict if they have still some future. Many experts believe, that because of the different groups inside countries like Iraq and Syria, but even more because of the contradicting and centrifugal interests of neighboring countries, borders have to be changed and redrawn.

As we saw and see continuously on the Balkans new borders do not solve the basic disputes and differences. But they may reduce tensions and prevent cold conflicts to be transformed into hot ones. It seems impossible to come to a stable and sustainable solution of the different conflicts in the near time. But our priorities must be to stop the killings and destruction of the homes of so many people.

## **The Kurdish question**

When we discuss the necessity to define and find some new borders, the Kurdish question comes into the picture. The Kurds in Iraq have already achieved a high degree of autonomy inside Iraq. The Kurdish Regional Government developed a viable economy - on the basis of oil and gas and found lately a principle agreement with the national government in Bagdad on the division of the respective incomes. The Kurds in Syria will try to archive the same. The Kurdish success in Iraq and the aspirations of Kurds in Syria could give an example of new autonomies and regional governments inside a loose federation of Iraq and Syria.

But on the other hand these Kurdish aspirations, especially those in Syria do not meet acceptance and joy in Turkey. Therefore, in addition to the outside influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia - like in Lebanon - Turkey will also try to have a stake. Whereas the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq developed good relations with Turkey, the Syrian Kurds are seen by Turkey as strongly connected with the PKK, which is widely defined a terrorist organization of Kurds inside Turkey. Especially in view of the Kurdish interests of forming quasi states - maybe with a perspective to form a independent state of Kurdistan - Turkey will definitely agree only with solutions in Iraq and especially in Syria, which give it a big say and influence in these countries.

## **Turkey as key player**

For the European Union Turkey became a key player in the region due to an additional development. In spite of many differences in treating the Kurdish question inside Turkey and concerning civil liberties and media freedom, the EU needs Turkey to stop the dreadful war and by this eliminate the reason why so many want to leave Syria and Iraq and want to go to Europe - also because its recognition of the principles of asylum rights, anyway until now. The EU did not help Turkey to deal with the about 2 Million of refugees and now it has difficulties to convince Turkey to stop refugees to cross the sea towards the many Greek islands and from there to the Balkan countries and/or towards Germany, Sweden, Austria etc. So to find an agreement needs time.

As the refugees are not very willing to join the poorer EU countries and most of these countries are not wiling to accept Muslim (?) refugees from Syria and Iraq, the refugee influx is concentrated on few countries. And as only few countries feel the financial costs and other problems in connexion with accepting of and caring for the refugees, the pressure to find a common European solution including a closer cooperation with Turkey is relatively weak. Also on the Turkish side one can find resistance, but due to the problems of Turkey with several of its neighbors, including Russia, a closer relation with the EU is also in Turkey's interest.

## **A way out?**

Due to the many faultlines and divisions it will be very difficult to find a way out of the chaos characterizing the present situation in the -wider- Middle East. The difficulties to bring all players in the Syrian war to the negotiation table and the difficulties to implement a solution overcoming the divisions in Libya demonstrate the many obstacles to find a more stable and peaceful future for the region. As the US will in

the long run concentrate their attention more to Asia, the European Union will have to engage itself more than in the past. But of course with some engagements of the US in their own interest this stronger EU engagement would be more effective.

1) New initiatives in the Israeli/Palestine conflict are necessary. Equal rights for all citizens of Israel and Palestine should be in the center of any solution - irrespective of the constitutional framework.

2) The new relationship of the West with Iran should give Iran more responsibility in the region, which should lead to a more responsible role in finding stability and peace.

3) Saudi Arabia - like Israel - should recognize that Iran has also regional interests and should find ways of arranging themselves with the new reality after the nuclear deal.

4) For both countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia it would be beneficial to stop any proxy war and concentrate on the economic and social development in their own countries, especially also in view of the low oil price. Both should have an interest to stop all terrorist and sectarian groups using force to change borders and the balance of power inside countries and between countries.

5) Turkey could not realize its defined aim to have no problems with any neighbor. They have a lot of them now. Turkey should play a balancing role in the region - as a non - Arab Sunni country and strengthen its ties with the EU.

6) Russia should be brought in openly and honestly as part of the solutions, again recognizing its interests, but also its capacity to help to convince Assad to agree at least to a power sharing. And that should be the prime interest of Russian policy.

7) The Kurds should have a right to deal with their internal affairs with greater "autonomy", but should also help to find models of integration instead of disintegration - inside Turkey, Iraq and Syria.

8) At present the faultlines and divisions are too big to find a way of centralized countries and governments in Syria and Iraq. Federations of different regions inside Syria and Iraq are possible and must be thought of. This will create countries with strong influence from different regional powers, but for the moment there is no other way possible, if we want to stop the killings.

9) Direct outside interventions - especially military ones - are not helpful and cannot be successful. Opening up Europe for goods, services and students is the only, alas long term strategy, to help the countries to build up a middle class, which could foster economic and social development and a path towards democracy and respect for civil liberties.

10) Visionary ideas and new formulas must be found to promote peace. In this respect one should consider the possibility to engage the 5 plus 1 model, which was successful in the case of Iran - or a similar one - to find a platform for designing a way forward for the whole Middle Eastern region. But always the regional powers must be involved to design a path towards peace and a new order of stability.