

CONFERENCE REPORT

The Middle East at a Crossroad: Regional Responses to Shifting Challenges



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This is a report on a public session titled “The Middle East at a Crossroad: Regional Responses to Shifting Challenges”, held as part of the TRT World Forum 2019. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2019, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
FEBRUARY 2020

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Speakers



Rached Ghannouchi

Co-Founder of the Ennahdha Party of Tunisia

Rached Ghannouchi is the co-founder and President of the Ennahdha Party, the largest political party in Tunisia. Following the Tunisian government's rejection of Ennahdha's application for parliamentary elections in 1988, Ghannouchi sought exile in London. He returned to Tunisia within days of the January 2011 Revolution and led the party campaign for the October 2011 elections in which Ennahdha won forty-one per cent of available seats. His perseverance and understanding of other parties' viewpoints in Tunisia has guided his party to adopt a modern, forward-looking constitution that has contributed to the establishment of a durable democracy in Tunisia.



Mustafa A.G. Abushagur

Former Deputy Prime Minister of Libya

Dr Mustafa A.G. Abushagur has been a member of the Libyan House of Representatives since 2014. He served as the First Deputy Prime Minister of Libya from November 2011 to November 2012. He is the founder and Chairman of the Libyan Policy Institute, a think tank based in Tripoli, Libya. Dr Abushagur holds a B.Sc. degree from the University of Tripoli and M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees from California Institute of Technology in the field of electrical engineering. He has published more than one hundred papers and holds several patents.



Cevdet Yılmaz

Chairman of Foreign Affairs of the AK Party

Cevdet Yılmaz is currently a Member of Parliament representing Bingöl and Chairman of Foreign Affairs of the AK Party. Dr Yılmaz graduated from Middle East Technical University and completed his Master of International Relations at the University of Denver, USA. He completed his Ph.D. at Bilkent University in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration and began his duty as a development planning expert in the under-secretariat of the Prime Ministry State Planning Organization. Dr Yılmaz served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development in AK Party Governments.



Maha Azzam

Head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council

Maha Azzam is the Head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council and co-founder of Egyptians for Democracy. She was Head of Programme on Security and Development in Muslim States at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and has been an Associate Fellow of the Middle East Programme at Chatham House since 2000. She was one of fifteen specialists at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies Trans-National Threats Project, analysing the impact of extremism in Europe. She was previously a Caabu board member from 2002 to 2006 and re-joined in 2010.



Burhanettin Duran

Professor at Ibn Haldun University and General Coordinator of SETA Foundation

Burhanettin Duran is currently a professor at Ibn Haldun University and General Coordinator of the SETA Foundation. He received his BA in Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University in 1993, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from Bilkent University in 2001. Duran's research focuses on the transformation of Islamism, Turkish political thought, Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy. In October 2018, Prof. Duran was appointed as a member of the Turkish Presidency Security and Foreign Policy Council.



Resul Serdar Ataş

Director of News at Programmes at TRT Arabi

Resul Serdar Ataş is the Director of News and Programmes at TRT Arabi. He is a member of the Euronews Editorial Board where he represents the TRT Network, the fourth biggest shareholder in Euronews. Previously, he worked for Al Jazeera Network where he served as Planning Producer, Senior Producer and Head of the Middle East Desk. He currently presents a weekly show on TVnet, which covers regional affairs.



Salman Shaikh

Director of News at Programmes at TRT Arabi

Salman Shaikh is the Founder and CEO of The Shaikh Group (TSG). Before establishing TSG, he was the director of the Brookings Institution's Doha Center, where his research focused on conflict resolution, domestic policy, and the geopolitics of the Middle East. Shaikh has extensive experience working with the United Nations as a Special Assistant and Political Adviser in various offices. Shaikh also served as Director for Policy and Research in the private office of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bin Nasser al-Missned, the Consort of the former Emir of the State of Qatar. He has been featured in key publications and media broadcasts, including CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera, and he has published commentaries with Foreign Policy, The New York Times and others.

Summary

The panel 'The Middle East at a Crossroad: Regional Responses to Shifting Challenges' focused on a variety of issues ranging from domestic issues facing countries in the region to the implications of the shifting rivalries among different actors in the region.

Elaborating on the situation in Tunisia, Rached Ghannouchi pointed to achievements in the country from holding successful elections to the establishment of coalition governments following the revolution. While acknowledging the challenges, he emphasized the need for improvement in Tunisia's economic situation.

Mustafa Abushagur stated that as long as regional and international actors with conflicting interests will continue to meddle in Libya, the prospects of finding any permanent solution to the ongoing war is going to be difficult. He also added that the transitional period in the country must be handled differently, particularly by re-establishing the existing institutions.

Cevdet Yilmaz stressed that Turkey is one of the main countries that has been affected by the ongoing war in Syria, emphasizing that Turkey's interests are best protected via a stable and united Syria. He stated that Turkey works with regional and international partners to ensure this.

Maha Azzam emphasized the crisis that the Egyptian military regime is facing. Addressing the dire economic situation, she said while peo-

ple no longer believe that the military serves their interest, they are also breaking the barrier of fear and standing up against the regime.

Professor Burhanettin Duran also focused on Turkey's role in Syria. He stated that the war in the neighbouring country has created multiple challenges for Turkey especially in terms of security. He added that Turkey's military operations against terrorist groups such as Daesh and PKK/YPG are not only to secure its territorial borders but are also an effort to establish a safe zone to create a solution to the refugee problem.

Resul Serdar Ataş discussed the role of media in the Middle East. Highlighting the problems in this regard, he pointed out two issues being the lack of accountability and absence of in-depth knowledge about the region. He further said media can be a constructive force in creating inclusive democratic governments as many countries in the region are going through detrimental changes.

Finally, Salman Shaikh dwelled on the role of the United States in the Middle East. While he suggested that America's role in the region is coming to an end, he stated that this situation is going to lead to a reorganization of the alliances between different countries.



Report

Tunisia: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

In his keynote address, the co-founder of Ennahda Party Rached Ghannouchi discussed the trajectory of the country after the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Pointing out the achievements, he emphasized the adoption of a new constitution which acquired the support of almost the entire parliament. He also added that the country had taken several important steps in terms of the empowerment of women. Ghannouchi continued his speech by speaking about the recent elections that took place in the country. While he praised the newly elected President Kais Saied saying that he is an un-

corrupted man of law, he emphasized that these qualities are important values at the heart of revolutions. Ghannouchi also emphasized Ennahda's willingness to work with other parties to form a national unity coalition following the legislative elections being the leading party in the parliament. On the other hand, acknowledging the frustration of the people with the ruling elite, Ghannouchi stressed the need to address a number of crucial challenges ranging from economy to health and education.

Ongoing Protests

Eight years on after the uprisings, people across the region are still protesting against the lack of socioeconomic progress, rampant corruption and divisive politics. The resilience of people in the face of ongoing challenges was a key point of the discussion.

With regards to Libya, Mustafa A. G. Abushagur stated that the Libyan people are determined to not allow their country to fall back under one-man rule or military dictatorship. He added that people are aware of their power, and because of that, they refuse to retreat until they achieve their goals. He also mentioned the challenges lying ahead for country. Libya still faces a number of issues including the legacy of years of Qaddafi rule, the ramifications of the intervention in 2011 and the ongoing war between the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), based in Tripoli and the Eastern-based 'Libyan National Army (LNA)' led by Khalifa Haftar. He also pointed out the problems with the existing institutions and emphasized the need to reform. Despite all the problems, Abushagur argued that the hope remains as long as Libyans stand resilient.

Following a similar line, Maha Azzam argued that the Egyptian people had been struggling against

dictatorships since 1952. In this regard, focusing on the 2013 coup that brought Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi to power, she argued that it was against the will of the people. According to Azzam the recent protests that took place in September represent an attempt to break the fear that was created by the military regime. She added that people no longer view the military as an institution that serves the interests of the people. She also mentioned that many citizens in the country are living under dire economic conditions and no matter how despotic is the regime it has to provide for them. Therefore, she argued as the cracks begin to appear and get deeper the military regime will not be able to neglect people's will. She concluded by stating that the people want independence and social justice and that the region is facing a major shift in this sense.

Elaborating on the same point, Salman Shaikh stated that protests are to continue in the region as people continue striving for dignity and opportunity. So far, their grievances have not been alleviated. Drawing on the role of media in this regard, Resul Serdar Ataş stated that media outlets can play a constructive role by pressuring states to create inclusive, democratic governments.

Cooperation or Competition between Regional Actors

The panellists also touched upon the role of regional actors in shaping developments. Talking about the Syrian civil war, Burhanettin Duran stated that the situation in the country created multidimensional challenges ranging from threats posed by terrorist organisations such as the PKK/YPG and Daesh to the refugee crisis. He argued that Turkey's military incursions in Syria were to ensure that interests of the country were secured. He emphasized that Turkey has always been committed to Syrian territorial integrity, the fight against both PKK/YPG and Daesh terrorists and to find a solution to the ongoing refugee problem by creating safe zones. Supporting Duran's arguments, Cevdet Yilmaz said that the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and stability is in the interest of Turkey and the country is working towards this end. He further added that he believes Turkey's actions will accelerate a polit-

ical solution to the ongoing war in the country.

Speaking about the Libyan case, Abushagur said that Khalifa Haftar does not enjoy any support from large sections of the population within the country. He argued that Haftar, who has the backing of external players, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, will not be able to survive one day without foreign support. Abushagur also added that there had been a continuous debate on the existence of a proxy war in Libya between two camps, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the one side and Qatar and Turkey being on the other side. The reality, though, is that after six years of siege and the involvement of major countries in favour of Haftar, providing him with unlimited supplies of weapons, the UN-recognised government and the only legitimate authority had no choice but to ask for help from Turkey.

International Actors

The role of the United States had been a focal point of the discussions in this regard. Elaborating on Syria, Yilmaz stated that the decision of the US to finance and provide weapons to the PKK/YPG ostensibly to fight Daesh has complicated the situation.

With regards to Egypt, Azzam said the U.S and its allies would change their positions if the balance of power changes in the country. However, she also emphasized Trump's declaration of Sisi as his 'favourite dictator', arguing that the US will try to avoid any changes and the country will continue to support dictatorships in the region.

Focusing on the Middle East peace process, Salman Shaikh stressed that the U.S has never been an honest broker in terms of the efforts to create a solution in Palestine. Taking a broad look at the situation, Shaikh stated that the international community has been unable to provide support to the peaceful protests in Lebanon, Sudan and elsewhere in the region.

In this regard, focusing particularly on the role of the Western states, Azzam reinforced that these countries should not be giving support to the dictatorial regimes in the region. She said security and stability

in the region can only be provided by democratic regimes which are accountable, respecting the law and human rights, thereby the Western countries need to reconsider where their interests lie. Pointing out another important issue, Abushagur argued that in the case of Libya, the international actors that involved in the country are not interested in finding a solution to the war but are rather focused on securing their interests.

Security and stability in the region can only be provided by democratic regimes which are accountable, respecting the law and human rights.

Key Takeaways

- Protests within the region will persist as long as people's socioeconomic grievances are not addressed.
- Regional actors are involved both diplomatically and militarily in the countries that are marred by war such as Libya and Syria in a bid to shape political developments in their favour.
- The lack of cooperation between international actors is contributing to the chaos and conflict in the region.
- The international community should support the establishment of democratic regimes in the region to ensure stability and security.
- The Syrian civil war has created multidimensional challenges from security to migration. It is therefore in the interest of regional states to preserve Syria's territorial integrity and stability.

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