

Regional Players and the Shifting Security Equation in the Middle East



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Keynote

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Former Prime Minister of Lebanon

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Former Ambassador of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to the UN

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE
DECEMBER 2018

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www.trtworld.com

CONFERENCE REPORT

Regional Players and the Shifting Security Equation in the Middle East

“This is a report on a public session titled “**Regional Players & the Shifting Security Equation in the Middle East**,” held as part of the TRT World Forum 2018. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2018, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.”



- 1** *What do we mean when we refer to a 'changing Middle East?' How does the discourse of instability affect perspectives of and policies towards the region?*
- 2** *Where is the region heading, and how can intra-regional efforts towards establishing peace and stability be capitalised on in a sustainable way?*
- 3** *How can communication between regional powers and institutions be strengthened and improved?*
- 4** *What are the near-term prospects for the reconstruction of Syria? How will regional dynamics affect the reconstruction effort?*

Summary

The future of the Middle East remains one of the most hotly debated and controversial issues of today. Intermittent conflict remains a defining feature of the region, with the Syrian war being the most recent example. "Regional Players and the Shifting Security Equation in the Middle East," discussed the many issues ranging from conflicts to economic backwardness and low levels human development. The question of what to do in order to end conflicts and bring peace to the region was central to the discussion. The historical animosities among countries and societies such as nationalism, sectarianism and external interventions, as in the case of the Iraq invasion as well as the legacies of authoritarian regimes, were discussed as sources of the ongoing disorder in the region. The implications of these troubles on the regional and global powers were stated.

Former Lebanese Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, in his keynote speech stated that the world is suffering from a serious phenomenon, known as the 'trust deficit disorder'. Trust in national and international institutions, among states and in rule based global orders are weakened as the world is undergoing a period of transition towards a new global order, or disorder. He further stated that the conflicts in the Middle East have mounting negative and damaging effects not only on the region but beyond it as well, which is fuelled by significant waves of migration towards Europe and elsewhere.

The specifics of the Syrian question were discussed with Turkish Presidential Spokesperson, İbrahim Kalın, and former UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura. They highlighted the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) secured by Turkey and Russia regarding Idlib, and the importance of this achievement in furthering the potential to reach a political solution to the conflict. Kalın proposed that Turkey should not be the sole party responsible for maintaining the terms of the accord. Other key international players such as the US, the EU and the Gulf States also have a significant role to play. In this regard, Mistura proposed that Turkey would be faced with major challenges if it pursues the Idlib agreement without significant international participation. Maha Yahya, Director of the Middle East Center (Carnegie), and Mokhtar Lamani, the former head of the UN-League of Arab States, also analysed the feasibility of reaching a political solution in Syria through these means, and the likelihood of their success.



Imran Garda, the moderator for the session, asking the esteemed guests for what is in store for the short-term political future of the Middle East.

The discussion then shifted to the more general issue of the failure to reach a political consensus in the Middle East. Major regional issues with international consequences, such as the Palestinian issue, the Syrian conflict, and the war in Yemen are exacerbated by this lack of consensus. In this respect, Yahya argued that due to lack of common interests among the different players, establishing a common framework currently represents a difficult challenge to overcome. This in turn makes the region vulnerable to further political fragmentation. In light of the increasing fragmentation, Mokhtar Lamani highlighted how the ongoing conflicts in the region lead to an augmentation of social and political mistrust between regional stakeholders and key international actors, resulting in derailed peace processes and unconsolidated policy initiatives.

In the concluding remarks, the resiliency of the people of the region was stressed. The importance of political determination was emphasised as being necessary for furthering, and, ultimately consolidating stability. However, as mentioned, the capacity to reach viable solutions fail to be achieved when political actors do not orient their regional outlook in a way that prioritises the establishment of a stable political order. In this regard, the Idlib agreement can be pointed to as a rare success. However, increased collective and cooperative action between regional players is needed in order to curb and eventually find solutions to the ongoing conflicts plaguing the region.

Introduction

The uprisings in the Middle East and the accompanying instability and in some cases armed conflict, which began in 2011 have brought on crises that the international community seemed ill-prepared for. From 2011 onwards, it would appear as though much of the international community was unable to grasp the monumental changes, crucial shifts and ensuing rivalries present in regional dynamics. From the evermore-complex dynamics of the war in Syria to the unfolding humanitarian disaster in Yemen, the refugee crisis and the ongoing Palestinian issues, the region continues to be faced with a serpentine-like security equation. The recent 'Gulf Crisis' has added to the uncertainty and instability left in the wake of the so-called 'Arab Spring', as has the presence of unpredictable US policies towards the region, and seemingly unforeseen developments such as the unofficial, yet widely acknowledged rapprochement between some Arab states and Israel.

In light of these and other regional developments such as the defeat of Daesh as a territorial threat, and the changing dynamics of the Syrian conflict, this session explored the emerging security dynamics and potential future developments in the region. Special attention was paid to the prospective of a political solution that gained momentum after the signing of the Idlib deal. The speakers discussed the subtleties of the concepts of peace and security; and elaborated on how we should approach these concepts if we aim to achieve a lasting global peace. In this regard, the principle of justice appears as the most important component of a political solution for the future of Syria. The possibility of an improved intra-regional dialogue is discussed under the light of recent developments, such as the Idlib deal and the process of a Constitutional Committee.

(In)security as a Global Phenomenon

Since the signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, the Middle East has been remembered with disputes, conflicts, and bloodshed. Recent history has witnessed many incidences of this sort in the region including the war in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, as well as the Daesh, Saudi-Iran rivalry and the Gulf Crisis. As these incidences make headlines, many people have equated the Middle East with insecurity and turbulence. Yet, to what extent this understanding reflects the truth and historical reality is a matter of debate. What are the responsibilities of other powers in putting a region into turmoil? These questions need to be answered before judging a whole region as being destined to conflict and chaos. This, then, requires developing a new, holistic approach in understanding the concepts of security and peace if we aim to achieve a globally sustainable peace.

Pointing out the contributions of the people of the Middle East to civilisations and cultures, Ibrahim Kalin asserted that in the last century this part of the world, in fact, has produced some of the most enduring achievements in culture, philosophy, science, education, architecture and many other fields. Cities such as Damascus and Baghdad, that are described today with wars and conflicts, hosted luminaries of the world in many different fields. This fact reveals that equating a region with conflict is a recent phenomenon requiring satisfying answers to the question of what has changed in the last century that has brought the region into disarray?

In this regard, the claim that the troubles happening in the Middle East today can be thinkable independently from the actions and decisions of others deserves further digging. The Middle East has become a region where global powers have frequently intervened through direct and indirect mechanisms over the course of the last century, making the region even more fragile and turbulent. The most recent example of this is the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. In this regard, Fouad Siniora asserted that the US invasion of Iraq and its dismantling of the Iraqi army paved the way for furthering destabilisation. Later, shockwaves resulting from the Arab Spring protests made the situation even more serious, leading the region into a new disarray. This has ultimately led to a greater interference of the main world players, particularly with the involvement of Russia in the war in Syria. More recently, the US decision of moving its



Fouad Siniora, former Prime Minister of Lebanon, addresses the problem of sectarianism in the Middle East.

The mentality that “I am powerful, therefore I am right” is one of the main causes of insecurity in the world.

embassy to Jerusalem has made the Palestinian issue more intractable. These sort of foreign interferences into the region and unilateral actions of powerful countries have contributed to the destabilisation of the region, increasing its insecurity. According to Kalin, the mentality that “I am powerful, therefore I am right” is one of the main causes of insecurity in the world.

On the other side of the token, there lies the fact that the presence of insecurity in one part of the world could have damaging effects on other parts. Therefore, when thinking about security and peace, a holistic and comprehensive approach is necessary. For instance, although Daesh emerged in the soils of the Middle East, its terror campaigns reached many European countries including Turkey, France and the United Kingdom. The recent refugee crisis stemming from the war in Syria is another example for this situation. In this regard, Siniora asserted how the crisis in the Middle East continues to have growing destructive effects on the entire region, there would definitely be negative political and social consequences in many countries outside the region. The rise of populism and extremism in many European countries can be regarded through this lens.

By changing the discussion on the source of insecurity, Kalin asserted that Western countries are also producing insecurities in their own regions through racism, xenophobia and nationalism. As populist and right-wing leaders and parties have increased their appeal in the latest elections in Europe, the reports of Islamophobia, anti-immigrant attacks and abuses have soared. In addition to this, the anti-immigrant policies of the Trump administration in the US degrades immigrants, Muslims and people from different ethnic groups as they are faced with discrimination and restrictions in the US. In this regard, Kalin gives the recent example of the German Turkish football player Mesut Özil who gave up his role as a player in the German national team due to the racism and discrimination he faced as a result of his Turkish roots. These developments show that countries that are considered secure and peaceful can also create insecurity, not only for other regions but also for their populations through marginalising domestic policies. Given that peace and security require holistic understanding, it should be noted that insecurity is a global problem, not reducible to Muslims or the Middle East.



Presidential Spokesperson of the Republic of Turkey, Ibrahim Kalin, reflecting upon insecurity and xenophobia spreading throughout the globe.

The Biggest Victims of War

It has been seven years since the beginning of the war in Syria. Peaceful protests as part of the Arab Spring in 2011 turned into a violent conflict after the Assad regime's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations. The situation on the ground deteriorated with the involvement of external powers and non-state actors. The number of deaths during the seven years is estimated to be over half a million people. Additionally, UN reports showed that over five million people fled the country in a bid to find safe shelter. This is in addition to the over six million people who are internally displaced from their hometowns. Despite the condemnation of the international community, the regime has not backed down from its inhuman conducts. Wide spread violence against civilians, indiscriminate targeting, attacking hospitals and schools and preventing aid convoys were some of the crimes repeatedly occurring during the war.

Aside from using conventional weapons, the Assad regime did not hesitate in using weapons of mass destruction in order to eliminate any opposition. The Ghouta attack was one of the worst humanitarian disasters, saw the regime use chemical weapons, killing around 1,700 civilians in August 2013. Although the usage of chemical weapons is well documented beyond suspicion, the international community did not take any action against the regime, despite the fact that it is prohibited. The city of Aleppo became another scene where, according to the UN, a "complete meltdown of humanity" took place. Regime forces sieged the city leaving people on the verge of starvation and attacked with barrel bombs and chemical weapons. Remaining civilians were evacuated after a deal brokered by Turkey and Russia. Similar incidences occurred in other Syrian cities as regime forces continued violently suppressing opposition groups.

To make matters worse, the people in Syria faced the barbarity of terrorist groups as the region became a safe haven for them. Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliated groups advanced their positions and took control of some of the territories where they applied the most inhuman conducts. The international community were shocked by the screening of Daesh executions



Director of the Middle East Centre,
Maha Yahya, talks about the difficulties
in enacting the peace process in Syria.

shot in a Hollywood-like setting. The situation exacerbated as foreign fighters started joining terrorist groups from other countries including Europe. The expansion of YPG terrorism, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK in Northern Syria, with the assistance of the US, resulted in documented war crimes and humanitarian sufferings - including forced displacement of Arabs and Turkmens from their villages and forced conscription of child and female soldiers. Involvement of regional and global powers only worsened the situation contributing to the prolongation of the war.

Against this backdrop and general trend of increased violence, oppression and poverty across the region, Maya Yahya pointed out how the people of the region are the biggest victims in Syria, not anyone else. They are paying the heaviest price for a war that they no longer control. Yahya further called attention to the developments that would potentially have a damaging influence over the people of the region. She said there are at least four major conflicts in the region: Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. Additionally, the longstanding occupation of Palestine by Israel is continuing. The people of the region also suffer from dire economic conditions. As the rentier state system where people give up their political rights for the sake of benefits of a rentier state, is approaching to an end; coupled with the declining economic growth, increased unemployment and decreasing subsidies and assistances, the poorest of the poor are the ones that are affected the most. According to Maya Yahya, this deterioration in many fields will invite more violence against the civilians.

Having competing interests and realpolitik considerations, interfering states negatively contribute to the continuation of despair that people face in their daily lives. In this regard, Ibrahim Kalin asserted that the shifting policies of key players including the US, EU, GCC countries and their negligence of the sufferings experienced by the people, are complicating the situation on the ground in Syria. As such, Kalin asserted that although the US legitimised its military presence in the region out of Daesh threats, they have maintained their presence in Syria after Daesh was eliminated while giving military support to the YPG, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK. Kalin further stated that the main aim of the US is to maintain their military presence in Syria against Iran. Therefore, the military solutions that are proposed and implemented by the external powers ignore the fact that people are the biggest victim in the war and constitute obstacles in front of a potential solution.

A New Window of Opportunity: Idlib Deal

Amid the decreased hope for a political solution in Syria, the Idlib deal has provided a propitious platform as a significant step towards a transition from military solutions to political ones. With the courageous initiatives of Turkey and Russia, one of the most potential inhuman catastrophes have been prevented.

As the regime forces have advanced their positions with Russian and Iranian support by recapturing large swathes of areas from Daesh and opposition forces, Idlib became the last rebel enclave. The regime made military preparations for what was called “the final offensive” in order to consolidate its control. Yet, a possible offensive would result in humanitarian catastrophes much worse than what happened in Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta. Over 4 million civilians are assumed to be living in the Idlib region, including permanent residents and refugees. With Turkey’s determination, Russia and Turkey signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” on September 18, 2018, preventing a bloody offensive and the migration of millions of people.

The diplomatic efforts to end the ongoing conflict in Syria first started in June 2012 with the Geneva talks under the auspices of the UN. Successive negotiations, however, produced no serious results as discrepancies among relative parties including opposition groups, the regime and other actors were far from being bridged. This paved the way for a new initiative by Russia, Turkey and Iran known as the Astana Process, which was launched in 2017. The primary purpose of the trilateral talks has been to facilitate a stable ceasefire, build confidence among conflicting parties, and establish a unified front against terrorist groups such as Daesh and al-Qaeda. The Idlib deal is considered as a product of understanding and diplomatic relations developed through the Astana Talks process. By drawing attention to the significance of the Idlib deal, Staffan de Mistura stated that the deal is the success of Russian and Turkish diplomatic attempts and negotiations that has created a new window of opportunity where the prospect of a political settlement overweighed the military one.

The other critical factor contributing to the prospect of a political settlement was the mobilisation of the civilians in Idlib. Local people including women and children in Idlib



UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, discussing the UN's efforts to facilitate a peace process in Syria.

organised mass protests against a potential regime offensive and firmly stated that they were not terrorists but civilians. This is in addition to the general international public opinion that was deeply concerned for yet another bloody regime offensive that would potentially claim lives of civilians. Activists, civil society representatives and human right defenders out-cried to stop the regime. All of these developments served to the success of the Idlib deal and strengthened the possibility of transitioning from a military solution to a political one.

Against this background, Mistura asserted that the international community should firmly embrace the efforts of Turkey and Russia and utilise the opportunities that emerge out of this. In this regard, Kalin pointed out that the Idlib deal is very important yet Turkey cannot carry this burden on its own. Although other countries show their sympathy with Turkey, the international community should be actively involved in the process in order to achieve a lasting peace. In the same line, Mistura pointed out that Turkey's obligations in the Idlib deal is gruelling in that Turkey is responsible in handling terrorists in the region while ensuring that 3 million people are not targeted.

As a follow up development, the leaders of Turkey, Russia, Germany and France came together in Istanbul in order to discuss the future of Syria. The Istanbul Summit was important in multiple respects. First, European countries, namely France and Germany, once remained apathetic towards Syria, showed their willingness to partake in the political process. Their involvement also fortified the terms accepted in the Idlib deal. Second, the summit demonstrated that political settlement is the only option for an enduring peace in Syria. Finally, the summit clearly referred to the people of Syria as the only source for the future of the country.

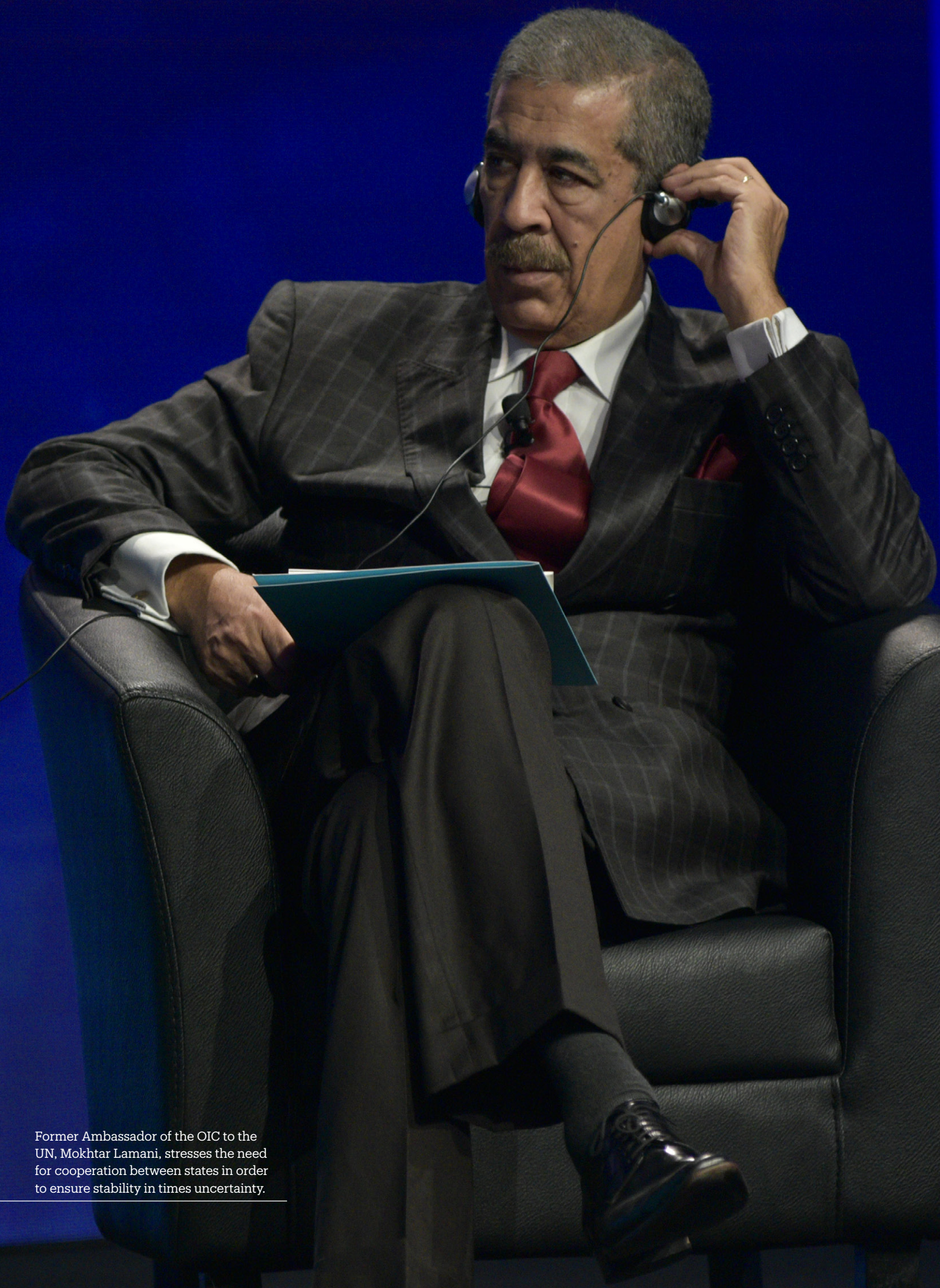
The Principle of Justice

As the war in Syria comes to a point of fatigue, the possibility of a political settlement gains much more credibility. The plan to establish a constitutional committee appears as an important first step in this direction. Under the UN auspices, the yet-to-be found constitutional committee aims to achieve a credible and inclusive process of drafting a new constitution for the future of Syria. It is aimed that the committee will bring together the regime, opposition delegations and civil society members including experts, independent parties, and tribal leaders. The leaders in the Quadrilateral Syria Summit in Istanbul called for establishing and the early convening of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva by the end of this year.

Although this is a crucial attempt to end the long-lasting conflict, the success of the committee depends on many factors including the principles that constitute the foundation of the new constitution. In this regard, by reaffirming the commitment of the success of the committee, Ibrahim Kalin asserted that a sustainable peace is possible only when it is based on justice. One can never understand the region without understanding the importance of justice for the people. Given the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Syria, peace is not possible if it is based on injustice. Kalin goes on to say that this is what has been lacking in the Palestinian issue. The reason why sustainable and enduring peace has not been achieved so far, despite many attempts, is that all the options that have been offered in regards to the Palestinian issue have lacked the principle of justice. What they propose is that the occupation shall continue under different guises, which is a potent violation of justice. Due to this unjust treatment, it is not the Palestinians alone but the international community that have refused to accept this.

Kalin maintained that the recent policies of the Trump administration regarding Palestine, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and cutting aid to the Palestinians, only strengthen these feelings of injustice. He further stated that presenting the Palestinians as the troublemakers, blaming the victim as the culprits in this case, has been Israel's policy towards the Palestinians for decades, and now the Trump administration is repeating the same policy. This will not lead to a sustainable peace.

In the same token, Siniora drew attention to the drawbacks of appealing to "quick fixes" in order to have short-term solutions to the problems. Siniora asserted that if justice is compromised for the sake of peace, we end up losing both eventually. Rather, fundamental issues and root



Former Ambassador of the OIC to the UN, Mokhtar Lamani, stresses the need for cooperation between states in order to ensure stability in times uncertainty.

causes should be addressed seriously. At a time when international organisations are losing confidence among the people of the region and in general, the provision of justice by these institutions become questionable.

In this regard, Maya Yahya raised several critical issues pertaining to the drafting of a new constitution. She asserted that the establishment of the constitutional committee will not provide a “golden answer” to the problem. As this process continues, the credibility of the committee should be established in the eyes of the Syrian people. If the new constitution is drafted with a victor-vanquished mentality, this runs the risk of raising question marks as to the provision of justice. In order to have this credibility, Syrian people should reflect their concerns and demands and the final draft should be acceptable to them. Issues such as the right of return for refugees should be under the guarantees of the international institutions. Otherwise, a political solution not accepted by the people will bring new conflicts and violence.

Conclusion

In summary, the insecurity in the Middle East cannot be removed from the insecurities of the world. Unless a holistic approach is applied, the world will continue to suffer from instability, conflict and disorder. Global peace will remain unachievable. Powerful countries' imposition of their agendas will continue to exacerbate the problems occurring in the region, while increased radical ideologies such as xenophobia, the extreme far-right, Islamophobia and populism will deteriorate security in their respective regions. In order to deal with the problem of insecurity, a comprehensive approach that addresses the root cause of problems should be developed.

Concerning the war in Syria, it is clear that Syrians are the biggest victims of the ongoing conflict. Other powers' involvement in the conflict with their self-interests escalates the insecurity and inflames the sufferings of the people. The Idlib deal achieved by Turkey and Russia constitutes a good starting point that can be capitalised on for a political solution. Yet, the international community should contribute to the political process wholeheartedly. To be able to achieve a lasting peace, the concerns and demands of the people of Syria should be considered seriously and peace should be based on the principle of justice.

