

## **An-Nahrain Center/Beit al-Hikma Workshop on the Sociology of Conflict**

### **“International Actors and Conflict Prevention in the Middle East”**

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In addressing the subject “International Actors and Conflict Prevention in the Middle East” I should start by saying that my organization, the International Crisis Group, conducts research in areas of armed conflict but does so with the objective to identify ways to prevent, or end, or at least better manage, these conflicts in order to reduce tensions and pave the way for peaceful, negotiated solutions.

We have been active in the Middle East since 2002, and the challenge we face has grown exponentially in the last few years – in fact in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring.

There are several important features to the crisis gripping the region today:

First of all, we have seen the breakdown of autocratic regimes that were in power for decades – the old order. The outcome has been either civil war or a fragile successor regime. In the latter case, we have seen democratic experiments, as in the Tunisian case, or a return of autocracy (Egypt). But neither model is stable for the moment, given the high level of polarization and weakened institutions in both cases.

Second, along with the collapse of regimes we have witnessed the crumbling of national identities, which have given way to sub-national forms of solidarity, based on ethnic, religious or tribal affiliations, among others. This development has encouraged the manipulation of identity by political actors for political gain. Hence the rise of ethnic and sectarian animosity and conflict throughout the region.

Third, the chaos, violence and uncertainty have encouraged political radicalization. Both the middle class and the middle ground have disappeared. Violence has given way to extreme violence. The brutalized and disaffected are being recruited by transnational jihadi groups seeking to capitalize on the situation in order to press their own agenda, which is based on an extreme interpretation of Islam. Hence the multiplication of Salafi-jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda and its offshoots, and the growing strength of the Islamic State organization.

Fourth, regime breakdown and the ensuing chaos have created political and security vacuums into which have stepped external state actors, who are seeking to secure their strategic interests while helping themselves to resources. What they have failed to accomplish by diplomacy, they now seek to achieve via proxy forces (for example, both the U.S. and Iran in Iraq), and when this, too, proves insufficient they are forced to intervene directly (for instance, Saudi Arabia in Yemen). What we are seeing is that rather than helping to reduce tensions, these interventions tend to aggravate the problem, and turn a local violent conflict into a war.

Fifth, one outcome of the conflicts in the region is the flow of refugees and internally displaced persons, which is growing by the day and posing insurmountable financial, social and political challenges to host countries. For the international community, this signifies an added drain on their resources at a time when the world has yet to recover from the international financial crisis; fewer resources than required are therefore directed to address the cost of taking care of these refugees and IDPs.

Sixth, the proliferation of both internal and external actors in the region's conflicts has led to a thorough intersecting of these conflicts, such that we now face a region-wide problem of a complexity that is increasingly difficult to tackle, a true Gordian knot.

Finally, because everyone is focused on conflict – fighting, securing their interests, winning, fleeing – crucial underlying issues are being postponed indefinitely. I'm thinking in particular of (1) institution-building, which is so critically needed to lay the basis for more stable societies after conflicts end; and (2) preservation and environmental protection. Just look at the case of Yemen and the severe water crisis it faces, while people are preoccupied with staving off an impending famine.

Now I want to say a thing or two about the external actors in violent conflicts, as per the title of this presentation. Who are they, and what is their role? Do they intervene to bring conflicts to an end or, to the contrary, do they tend to make matters worse?

There is no simple answer to this, of course. But we can generally distinguish between two types of actors: "neutral" and non-neutral. (I will explain the quotation marks around "neutral" in a minute.)

Most international actors are not neutral, or not fully neutral. Neighboring states, in particular, have strategic interests to protect and advance. This invariably leads to partisan interventions: interventions directly and overtly in support of one side or another in a conflict. You can see this very clearly in the wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

You can also have interventions that are inadvertently partisan: not openly intended, but the result of the intervention is that one side benefits over another. You can see this, for example, in Western military support for Iraqi Kurds in the fight against Daesh: the weapons are to fight Daesh, but the Kurds are using the weapons, and the political backing and legitimatization that come with weapons support, to advance their own agenda in Iraq.

One of the most powerful external actors in the Middle East is, of course, the United States. Washington's policy is a dramatic reversal from George W. Bush's interventionism. Obama has instead pursued a hands-off approach, arguing that actors should not immediately seek outside help when they are in a dispute but should first try to solve their problems themselves. This is generally a very healthy approach, but the problem, of course, is that the policy transition from one extreme to another has proven to be quite difficult, as local actors don't know if they can count on Washington's support or not, and are acting accordingly, mostly in confusion.

The only neutral actor is the United Nations, but only on the technical/assistance side: the UN Department of Political Affairs, which carries out mediation efforts in various conflicts. On the side of the Security Council, it is partisanship all the way; we see this in all the wars in the region, from the Security Council resolution on Yemen last spring that was biased toward Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states to the political deadlock between the P5 on Syria. Because of the latter problem, the DPA's work is often hamstrung, or severely circumscribed. The slightest initiative at conflict resolution may be blocked by a member of the P5 out of self-interest.

The ability of the "neutral" part of the international "community" (more quotation marks!) is severely handicapped by a number of factors: the proliferation of conflicts, which means they have relatively fewer staff for each conflict who have the requisite historical knowledge and language skills; violence

and threats against staff of international humanitarian agencies; the unmanageable number of refugees; and a lack of political support for humanitarian and mediation efforts.

Given that the international “community” is a mix of “neutral” and non-neutral actors, what good can we expect from its help in resolving conflicts?

First of all, the answer should be: “Not much” We need to be extremely modest in our expectations, even in cases when outside help is indeed neutral and explicitly aimed at reducing tensions and finding a peaceful resolution. Secondly, we need to borrow a medical term and say that outside parties should “do no harm,” or at least “do no further harm.” This is critically important, because what we have tended to see is that states, in seeking to secure their interests in response to a crisis, often pursue an overly securitized response that will make matters worse.

This brings me to the next point, thirdly, which is that states should favor a political and diplomatic approach over a military one when responding to a crisis; and that, if a military dimension is required (as we see in the fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria), this should be part of an overarching political strategy that addresses some of the root causes of the conflict in question.

Fourthly, states should ask the UN to mediate in conflicts in the region whenever possible, but should continue to support not only the mediation process but also the outcome: in Libya, for example, the UN has been working hard on a deal between the main factions that would produce a government of national accord. Such a government, once it is created, will not survive without outside political and military support, as it will still have many enemies, including radical jihadi groups.

Finally, there is a need for a concerted international effort to bring the region’s main actors into some kind of framework – a new regional security architecture – that would enhance communication and a certain level of cooperation between various actors, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, and others as well. This could help reduce regional tensions, and this in turn would create the political space in which local conflicts can be more effectively addressed by the domestic actors themselves without external interference. In this dangerous time for the region, a move in that direction would be of the utmost importance.