ALSHARQ FORUM

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE, THE REGIONAL POWER EQUILIBRIUM, AND THE WAY FORWARD

Abstract: On the second day of Al Sharq Forum's conference "Examining the Post-Crisis Regional Order in the Sharq Region", which was held in Istanbul on October 8-9, 2016, a private roundtable was organized to discuss the current political landscape in the Al Sharq region. The discussions revolved around many themes: the political drivers of regional instability, the question of the relationship between majorities and minorities, the conflict between regional powers and its impact on sectarian tensions, and the possible role of intra-regional organizations in finding a way out of the current chaotic situation.

During the discussions, the underlying causes of regional instability were discussed. Some contributors pointed to local and domestic factors as the primary sources of the current malaise, while others focused more on the role played by regional and international powers.

Domestic causes of regional instability:

■ The most significant challenge in the region is the phenomenon of state failure, which means a marked decrease in the state's ability to govern with the rise of non-state actors and traditional identities at the expense of nation state citizenship.

■ One of the core issues across the region is state illegitimacy and inefficiency despite the fact that all states in the region are not alike. The efficiency and legitimacy of some states in the region are obviously better than others. The case of Libya under the rule of al-Gaddafi, for example, is different to that Syria of al-Assad or the case of Iraq.

■ Another internal factor resulting in regional instability is the fact that political regimes in the region abuse the state structure itself to maintain power. This means that if the regime goes, the whole state structure may eventually collapse, as has happened in Libya or Syria.

The most significant challenge in the region is the phenomenon of state failure, which means a marked decrease in the state's ability to govern with the rise of non-state actors and traditional identities at the expense of nation state citizenship.

■ Internal conflict and political polarization at the heart of state models is one of the underlying causes of the inability of the people in the Al Sharq region to govern themselves. There are many competing perspectives on resolving this problem (Caliphate state, nation state, etc.). Some parties in the region believe that Al Sharq region can move automatically from authoritarianism to a Western-like democracy, but it is obvious now that all parties need first to engage in an internal dialogue about which state model they should adopt and implement.

Internal conflict and political polarization at the heart of state models is one of the underlying causes of the inability of the people in the Al Sharq region to govern themselves.

■ In relation to the previous point, the problems of the state model in the post-Ottoman MENA region was discussed. It was suggested that the peoples in Al Sharq region - rather than being attracted to the European model of the 19th century modern state and the Weberian concepts of legitimacy and a monopoly of violence – have to think differently about the state models they require, starting with the basic function of the state: its ability to defend itself and to mobilize resources to defend itself.

Moving from domestic to regional and international dimensions

■ Disagreement between the key regional powers was considered to be one of the main sources of chaos and instability in the Al Sharq region. What has been seen in the region, in a sense, is similar to the case of Germany after WWII. Disagreement between the U.S. and its allies on one side and the Soviet Union on the other led to two German states. Similarly, the current regional disorder is a result of rivalries and disputes between the major players of the region (KSA - Iran, Turkey - Egypt, Qatar - UAE).

■ These regional powers have arguably become more able to influence regional politics today than international powers. Since WWII, the region has passed through three phases: during the cold war, within a bipolar world order, the states in the region had to side with one of two rival camps (the U.S. or the USSR). After the Soviet Union collapsed, the U.S. emerged as a world superpower, with a wave of democratization supported by America and Western Europe unleashed in the socialist republics of Eastern Europe throughout the 1990s. This wave of democratization arrived two decades later in our region during the Arab Spring. Yet, this time, it lacked the international or regional support the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe had been granted. The U.S. decided to retreat from the region and the vacuum this generated led to rise of regional powers (Iran, Turkey, and the KSA). Unfortunately, each of these actors was preoccupied by a different threat: KSA by the Iranian threat, Iran by defending its regional allies (the al-Assad regime and Hezbollah), and Turkey by its security concerns, and their rivalry resulted in instability of other states in the region.

The main driver for foreign intervention is domestic government. The example of Iraq under Saddam Hussein and at the current time has showed how bad governmental policies and their inability to rule over their entire territory forced it to depend on other international and neighboring countries, which will – of course – intervene to serve their own interests.

■ International powers played a spoiling role in the region, which became one of the most densely penetrated regions in the world. European powers maintained their support for regional despotic regimes and resisted indigenous democratic movements. Therefore, the way forward must include an escape from European hegemony and an end

to seeing ourselves through the eyes of the West.

■ On the other hand, the regional factor is thought to be secondary to the original internal malaise. System collapse has led to communication issues and the misinterpretation of messages between different parties in the region. That is why the U.S. intervention in Iraq and the Russian war in Aleppo were advized and supported by key regional actors (the KSA, Iran, the UAE, etc.)

■ By this same token, the problem of sectarianism in the region is multi-layered. The main cause is usually domestic, but the problem has been escalated by the intervention of regional and international players. Even before the eruption of the Arab uprisings and the subsequent regional congestion, many countries in the region witnessed sectarian crises and manifestations of state failure (Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, etc.)

■ The main driver for foreign intervention is domestic government. The example of Iraq under Saddam Hussein and at the current time has showed how bad governmental policies and their inability to rule over their entire territory forced it to depend on other international and neighboring countries, which will - of course - intervene to serve their own interests.

At the end of this themed debate, some clues towards a way out were proposed. Agreement between regional powers, the engagement of domestic groups in deep and serious dialogue, and the promotion of economic prosperity, especially for deprived and impoverished minorities, were emphasized.

The second theme discussed thoroughly at this roundtable was the issue of sectarianism. Although describing the rivalries in the region is no easy task, with many different domestic

and international factors closely interrelated; yet, sectarianism seems to be a key element in many different regional struggles. For instance, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has an ideological and geopolitical basis, but it rapidly transformed into a sectarian conflict. Also, the role of international powers in the region seems to have been disastrous in this regard. U.S. intervention in Iraq, as well as U.S. withdrawal during the Syrian revolution, both aggravated sectarian tensions.

Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the major causes of instability and sectarian tension in the region. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia perceive each other as existential threats and hence have engaged in bloody proxy wars throughout the region.

To understand the origin of recent sectarianism problems, some contributors refered to the Millet system of the Ottoman era, especially in countries like Lebanon. Others have pointed to the nationalist ideology of post-independence Arab states. Speaking about your own sect was perceived as bad and shameful in some states (e.g. Iraq and Syria). These regimes did not differentiate between sect (as a natural phenomenon) and sectarianism (as a political project). Meanwhile, Pan-Arabism as an ideology claimed that it represented all sects in the region.

Later, regional and domestic factors resulted in resurfacing of conflicts between different sects in many countries in the region. The Syrian regime, for example, was a secular nationalist regime. But the Shi'ite aspect of the regime became more and more obvious with the Lebanese civil war and following the Iranian revolution. While domestically the Syrian revolution began with participation from Syrians of all sects, the regime played the sectarian card and framed the revolution as a conflict between a secular regime and

Sunni extremists, mobilizing the country's Alawite and Christian minorities against it.

The Turkish-Iranian relationship is quite different. They do not see each other as existential threats, and the Syrian conflict is the only black dot in the record of the two countries' mutual relations. That is why, many contributors argued, Turkey is the only Middle Eastern party able to intervene to de-escalate sectarian tensions in the region.

In general, power-sharing and inclusive political systems were suggested by attendees as remedies for sectarian problems in the region. The strong centralized state is no longer a working solution. Secession, as in case of South Sudan, has proven to be an inappropriate way forward as well. Also, recognizing the rights of minorities in the constitution without allowing them a share in real power is an inadequate compromize. Some put it simply like this: without a division of authority, the state will divide.

Despite agreeing on the concept, the debate about the most suitable form of power-sharing was intense. The Lebanese model of identity-based power sharing was first refuted because it did not work even in Lebanon itself. Although it had preserved the Lebanese state to some extent, it produced a lot of corruption, according to some commentators. Therefore, this kind of "Sectarian Federation" will not help in Syria or Iraq. Instead, other power-sharing formulas such as; decentralization, territorial federation, sectarian representation, or a mixture of all these methods may be a working solution.

It is expected, in the long term, that Iran will not be able to sustain its capacity for mobilization, nor domestic support for its actions, and it will reach a breaking point after which Iran will be ready for negotiation and settlement.

Other contributors drew attention to obstacles which may hinder power-sharing solutions. Being an elite agreement, power-sharing may not be satisfactory or adopted by the whole spectrum of society. Also, intra-sect and intra-group divides may make it harder to reach a consensus. Sectarian militias and the question of including them within new regimes is another major obstacle to a solution.

Consequently, it was suggested that – instead of starting from theoretical models of power-sharing and then attempting to implement them and build reality from their templates – that we start from the reality and allow society to engage in dialogue to find out the model it prefers and agree on a common understanding for concepts like decentralization and federation. Then, all parties should come to a written agreement guaranteed by regional and international powers, adopt trust-promoting practices, and decide on an impartial conflict resolution arbitrator (e.g. a supreme court).

The final theme regarded the relationship between regional powers, namely Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Throughout this discussion, it became clear that rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is one of the major causes of instability and sectarian tension in the region. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia perceive each other as existential threats and hence have engaged in bloody proxy wars throughout the region. The current escalation began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 which, as one participant put it, whetted the Iranian appetite for regional expansion.

On the other hand, the Turkish-Iranian relationship is quite different. They do not see each other as existential threats, and the Syrian conflict is the only black dot in the record of the two countries' mutual relations. That is why, many contributors argued, Turkey is the only Middle Eastern party able

to intervene to de-escalate sectarian tensions in the region.

Some participants believed that the Iranian regime was pragmatic and not driven solely by its sectarian and ideological agenda, as was been revealed in the latest nuclear deal. Pushing sect and ideology aside and bringing together other parties to help overcome the Iranian-Saudi dichotomy will help in relieving regional tensions.

In absence of any effective regional organization (e.g. the Arab League), the EU was supposed to be a credible platform able to sponsor dialogue between parties engaging in conflict in the region. Yet, currently the EU has to deal with Brexit and its consequences. In addition, western countries have their own agenda and priorities in the region, of which fighting ISIS is top priority: this, however, is not the top priority for all regional powers.

Finally, many contributors thought that regional instability would last for some time and this escalation would not end in the near future. In short, convincing the warring parties to stop their confrontation and move to a platform of negotiation needs a shift in the balance of power. Now, Iran thinks it is winning and the Levant soon will be an Iranian zone of influence. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is gradually losing its proxies in the region because they are not as effective as Iran in identity-based mobilization and crisis management. It also seems that the present level of pain (in terms of casualities and social and economic costs) is not sufficient to deter the regime in Iran. However, it is expected, in the long term, that Iran will not be able to sustain its capacity for mobilization, nor domestic support for its actions, and it will reach a breaking point after which Iran will be ready for negotiation and settlement.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

sharqforum.org

🅕 🅣 ▶ ✈ */ SharqForum*

☁ SOUNDCLOUD */ Sharq-Forum*

ALSHARQ FORUM