

VOLKER PERTHES

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Good morning, everybody. I hope you had a good night's sleep after the wonderful dinner last night. Since I have to leave after this session, I will use this opportunity to say thank you to Thierry and his team for organising this wonderful conference. It looks as if we have had some casualties, in the room with people who still need to sleep-off the gala dinner, but also on this particular programme on the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel. Some of our speakers who were supposed to be here had to leave for different reasons and we have to do without Miguel Angel Moratinos, former Spanish Foreign Minister, who you saw yesterday on the Latin America Panel. We have to do without Fathallah Sijilmassi, the Moroccan diplomat and former President of the Union for the Mediterranean, who would certainly have given an important input on the Moroccan perspective and cooperation across the Mediterranean. For reasons connected to the situation in his own country, we also have to do without Fareed Yaseen, the current Iraqi Ambassador to Washington, who had to stay put in his embassy to give advice to his government about how to handle the situation in Iraq.

I do have a much smaller but wonderful panel with four speakers who I will briefly introduce. We have Mohamed Ibn Chambas, from Ghana who is currently the SRSG, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel. He has quite an experience in mediation and UN and AU peacekeeping, because he was also the AU-UN joint representative for Darfur, and among other positions, he is a former President of ECOWAS, the regional organization for West Africa. We also have Memduh Karakullukcu, who is a founding president of the Global Relations Forum in Turkey, which is an important think tank in that country. He is an engineer by training and an economist, which probably means, he knows what he is talking about, at least we hope so. He will give us a Turkish perspective and I think his presence has become even more important through the developments of the last few days. We have Abulaziz Sager from Saudi Arabia, who is also the founder and president of a think tank in his country, the Gulf Research Center. In UN circles and those interested in mediating conflicts, he is also known as someone who has been moderating the Syrian opposition meeting in Riyadh, trying to get together a unified delegation of the Syrian opposition for peace talks. We did not have peace talks then, but we had the delegation at least. Last but not least, we have Dong Manyuan, the Vice President of the China Institute for International Studies, a specialist in Middle East issues who, among other things, has previously served at the Chinese embassy in Ankara, if I got that right.

Before I start the debate, first with my colleagues here on the panel and then with you in the audience, let me try to set the scene a little bit. We are dealing with a vast area here; West Africa, the Sahel, North Africa, the Middle East is a region from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf or if you prefer the Indian Ocean. If we are looking for a single headline to characterize the situation in that vast area, it is probably the dissolution of order and the dissolution of order on different levels. In quite a number of the states in the region, it is on state level, whether Libya, Mali, Syria or Yemen: order is being undermined through either civil war, war or the weakness of states that has undermined institutions and societal relations. We also have a dissolution of order on a regional level as some of the regional organizations set up in the last decades disintegrate or do not really work well. We still have something called the Maghreb Union here in the Maghreb, but I do not think it is working in any way. The Gulf Cooperation Council has been undermined by conflicts between the member states and we can discuss what the Arab League does. The only healthy organization among the regional organizations seems to be the African Union, but we may want to discuss that at a later stage.

Some would say that there is something in the software of the region that we could call the normative order, which is being undermined through civil war, unrest, and the way that governments are dealing with their people. A normative order that was always difficult but rested on a time-honoured tradition of the co-existence of cultures is at least being questioned in a few states or in parts of this region.



Speaking geopolitically or strategically, the balance of power is not stable but shifting. We do not have a regional hegemon, but there are various struggles over sub-regional hegemony. There is also a high level of military or hybrid interferences in the states of the region in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and the Sahel, by regional and international actors. I would find it difficult to mention them all, but Iran and Israel are certainly among them, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States, Russia, some Europeans and some others. Paradoxically, which is probably something we want to discuss, the regional polarization, struggles for hegemony, non-cooperation, civil wars and the weakness of states and institutions, has opened this space very widely for external influence and external actors. At the same time, and I think that is a paradox, the situation in this area has made international actors much more hesitant to involve themselves long-term in a sustainable manner. This is true for the Europeans, who in the past tried to engage in long-term transformative processes, Barcelona, Union for the Mediterranean, Southern Neighbourhood, call it whatever you like, or even the Middle East peace process, a name that is still used by some Europeans. On the other hand, it is true for the United States, which of course were known for their long-term security guarantees, which actors could rely on and that are as much in question as the transformative engagement of the Europeans.

I would like to try an experiment by asking my four friends here to all answer yes, no, yes but or no but in 30 seconds. Therefore, my first question is, would the region be better off, less polarized and more at peace if we had less international involvement? In other words: should we let the states of the region sort it out, as President Trump indicated in one of his Tweets? Should the states and the societies of the region sort it out by themselves and would we be better off here?

Mohamed Ibn Chambas

The West Africa and Sahel region within the scope of the ECOWAS in particular, have been doing relatively well with good support from partners to reinforce many areas in which ECOWAS has been trying to create a strong regional approach. That aims to grow the economy, integrate the region and also in governance. In all of these areas it has indeed built strong partnerships with the UN and the EU for example, but also with the greater Middle East. However, the new threats to the region in the form of terrorism and violent extremism, if we see that as something that also has some external dimension, are certainly negative. Therefore, the region could do better without that kind of external negative impact.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you, a clear statement. We are going into more detail in a moment. Memduh, you are on either side of the question in a way, representing Turkey here for better or worse, whether or not you like to be a representative of your country today, you are by birth as it seems. Would the region be better off with less of that interference from outside?

Memduh KARAKULLUKCU

Interference is a tricky word. Instead of saying interference, if we can say constructive engagement then it would not be better off without constructive engagement from external parties, provided that they, particularly the EU and the US, adjust to the new realities of the power configuration both globally and in the region. I will need to expand on that, but I cannot do that in 30 seconds, so maybe we can go back to that.

Volker PERTHES

That is fine. Abdulaziz, how is that with the external interference. Would the region be better off without it?

Abdulaziz Othman bin Sager

Given the type of policies that the US is implementing in the region, which is very confusing, as well as the position of the other powers, I think we would be happier without that intervention. What we need to see is a much more constructive engagement from their side, rather than the destructive engagement that is taking place now.

Volker PERTHES

It seems that the bottom line for the three regional speakers is more engagement but less interference, or another form of engagement. Dong Manyuan, you happen to be the international representative here since we do not have our European or American speakers here, so what do you think? How does it look from China, from Beijing? Is more interference or less interference better?

DONG Manyuan

First of all, I fully agree with my two colleagues, we should change the terminology from interference to engagement or cooperation. I think that a new terminology of cooperation is better than the terminology of interference. Speaking personally, I am optimistic about the future of the Middle East or the whole MENA region because first all the regional countries and peoples hope for it to be a peaceful, stable and prosperous region. Second, nine years after the so-called Arab Spring the people in the region realize that they are fed up with turbulence, wars and conflicts and they even suffer from the rise of international terrorism and extremists. They hope to see such a façade or scenario finished as quickly as possible. By the way, I think that even though the MENA region is so turbulent to some extent, I think the majority of the countries still focus on the domestic economic development.

Volker PERTHES

Thank you. I am going to ask you for the specific role of China in a minute but let us hear again from the people who are actually working in the region and coming from the region.