Second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate
November 1-2, 2015
Emirates Palace - Abu Dhabi

Conclusions

Over the course of two days, nearly three hundred policy-makers, experts and academics from more than forty countries convened at the Second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate (ADSD) to tackle key issues concerning the Middle East and North Africa region.

From geopolitical shifts on the map of power distribution in the world, to global threats and risks, and changes in world order, the following points are the main conclusions from over 70 interventions made by speakers at the 2015 ADSD:

The first session was dedicated to the Gulf in a new world, the changing environment surrounding it, and the shift in the US strategy towards the region. The session concluded the following:

- The strategically important Gulf region is witnessing such high levels of turbulence for the first time since its inception. The past year was marked by conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen, an ongoing instability in Iraq, the expansion of ISIS, and external military interventions, notably by Iran and Russia in Syria.
- The Saudi-led operation in Yemen with the efficient participation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reflected a shift in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) strategic mindset and anchored on the importance of its capability to protect the regional security and stability, and the interests of its member states.
- The GCC member states lack a unified strategy against challenges and subsequent threats, and this was reflected in response to the Yemen war, the Iranian threat, and the danger of the political Islam.
- Risks and challenges in the region furthered the conviction of UAE decision-makers with the necessity to build a model of power in its comprehensive concept to protect the country's development model, and to provide proactive measures facing potentially dangers and threats.
- Some believe that threats faced by the GCC stemming from hotspots in regional conflicts, Iran, and terror groups call for the Gulf states to boost their policies and existing security system into a paradigm similar to the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Although the GCC already has a joint defense pact and the Peninsula Shield Forces, they are seen as ineffective. Such enhancements will facilitate cooperating with the US the region, according to American views.
- The Middle East region in general and the Gulf region in particular will remain important for US policy and interests; this is reflected through the presence of US military assets in

the region. However, the shift in US policy is based on encouraging major regional powers to bear their responsibilities towards arising conflicts in the area.

- The US policy in the region since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and until the nuclear deal with Iran created a sentiment of mistrust from GCC countries towards their Washington ally. This calls for the US to reassure and reinforce its partnership with its allies in the region.
- The US must stop following its existing reactive policy, and taking late decisions regarding the GCC and regional affairs. Washington's use of force in dealing with rising challenges in the region must be swift and decisive.

The second session focused on internal shifts in the Arab Spring countries ranging from Syria, Iraq, and Libya, to Yemen and Egypt. This session aimed at examining internal factors and the role of external powers that contributed in these shifts. In this regard, the session reached the following conclusions:

- The regional order and its institutions were unable to solve current problems and failed to intervene effectively. Subsequently, regional crises blew to international proportions and regional conflicts turned into proxy wars.
- The Arab region is currently facing the decline of the nation-state's power and the erosion of its legitimacy. To retrieve this power and legitimacy, the region must restore security, resolve conflicts, face the identity, economic and refugee challenges, and boost governance.
- The Arab Spring demonstrated that regimes in the region are stronger than states. Furthermore, the movement showed a failure in the process of building the Arab nation-state over the past decades. Consequently, this led five Arab countries to figure on the list of the top 10 failing states in the world.
- The 'Arab Spring countries' face three sets of issues: structural difficulties related to the rise of sub-national identities, complications related to the legacy of authoritarian state, and concerns related to the management of the transitional process.
- After the revolution, Libya rushed into holding general elections and omitted to prioritize a national reconciliation and agreement over building the state. In addition, it failed to get rid of the control of Islamist militias.
- Two elements combined in Yemen to lead to the current situation: President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi's regime failed to regain the state's power and structure following the departure of ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In parallel, Iran exploited the GCC's retreat after signing the Gulf initiative to support the Houthis, who succeeded in misusing conflicts among political forces.
- Syria currently ranks first on the list of failing states. This is essentially due to the role played by external allies of the Assad regime, and especially Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.
- Egypt is still struggling to reach stability and order. Some fear that a third revolution is brewing in the country and call for key issues related to the economy, unemployment, public services, education and health to be tackled.
- Iraq suffers from complex challenges questioning the country's unity. ISIS is not the core of Iraq's problem; rather what has shaped the organization with sectarian policies, and

the targeting of Sunni communities in the country. The status quo cannot be improved without a wide-ranging national reconciliation.

- Russia claims that it has intervened in the Syrian conflict to preserve the state, fight terrorism and move forward with the peace process. However, many see it as an involvement to preserve Assad's regime and to promote Moscow's interests as Russia has not yet provided any initiative or concession to restore peace.

- To avoid involvement in the Syrian quagmire, Moscow needs to achieve a peaceful settlement in the country through support from other key players, as it has shown readiness to cooperate with Gulf countries.

- Some see the current conflicts in the Middle East as 'the tip of the iceberg', with a risk of spillover to the rest of the world and a return of the Cold War era. There are calls for changing the world order and reforming the United Nations (UN) system.

The third session focused on dynamics of the regional leverage of Iran and Turkey, possible shifts in the actions of Iran's regime in the wake of the nuclear deal, and developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It concluded the following:

- Although US President Barack Obama has dealt positively with Iran and sought to reach a nuclear deal through rapprochement out of belief that it will change Tehran's behavior and reduce its belligerent policies, many question the validity of this approach because of the ideologically rigid nature of the Tehran regime.

- Some trust that concluding a nuclear deal with Tehran indicates the possibility of reaching an agreement with Iran on other issues. In this regard, Tehran must show good faith by ending its interference in other countries' internal affairs.

- Iran's intervention in the Syrian conflict demonstrated its limited capabilities when it requested Russia's support to save Assad's regime from collapse.

- Some believe that any closed-door security arrangements made by the GCC countries may provoke Iran and escalate the hostility between the two sides.

- GCC countries fear Iran and its nuclear program, and believe that Tehran will eventually acquire a nuclear weapon. Should Iran maintain its revolutionary regime, conflicts in the region will remain.

- Turkey, led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), made the Arab region the center of its regional geopolitical project and depended on soft power and economic partnerships to promote its role and increase its influence. However, Ankara's policies towards the implications of the Arab Spring fragmented its relations with countries in the region. Furthermore, the Syrian crisis was a turning point in Turkey's foreign policy and caused additional alienation of the country.

- Turkey's opposition parties criticized the ruling AKP party's approach in dealing with events in the Middle East. The opposition blocks believe their country's involvement in regional conflicts is flawed, and they are urging the government to reconsider its actions – notably on the Syrian issue.

- It is now evident that the Arab-Israeli peace process lacks sound bases to ensure continuity and success. Palestinians claim that they cannot accept Israel's current two-state solution and label it as distorted solution. They also reiterate that the peace process

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cannot resume on the same foundation of the Oslo Accords, rather a confirmation and acknowledgment of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people before initiating any political process.

The fourth session aimed at identifying future trends that are currently taking shape, and the major scenarios that humanity is likely to face because of emerging deep shifts in the Arab and global scale. Following are the main conclusions drawn from the discussion:

- The world is currently facing two crises: The first tackles the struggle between states over conflicting ideas and values rather competition over resources. The second crisis is the collapse of the international security system. The Arab region will consequently witness what is shaping up to be a new Sykes-Picot arrangement.

- With the rise of new powers and a decline in traditional ones, the world is encountering growing risks that may replicate the conditions for the emergence of a new world order, similarly to the events of 1949 or 1990.

- China remains committed to respecting the sovereignty and stability of other countries. The extent of China's readiness to get involved in regional and internal conflicts is not clear. Moreover, there are several questions surrounding whether the GCC nations are willing to accept its increasing role in the region. Preferences are showing that China is considering pushing for economic solutions that would support political ones.

- Reality on the ground strongly indicates the US will retain its standing as a leading global power despite Washington's declining influence in the world, Russia's increasing role on the world stage, and the rising power of China - especially in the economic sector.

- The transitional stage that the Middle East region is passing through is not over yet and the region is likely to remain a potential battlefield for competing international powers. Several regimes in the region did not meet the demands of their people, and in consequence, these countries will be vulnerable to internal conflicts and turmoil.

- The world is nearing the Carbon Age as it is threatened by high-level carbon emissions that the international community failed to control. The Climate Change Conference in Paris scheduled in December 2015 is seen by some as the last chance for the world to implement urgent solutions.

The fifth and sixth sessions focused on the impact of the shifting dynamics of digital power on global and regional strategies, and the future of digital power and state power. The two sessions covered the following themes:

- Digital power affects traditional establishments including the state's authority, as we know it. It also shakes the relationship between the state and society. Although digital power enhances the empowerment of individuals, it may lead to internal political divisions.

- Digital power is rapidly spreading in the world and the Middle East region is getting its share of change. Internet and social media networks played a significant role in mass mobilization during Arab Spring revolutions.

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- Some countries, and specifically totalitarian regimes, seek seizing control of digital power through internet censorship and other surveillance measures. However, these regimes are facing major challenges in this regard and are fighting a losing battle.

- Non-state actors and terrorist organizations are increasingly using technological improvements to intimidate the power of state. It is worth noting that some states have so far failed in undermining ISIS's digital power and blocking the access to terrorist or suspicious websites may not be the ideal solution to counter the trend.

- We are still at the beginning of the digital revolution age and it is essential to maintain a balance between its opportunities and risks, as well as between cyber security and civil freedoms.

- We can overcome cyber-related issues and associated consequences on security and state through establishing a collaboration among states, enacting regulations for cyber-management, and adopting a set of values that govern its use.

The seventh and eighth sessions were dedicated to discussing international economic trends and the role of technology and energy in shaping these trends. The main points drawn from these sessions are the following:

- There has been a major shift in global economic power from the established advanced economies in North America, Western Europe and Japan to the East, and the economic rise of China is a strong indicator of it. However, for China to preserve its current economic standing, it must restructure its economy towards knowledge-base and services. Moreover, it must carry out economic reforms to promote innovation and productivity.

- As the growth of the US economy affects other world economies, the same applies for the impact of China's economy on the globe, and particularly, its trade partners in Africa and the Caribbean.

- India is seeking to surpass China's growth rate and analysts predict that New Delhi will become the engine of global growth in the upcoming years.

- Recent non-use of US military force may indicate a shift from the importance of traditional element of power to that of economic and technological power, despite their inherent relation.

- Some analysts argue that there is an urge to rethink the distribution of global power in a more balanced manner, in order to give a chance for emerging economies. This can be accomplished through limiting the Western dominance in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and other international financial organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. China, on its part, is eager to reform the structure of world economy.

- As for energy sector, factors ranging from massive oil oversupply, increasing efficiency in power use, decline in oil consumption, to diversification in energy sources, all contributed to the recent hefty drop in the commodity's prices. Although GCC countries were adversely affected by the decline of oil prices, Iran was the biggest loser and Russia is

expected to be affected by the crisis on the long run. Additionally, oil prices are not likely to exceed $100 per barrel within the next 5-10 years.

- As for oil prices in the short term, they are likely to remain nearly between $50-55 per barrel. Therefore, GCC countries are required to rationalize spending, generate additional sources of income, lift subsidy for oil derivatives, privatize companies, seek diversified economies, and focus on other renewable sources of energy.

- OPEC can no longer efficiently help stabilize prices in oil market, as its oil share does not exceed 35% of total global production. Therefore, other major oil producing countries like Russia must get involved in this process.

- Even if shale oil production is to increase in the US, the GCC region will continue to preserve its important strategic, geopolitical, and economic standing. Moreover, the relationship between the US and the GCC will likely retain its strategic significance in the future.

As for the ninth and last session, it focused on the dangers of rising terrorism and sectarianism in the region and worldwide, and studied the impact of these dangers on regional and global policies. The main points discussed during this session were the following:

- There are two fresh trends that lie under the broader scope of terrorism: First, the new generation of terrorists who were born and raised in European/American societies, and second, the third wave of terrorists that followed Al-Qaeda. These two elements call for a new approach to understand terrorism phenomenon in its totality.

- Terrorism has become a global phenomenon, rather than a regional one. The world must now deal with violent forms of terrorism and with its extreme ideologies. We need to acknowledge that some causes leading to terrorism are deep-rooted in our culture.

- Female recruits represent 30% of terrorist groups; the two main solutions to counter the phenomenon are to enhance equality between men and women and increase women participation in social, economic and political domains.

- Political and economic stability is inversely proportional to terrorism and this was demonstrated by Morocco's experience with terrorism. Following Casablanca's terrorist attacks in 2003, the country embarked on a nation-wide initiative to enhance reforms geared towards national decision-making, religious discourse and religious institutions. Moreover, the government launched a human development project and the sum of these bold steps led to the decline of terrorist threats in Morocco.

- In order to isolate and defeat the terrorism phenomenon, integrated counter-terrorism strategies at national and global levels must be adopted.

This is only a brief summary of the Second Abu Dhabi Strategic Debate' sessions. Undoubtedly, that there is a myriad of additional ideas and views that were raised during this gathering which we could not include in such a synopsis. The Emirates Policy Center is happy to receive any feedback or suggestion regarding the main themes or conclusion of this debate.

To conclude, I would like to express my gratitude to all speakers who shared with us their views and expertise, as well as the audience whose comments and questions enriched discussions and opened new horizons for learning and knowledge. I would also like to extend my special appreciations and high gratefulness to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its generous cooperation, and notably, to His Highness Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and His Excellency Dr. Anwar Gargash. I would also like to thank the Atlantic Council and its staff for their distinguished contribution to the gathering. Last but not least, I would like to express my deep appreciation for EPC staff who have exerted tremendous efforts over the last few months in planning the agenda of second ADSD, determining themes and lists of speakers, and organizing administrative, technical and logistical support, in order to make the event a success.

Once again, thank you for your attendance and hope to meet you again in the third ADSD next year, God willing.

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