

THE MASHRIQ CRISIS: CONTAINING WAVES OF INSTABILITY

Istanbul, February 22-23, 2016

On February 22-23, 2016, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and Global Relations Forum (GRF) jointly organized a conference entitled “The Mashriq Crisis: Containing Waves of Instability” at the Divan Istanbul Hotel. The opening dinner on February 22 set out the conference agenda with keynote speeches and discussions pertaining to terrorism and the foreign fighter issue. The keynote speakers emphasized the eminence and multi-faceted nature of the challenges in the Mashriq and the need for an integrated solution that balances humanitarian and security responsibilities. On February 23, the meeting addressed the sources of contagious instability through three panel sessions focusing on the geostrategic context of Syria and Iraq, the refugee crisis, and the foreign fighter challenge respectively.

SESSION #1 - GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT OF SYRIA AND IRAQ: VECTORS OF INSTABILITY TOWARDS THE REGION AND EUROPE

THE GEOSTRATEGIC IMPACT OF SYRIA ON EUROPE: FACTORS OF INSTABILITY

The first panel session of the meeting began with an overview of the crises and difficult choices faced by the EU as a result of prolonged and disentangling conflict and instability in the Mashriq, emphasizing the importance of the geostrategic context for a thorough understanding of the challenges ahead for the EU. In an effort to assess the impact of the developments in Syria and Iraq on Europe, terrorism, the refugee crisis and the EU’s institutional set-up were noted as the main vectors of instability.

Starting with a discussion on how terrorism is creating instability in Europe, the focus was on the current threat of ISIS. The main point raised was that with the operational and recruitment tactics used by ISIS, terror has become home-grown and rooted in Western societies, which are also the main targets of the attacks. It was noted that this new brand of terrorism attacks the way of life of European societies, and threatens to tear apart their social fabrics.

The discussion then turned to the refugee crisis and the destabilising impact it has had on Europe. It was highlighted that the refugees fleeing from Syria and Iraq are in the hands of global criminal networks, which make billions of euros of income with thousands of operatives. The participants pointed out that this criminal involvement has created an unfavourable opinion regarding the freedom of movement within the EU. As a result, the Schengen Agreement is being suspended bit by bit, and its political symbolism is being seriously questioned. The Schengen Agreement’s suspension would have a serious impact on trade, especially between France and Germany, the participants warned.

It was also emphasized that the refugee crisis has had wider political consequences that deepen instability within the EU: the wave of refugees fleeing from Syria and Iraq to EU states is feeding right-wing populism in these countries and consequently, furthering the polarization within their societies. In the UK, for instance, these societal tensions and the security concerns caused by the refugee crisis

constitute a major part of the arguments favouring Britain's exit from the EU (Brexit) with the upcoming referendum in June 2016.

Finally, the discussion focused on how this instability relates to the EU's institutional set-up. It was asserted that the current wave of refugees is denting the political system of the EU, as well as the way it functions. The Treaty of Lisbon stipulated that foreign policy would remain a national issue, yet seven years into its implementation, the "big three" has become the "big one", the participants suggested; with the UK's lack of interest and France's weakness, Germany directs foreign policy within the Union. Foreign ministers of the member countries are excluded from the European Council, where the important decisions – including those related to the refugee crisis – are made. It was noted with concern that for the first time, a crisis may undo the EU, instead of paving the way for its evolution.

KEY REGIONAL ACTORS

After analysing how the geostrategic context of Syria and Iraq is affecting Europe, the discussions moved on to focus on the region surrounding Syria. The United States, Iran, Turkey and the EU were identified as four key actors influencing the situation in Syria and Eastern Mediterranean.

The discussion began with a focus on the shifting nature of U.S. involvement in the Middle East. The U.S. was active and interested player in the Middle East during the 1990's when it was the sole superpower and had a perceived duty towards the international community to fight disorder. Nevertheless, early into the 20th century, the interventions of the U.S. were not always in compliance with international norms and UN Security Council decisions and did not bring intended consequences. The chaos still rife in Iraq 13 years after the intervention was pointed out as an indication of a failed interventionism.

As a result of this, the participants said, the U.S. has become increasingly reluctant to being involved in the issues of the Middle East, with Libya as the starting point of this shifting attitude. With Obama's presidency and the rise of the democrats, the approach of the U.S. towards the Middle East has thus been redefined. The participants identified three reasons that led to the feeling of necessity for this redefinition. First, the prolonged U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan had led to a depreciation of the image of the U.S., especially in the region. Secondly, due to the domestic problems of the U.S. including but not limited to its staggering economy, it was not the right time for further interventions in the Middle East. Finally, its new global energy policy had brought about a partial withdrawal of the American interest in the region. It was then mentioned that within this context, the share of the U.S. in the global power index is perceived to have been reduced.

In the opposite fashion to the U.S., Iran was argued to have been developing its own strategy to assert itself as an important actor in the immediate region, as evidenced by its involvement in Iraq. The participants shared the observation that Iran has started to penetrate into the new regime in Iraq and into the emerging system of regional balance. Iran's increased involvement was expressed as an indication that it is making a strong return to the international stage.

The next key actor mentioned was Turkey, whose foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation. It was noted that after several diplomatic successes such as its election to UN Security Council non-permanent membership, Turkey emerged as a shining star in the region, which created an overconfidence that led to a shift away from its traditional line of conduct. This shift, a participant

argued, has caused Turkey to be perceived by some countries as a liability rather than a partner for the solution in the Middle East.

The discussions then featured a consideration of the EU's influence over the situation in Syria. It was asserted that it is time for the EU to address hard security issues again. The foreign fighter challenge and the refugee crisis are only the by-products of the real security challenges that the EU is going to face in the future, and accordingly it is essential for the EU to play a key role in shaping the solutions to these challenges.

In addition to these four key actors, Russia was mentioned as another actor who has been involved to a great extent in the geostrategic context of Syria. It was argued that Russia is no longer a vulnerable and weak country; its share in the power index is growing, as opposed to that of the U.S. What this situation meant for the global balance of power was interpreted by a participant as a new Cold War-like order, this time with Russia as the frontrunner. Russian involvement in Syria was put forth as clear evidence that Russia wants recognition in the international political arena, especially because its involvement in Syria is the first instance since Afghanistan where an intervention is made in an area that is not a former Soviet territory. It was stipulated that Russia will not stop and will consolidate its power in the Eastern Mediterranean unless the U.S. and the EU become active in the region.

SESSION #2 - REFUGEES: NATIONAL AND COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT RADICALIZATION

CASE STUDY: LEBANON

The second session of the meeting began with an analysis on Lebanon as a key example in the discussions around how best to prevent radicalization amongst the refugees, due to Lebanon's experience of receiving many surges of refugee inflows over the years.

The question of borders was raised as a central issue for understanding migration concerns. In the context of Lebanon, the Syrian border shared with Lebanon is porous and volatile, and the non-controlled areas allow for easy crossing between the two countries. Furthermore, the participants added that Lebanon has a long history of shared culture with Syria and hence it has been the destination of Syrian economic migrants for years. This is a pattern of migration that gained momentum with the Syrian crisis: there has been a 20-25 percent population increase in Lebanon due to the refugee crisis, which is putting a strain on public service provision.

It was asserted that the lack of a comprehensive strategy for addressing the refugee crisis and the mistaken policy of receiving refugees without a plan in Lebanon is largely the result of a misperception of the Syrian crisis. The international community wrongly assumed that this would be a short-term crisis. Five years into the crisis and in the absence of a strategy, Lebanon seems far from being able to devise and implement policies, especially considering the political paralysis in the country resulting from frequently changing caretaker governments, the malfunctioning of the parliament, and the upcoming presidential elections.

Nevertheless, it was argued, the political understanding of the Syrian crisis might finally be changing after the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon exceeded 1 million. It was noted, for instance, that the

politicians have started to discuss the establishment of refugee camps, a policy that was previously dismissed out of fear of creating pockets of radicalization.

THE REFUGEE CRISIS FROM A SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

Having assessed the case of Lebanon, the discussions then evolved to address the refugee crisis from the perspective of security.

The participants put forth two reasons as to why refugees want to leave Turkey. The first reason is related to the current situation and cyclical happenings, such as EU leaders' policies of acceptance, the emotional support following the image of Alan Kurdi, and the EU-Turkey Action Plan. The second reason is a long-term, strategic one that again ties in with the overarching objective of aiming for a secure future. 53% of Syrians in Turkey are reportedly under 18 and 400,000 of them are not in school. In the absence of trust in the international community and the hope of returning to their home country, they opt for the risky journey at the sea rather than staying in Turkey, a participant suggested. Moreover, the participants cited the surveys showing that 49.8% of Turks do not want Syrian neighbours and 42% of them believe that Syrians are damaging Turkey's social and cultural fabric to argue that the refugees, half of whom have expressed a need for psychological assistance either for their family members or themselves, feel isolated and insecure. It was asserted that technology as well as poverty, exclusion and segregation in cities facilitate the radicalization of young refugees, who are already vulnerable due to the aforementioned feelings of isolation and insecurity.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIES

The discussion then focused on the actions to be taken for remedying the situation, stressing that in the Action Plan, the humanitarian aspect of the issue is overshadowed by security concerns, which reveals the problematic relationship between the EU and other countries. The participants acknowledged that there is a need for collective action towards: expanding legal channels for settlement, providing access to employment and legal status, increasing the availability of funding and guaranteeing its fair distribution, addressing all forms of human trafficking and smuggling, combatting gender based discrimination and violence, and taking the host communities' vulnerabilities into consideration.

While wrapping up the session, several participants stressed that discussing the issue of radicalization in relation to the refugee issue could jeopardize the security of the refugees and create the false impression that radicalization is a uniform phenomenon that can be tackled with a general recipe or some policies around the world. It was added that the pull factors for radicalization, namely the ideological underpinnings of violent action as well as the machinery that propagates these ideas, predate ISIS and they cannot be analysed in isolation from the push factors. The participants emphasized that a consensus to be established on drivers of the problems could help devising proper solutions.

SESSION #3 – FOREIGN FIGHTERS: A NATIONAL THREAT IN NEED OF A COOPERATIVE RESPONSE

A COMPARISON OF HOME-GROWN RADICALIZATION IN TUNISIA AND TURKEY

In the final session of the conference, the discussions on the foreign fighter threat began with a comparison between two case studies, Tunisia and Turkey, to understand how the home-grown threat has evolved in each country and consider how best to forge a cooperative response to this issue.

The participants shared their observation that the issue of foreign fighters is very significant in Tunisia because of its small population and the disproportionate amount of people who have left the country to join extremist organizations. Language was put forth as an important enabler of radicalization and a determining factor in both countries: the Arabic language facilitates radicalization in Tunisia, whereas it creates a barrier in the case of Turkey. In response, the participants noted, for reaching out to the Turks, ISIS created Turkish language publications and tried to appeal to the opposition towards the PKK and promote the discourse of the Ummah.

In relation to the recruitment methods, it was noted that Tunisia has a lot of people who are radicalised online, whereas in Turkey, physical networks and contacts are more prominent pull factors. However, it is relatively easier to access ISIS-related media online in Turkey, arguably in order to prevent them from resorting to “dark web”, which is much more difficult to monitor.

When considering the Tunisian and Turkish responses to the foreign fighter problem, it was argued that both countries were late in realizing that ISIS constituted a domestic threat, and their security apparatuses were not tailored to deal with ISIS-related extremism.

TURKISH RESPONSE TO THE FOREIGN FIGHTER PHENOMENON

The final part of the discussion focused on Turkey’s response to the foreign fighter issue in more detail. It was noted that in 2016, there are over 37,000 individuals on the Turkish no entry lists as suspected foreign fighters, a drastic increase from 280 people in 2011. One participant added that border controls have been strengthened since last summer in order to end illegal crossings, but Turkey needs international assistance for more effective border protection. It was asserted that states have the collective responsibility of solving this problem together; multi-agency cooperation, international cooperation and effective border controls are kinetic measures that are required to ensure effective counter-terrorism.

LESSONS LEARNED

While concluding the meeting, the following observations were shared as the key points of the discussions for understanding and addressing the crisis in the Mashriq:

- The EU and its institutional set-up are being seriously dented by the instability caused by terrorism, foreign fighters and the refugee crisis.
- The fear is that this cycle of instability could weaken the EU, instead of making it evolve and adapt.

- The pertinent question is whether the EU will ultimately rise to these challenges or be undone by them.
- Moreover, foreign fighters and refugees are only the by-products of the security challenges emanating from Syria, and the EU must play a central role in analyzing the geostrategic context and devising the adequate policies.
- Despite its lack of will to continue with interventionist foreign policy in the Middle East, the U.S. is another key actor in dealing with these challenges and must be part of the strategies for addressing them.
- In order for such strategies to be successful, they need to deal with the refugee crisis effectively, yet the current situation of the refugees in Lebanon, Turkey and the EU indicate that the international community is failing them.
- The humanitarian aspect of the refugee crisis has been overshadowed by security concerns, which potentially has dangerous consequences for Syrian refugees, particularly the youth. Their lack of education and insecure futures create a feeling of insecurity and isolation, and consequently increase their vulnerability to dangerous influences like radicalization.
- In the absence of hope for the future and the imminent danger of radicalization, many refugees choose to risk their lives for a journey to Europe. Yet further dangers are faced outside of Turkey, with thousands of Syrian children lost on EU soil.
- Ultimately, this indicates a lack of cooperation between the EU and other countries. There is a need for working collectively to create a successful strategy that acknowledges the disconnect between what is happening on the ground and the current action plan.
- Dealing with the foreign fighter crisis effectively is another key part of any successful collective strategy; however, the consideration of the Tunisian and Turkish contexts indicates that such a strategy is not yet in sight.
- The threat of foreign fighters, both home-grown and external, has put immense pressure on Turkey's borders.
- It is the collective responsibility of states to ease this pressure. Multi-agency cooperation, international cooperation and effective border controls are key to achieving a successful counter-terrorism strategy.

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