

Sectarianism, refugees, Arab-Israeli conflict 'cause instability'

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BEIRUT: Increasing sectarianism, the Arab-Israeli conflict and insufficient effort with regards to refugee questions are the factors most threatening stability in the Arab world, panelists at a conference in Beirut on "State Building and State Stability in the Arab world," concluded on Wednesday.

The conference was held at the American University of Beirut (AUB) Wednesday and organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International affairs, AUB's Institute of Financial Economics and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, a political group close to Germany's Christian Democratic Party.

"We have a bizarre relationship with statehood in the Arab world," said Rami Khouri, the director of the Issam Fares Institute, at the opening of the conference. Huge nonstate actors like Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Muslim Brotherhood wings in various countries and tribal groups in Iraq and Yemen "are saying they can do the job better than the state," he added.

Along with Khouri, the conference included speakers like Paul Salem, the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, Hussein Ghobash of the University of Saint Joseph, Ramla Khalidi of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and Sari Hanafi of AUB.

Salem said that with the decline of nationalism, classicism and partyism, sectarian movements had gained strength in the Arab world. He said a "great number of countries" were affected: "A number of alternatives which failed threw us back to other forms of mobilization."

Especially states that had collapsed in the past - like Lebanon and Iraq - were afterward rocked by sectarianism, he said. Reading Iraq's electoral law, he said, had made him think of a civil war from the very start.

Lebanon's past had shown how difficult it was to find a way out of sectarian tensions once they had been integrated.

"The challenge is to recognize sectarianism but at the same time not allow it to take over," Khouri added.

In order to stabilize the Arab world, he said "you need to overcome the Arab-Israeli conflict to remove the single biggest reason." He cited research that showed the conflict was constantly seen as the pivotal issue by people across the Arab world.

Side-effects of the conflict were also harming stability, he added. Governments throughout the region used the conflict as an excuse to delay democratization and cementing their authoritarian rule, he said.

Furthermore, Khouri added that different positions toward Israel by Arab states fueled inter-Arab differences.

The rise of Hizbullah and Hamas was, he said, partly due to these groups' appeal "as a new way of fighting Israel."

Finally, Israel was a reminder of the colonial era in the Arab world." It all comes down in one way or another to the Palestine issue" he added.

Hanafi said the large number of refugees across the region also contributed to instability.

State building had for a long time been hampered by state-of-emergency rulings. But given the huge number of refugees, he said, governments had failed to integrate them into their countries, even after being displaced for several decades.

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