

“A time of new beginnings?”

BETWEEN THE HOPE FOR PROGRESS AND THE FEAR OF REGRESSION: THE ARAB WORLD IN TRANSITION

Experts and decision-makers from thirteen Arab countries and Germany discuss prospects for the future at the second interregional KAS conference at the Dead Sea, Jordan.

What happened on 24 November 2014 would have been unthinkable for most observers and experts on the Arab world only four years ago: that Sunday, the nearly five million Tunisians were called to the ballot box to cast their vote in the country's first free presidential election and to have a say in Tunisia's political future. Although the long-term impact of the "Arab Spring" cannot be assessed yet, Tunisia has nevertheless become a successful example along the difficult path towards more democracy in the region, as Dr Günter Krings (CDU), Parliamentary State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, explained in his keynote speech at the conference. At the same time, however, it is the sad reality that the original promise of the "Arab Spring" - more democracy, more freedom and a better livelihood – has not come true in many other countries in the Arab world.

Instead, the events over the last couple of years have rather given rise to new concerns. The ongoing conflict in Syria has turned into a maelstrom which threatens to wreak havoc on neighbouring countries and which has created new safe havens for terrorist groups, such as the so-called Islamic State. In Egypt, the spectres of authoritarianism and repression have emerged anew. Political instability, repression and an ailing economy have become commonplace in many parts of the region and serve as an ideal breeding ground for extremism; and the ongoing refugee disaster is the greatest humanitarian challenge

which the international community had to face over the last two decades.

Since all these changes are taking place right on Europe's doorstep, with both direct and indirect ramifications for Germany, indifference cannot be an option, Dr Gerhard Wahlers, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department of European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, argued in his opening speech. Germany and Europe do not only have a moral duty to help, but it is also in their own interest to step up their activities in an Arab world that finds itself at a crossroads. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of the underlying causes of the 2011 uprisings: it was not an abstract yearning for democracy, but the specific desire for greater economic participation and a dignified life free of arbitrary treatment at the hands of the state which drove people to the streets. However, even four years after the events of 2011, the majority of these structural causes still exist in many parts of the Arab world.

Nevertheless, the upheavals of 2011 have also produced cautious buds that must be preserved and nourished, as the first panel discussion Representation by Choice: Organising a Diverse Society revealed. The protest movements have left their mark on society not only in the "model country" Tunisia but also in many other countries, and they have carved out new opportunities for civic engagement and political

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

**REGIONAL OFFICE
GULF STATES**

December 08, 2014

RAHMA JANETZKE
PETER SENDROWICZ
MUNA SUKHNI

www.kas.de/rpg

participation. Even in the conservative Gulf monarchies, the ruling families seem to have recognized the need for reform: all Gulf states have held elections since 2011 - often for the first time in their history. However, it is of fundamental importance for the further development of pluralistic societies in the region not to confuse the means with the end. Much more important than elections is the awareness that political legitimacy can only be sustainable if all the voices of society are heard and respected.

A major reason why the verdict over the successes or failures of the Arab Spring is still out is the development of social media in the Arab world, as the participants of the second panel *The Role of Social Media: A Platform for Engaged Citizens* analysed. The rapid spread of Facebook, Twitter & Co. has fundamentally altered the media landscape. Indeed, the ability to effortlessly share information, especially pictures and videos, has not only significantly accelerated and condensed the flow of information, but has also created an alternative public sphere to the strictly controlled state media. Since 2008, social and digital media have thus evolved into an important platform for public debate about issues which are not addressed by traditional media in the Arab world. At the same time, the contradiction between official statements and informal reporting via social media channels has also fostered a more critical attitude among the region's youth.

In addition to the erosion of the state monopoly on information, economic stagnation was discussed as another necessary condition for the Arab revolts by the third panel *Economic Prosperity: A Way to Political Stability*. Anger over the lack of economic opportunities and widespread corruption was one of the root causes of the rebellion in 2011 and in many cases the situation has deteriorated since then - with

a direct impact on the political stability. Hence, the promotion of foreign direct investment is one of the most effective and sustainable forms of assistance which the West could offer to the ailing economies of countries like Tunisia. While the development of democratic institutions on the one hand and economic prosperity on the other hand should not be pitted against each other, the implementation of a sound economic policy could still be the decisive factor for the success of these young democracies. This is why an orderly, transparent and reliable legal framework is so important for the transition process in the MENA region.

Developing a new economic policy is an equally important and urgent task. The course of rapid deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation, which many Arab states had pursued in the 2000s, has marginalised the middle class and deprived society's poorest of their livelihoods. The Arab world must therefore try to strike a balance between a more equal distribution of the benefits of growth and the creation of greater incentives for entrepreneurship. In this regard the MENA countries, including the states in the Arab Gulf, could learn a great deal from the German model of the social market economy. Although the Gulf monarchies have, in contrast to their partners in the Maghreb and the Levant, a solid financial reserve to resort to due to their oil and gas resources, they too will have to develop a medium-term sustainable economic policy which will foster new industries and integrate their populations into the labour market.

Economic considerations were also discussed in the fourth panel, *Refugees in the Mediterranean Region as a Multi-Faceted Challenge: The Search for Adequate Responses by the EU and the Arab States*. Today, about 1.4 million Syrians call Jordan their home; they represent almost

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

**REGIONAL OFFICE
GULF STATES**

December 08, 2014

RAHMA JANETZKE
PETER SENDROWICZ
MUNA SUKHNI

www.kas.de/rpg

one-fifth of the total population, but many of them are not officially registered as refugees. While there is a widespread fear among the Jordanian population that Syrian refugees could replace Jordanian workers, which would entail further tensions, many refugees are well educated, show a strong entrepreneurial spirit and could therefore be an asset to the Jordanian economy. At the same time, however, the influx of refugees threatens to crash the already heavily strained infrastructure (such as electricity and water supply, but also the school system) and the fragile social structure of the neighbouring countries. Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are thus particularly dependent on the help of the international community, since they cannot deal with this burden alone. Even when taking into account all the positive effects and financial aid the refugee crisis costs Jordan over three billion dollars each year - money which is urgently needed in other areas in this resource-poor country.

In this context, the Integration Commissioner for the Bavarian State Government, Martin Neumeyer (CSU), reminded the audience of Europe's and Germany's moral responsibility. Once a region characterised by the mutual exchange between the neighbouring peoples, the Mediterranean Sea runs the risk of becoming an insurmountable barrier, if not a graveyard, for many. Although people in Germany are becoming much more open and sympathetic towards the situation of refugees, especially when compared to the 1990s, there is still a great need for reform. In particular, refugees should not only be seen as a burden but also as a possible enrichment. Due to the progressing demographic change, Europe, and in particular the Federal Republic of Germany, need people who want to build up a livelihood – something which is often denied to refugees. At the same time Europe cannot solve all the problems alone and does not

bear the sole responsibility. While Syria's neighbours Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey already shoulder much of the burden, other Arab countries - many of whom are also transit countries for refugees – bear a humanitarian responsibility too. In this regard, the question arose as to why the states of the Arabian Gulf have not accommodated any refugees, despite the fact that they possess both the necessary financial resources and infrastructure.

The fifth and final panel, Extremism as a Security Threat in the Arab World and the EU, was all about the growing threat of extremism. The success of the radical Islamic body of thought is symptomatic of the underlying crisis of established religious authorities. The traditional religious scholars and institutions in the Muslim world have lost a lot of their reputation among young people and many Muslims who have grown up in the West have lost any connection to them - a vacuum that is being filled successfully with the simplistic interpretation of Islam by radical Salafists.

At the same time, however, exogenous factors do indeed contribute to radicalisation as well: the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the growing importance of religious identity in times of globalisation, slow economic growth and the inability to create nation states whose national myth and political system are representative of all ethnic groups. This is exactly why it is so important to create political and economic alternatives for marginalised communities while engaging in a dialogue with moderate Islamists, since they are the only ones who could penetrate more radical elements and exert influence on them.

The conference, which was organised by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Domestic Programmes Division in close cooperation with the Regional Office Gulf States and the KAS Office Jordan, served as a plat-

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

**REGIONAL OFFICE
GULF STATES**

December 08, 2014

RAHMA JANETZKE
PETER SENDROWICZ
MUNA SUKHNI

www.kas.de/rpg

form to foster synergies and inter-regional dialogue between decision-makers, experts and civil society representatives from Germany as well as the Maghreb, the Levant and the Gulf. At the same time, it was a unique opportunity for the participants from Germany to get an inside view of the complex and multi-faceted situation in the region and discuss problems and opportunities for cooperation with leading Arab thinkers.

The conference thereby built upon last year's event Between Europe and the Gulf, with which the Regional Office Gulf States and the Jordan Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung had set the initial impetus to foster better understanding and networking between opinion leaders and decision-makers from all parts of the Arab world.