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THE LEVANT: FROM ANCIENT GATEWAY TO MODERN CHAOS – THE SEARCH FOR A REGIONAL ORDER

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Introduction

The Levant as a region has historically played an important role in international politics due to its geostrategic position, hydrocarbon resources and proximity to Islamic, Christian and Jewish religious sites. Moreover, powerful regional actors and their diverse military, political and economic interests create numerous fault lines and drivers of conflicts.

The outbreak of the Arab uprisings in late 2010 against autocratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa has further unsettled the balances in the region and the crises in Iraq and Syria continue to threaten stability and prosperity all around. The breakup of state apparatuses, oftentimes termed as state failure, has provoked political polarization, sectarianism and occasional civil wars, enabling the emergence of powerful non-state actors in the region. Disagreements between key regional powers, external interventions and shifting

alignments between regional and international actors in a multipolar constellation have added new layers to the already complex and unpredictable situation.

In order to contribute to the discussion on the future of this turbulent region, the KAS Regional Program South Mediterranean and the International Relations Council of Turkey invited a group of 20 international experts and academics for a two-day workshop, where foundations and actors that influence the formation of a sustainable regional order for the Levant were analyzed.

Sovereignty vs. Sectarianism

The first panel served as an opportunity to set the conceptual framework for the further discussion by identifying which components constitute a regional order and how regional orders are challenged in the current context of fluid global power constellations.

The state-based order in the Levant is faced with numerous challenges, such as the erosion of central state authority, which contributes to increasing state fragmentation and the rise of non-state actors. Furthermore, the current order is tested through the massive population displacements caused by conflict and the shifts in dynamics of identity politics in the Levant, namely the radicalization of ethno-sectarian identities and polarization among ethno-sectarian lines that act as drivers of conflict. In this complex situation, it is all the more important to surpass a simple framing of "chaos" and "disorder" and to try to understand the underlying logic of these developments. As the main underlying logic, the competition between two norms of regional order – sovereignty and sectarianism – was described. Currently, sectarianism is seen to have gained the upper hand in this competition. The Syrian conflict in particular presents a decisive case for the region in this respect. Other key developments concerning the competition between sovereignty and sectarianism include the rise of Iran as a regional power, the emergence of Turkey as a Sunni regional actor, the shift of the diplomatic weight in favor of the Sunni GCC states, the consolidation of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq, and the changes in conceptions of sectarianism among faith communities in the region. Three main results of these current dynamics were pointed out: First, while the current situation has weakened some states it has also strengthened some state capacities, as can be seen for example in the enhanced border control capacities in Jordan. Secondly, commitments to the principle of state sovereignty remain present in the political discourse even in the current atmosphere of rising sectarianism. And thirdly, a push back from actors who refuse to build any order which is not based on sovereignty as a basic principle (e.g. Russia) can be remarked.

Looking more closely at the topic of identity politics, identity was described both as constituent and a destructive force for order – with the latter having been aggravated in the Levant in recent times. Two structural changes were highlighted as having influenced this tendency: Firstly, globalization, which has led to an expansion of individual identities and to a reinforcement of local identities as countertrend. Secondly, since systems and identities have become more fluid, people have attempted to reinforce their identities in an effort to counter this perceived loss of structures. In this context, identity becomes the defining force for political motivation. Given these structural changes and the resulting reinforcement of identities – particularly the disintegrative side of identity – it seems all the more important for politics to take into account the yearning for identity instead of trivializing it, and to find ways how to turn identity from a disruptive into a positively defining and reuniting force.

Subsequently, radicalization and the rise of non-state actors were discussed as two developments commonly described as threats to regional order. It was cautioned that the discourse surrounding radicalization, a term that widely spread following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the growing threat of home-grown terrorism in Europe, is led in a moral language. Terrorism and radicalization are portrayed as an "evil" that has to be fought against instead of understood. The term radicalization is thus seen as unproductive in order to

understand the phenomenon and the dynamics it is embedded in. In a similar fashion, the term of non-state actors was described as “meaningful but not very helpful” – in this case due to its extraordinarily broad nature. “Violent non-state actors” was thus suggested as more specific and ergo more helpful term to talk about challenges to regional state-based order.

Foundations of the Regional Political Order

The following panel subsequently looked at political systems in the region and how they have influenced and keep influencing the prospects and shape of regional order. This discussion is set in the context of the region after the popular uprisings of the Arab spring, where regime change and political reform have become key issues. Hopes for political change and democratic development in the region have however mostly been disappointed since authoritarian regimes have pushed back the social and political demands of their populations. The uprisings were either quelled or led to violent conflicts rather than regime change.

What we are currently witnessing in the Levant can be described as unprecedented collapse of sub-regional order due to the full-scale civil war in Syria and its repercussions on the other countries of the region. It was highlighted that over years and even decades in authoritarian states of the region the public sphere had been occupied by civil society organizations linked to autocratic leaders and had thus been foreclosed to the participation of more inclusive and representative civil society bodies. Nevertheless, from a Western perspective, these puppet civil society organizations were seen as representative actors of the populations and thus adequate partners. This misjudgment was given as the main reason why the West was caught by surprise when the uprisings started.

In order to get out of the current crisis mode, a certain degree of democratization is seen as necessary, since – while not being a clear-cut black and white situation – democratization tends to further stability. For the success of democratization a set of factors was highlighted: Firstly, building intra-elite consensus on the desired state order; secondly, (re-)building state institutions; and thirdly, encouraging civil society since inclusive institutions are pivotal for democratization. The cases of Egypt and Syria were used to illustrate transition processes – in this case failed attempts at democratization. Both cases saw demands for aspects of democracy and processes of change after popular uprisings in 2011 in the context of relatively depoliticized societies. And while in both cases the countries experienced the overthrow of their autocratic leaders – in one way or the other – this did not lead to a (sustained) process of democratization. A missing link between the institutions and civil society was given as a reason for this development. The ongoing demonization of the opposition in both countries furthermore continuously hinders any consensus, which could provide the basis for democratization.

What this shows is that while popular desire for democratization – in the form of a sufficiently motivated and big enough group of people who overcome their own interests for the higher public good – is a potential driver for democratization, it is not sufficient on its own. Consensus, an inclusive civil society sphere and a strong link between institutions and civil society are necessary to turn this popular desire into a transition towards democracy.

Speakers cautioned against the argument of “establishing order” vs. “democracy”, which can be observed in the discourse used by autocratic rulers as justification for their rule. A prominent example of this is Egyptian President el-Sisi and his positioning as a strong force against terrorism in the region.

Building a Regional Economic Framework

Moving from political systems to the economic framework in the Levant region, the subsequent panel focused on the potential of deepened economic interdependence and cooperation in the context of new energy discoveries, and common challenges such as demographic pressure, climate change and resource scarcity. Speakers addressed among others questions of how economic interdependence can be fostered despite historical animosities and ideological differences between key actors, and how economic integration might influence the stability of the region.

With regard to the potential for economic integration in the Levant, it was highlighted that the economic complementarities and different stages of economic development of the LEVANT 4 – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria – are similar to the six countries that created the EEC. Economic cooperation between the four countries reached its peak in 2010 with a free-trade agreement – only to see the positive development hurt by the onset of the Syria crisis that has caused trade between the countries with Syria to decline from 2010 to 2015. While trade between the other states has remained relatively stable, the negative effects of the conflict in Syria continue to be a heavily destabilizing factor for the economies of the neighboring countries.

In the broader Levant region – including Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and Syria – economic integration would currently have to integrate three types of states:

- 3 unified and functioning states: Egypt, Jordan, Turkey
- 2 fragmented but functioning states: Lebanon and Iraq
- 1 fragmented war zone: Syria

In this situation, some experts view the potential for cooperation as very limited, given the unclear end and outcome of the Syria crisis and the complicated and conflict-ridden political relationships between the countries of the region. Other experts however – despite the obvious difficulties – point to the potential for long-term cooperation if a positive outcome for the conflict in Syria can be thought of and by taking advantage of the political and economic diversity of the region. From this perspective, refugee communities in other countries of the region could also potentially create positive network effects and facilitate trade. In the current situation, bilateral agreements seem like the more realistic option for short-term economic cooperation and could later be merged into a broader regional agreement. Taking the potential for cooperation even further, one expert remarked that the current economic cooperation can be seen as a form of “functional peace” that could provide a basis for peace more general.

New offshore hydrocarbon discoveries in the Levant countries – while small on a global scale – are seen as having the potential to decisively change the regional energy supply and possibly promote regional cooperation in the energy field. The focus here lies increasingly on gas exploration. With these new discoveries arises the question of infrastructure for transport and export, such as pipelines and LNG facilities. The commercial viabilities, as well as government regulations, environmental considerations and importantly also political issues present variables in the decision-making on what infrastructure will be constructed and used. Based on the new discoveries there have been attempts to create new energy hubs in the Levant and also first attempts at regional cooperation in the domain, such as trilateral summits.

The Cyprus issue remains an important consideration in the development of regional energy resources. Some experts argue that the new discoveries and the coordination needed to exploit them will act as catalyzer for cooperation and will thus increase political will to find a solution for the Cyprus dispute. Others however warn of the energy resources as a potential new source of political conflicts, such as in the case of the disputed maritime zone between Israel and Lebanon. Experts also caution that the development of these resources will

not be possible in absence of a political settlement for the Cyprus issue. A prominent illustration for this is the proposed Israel-Turkey pipeline that would go through the Cyprus exclusive economic zone and might be blocked if no political settlement provides a basis for cooperation.

On top of issues of conflict and energy sources, the economic framework in the Levant can also be seen to be influenced by transnational challenges, such as demographic pressure, climate change and resource scarcity, particularly impacting water and food security.

Countries in the region are characterized by a youth bulge that increases the pressure on labor markets to provide employment for the high numbers of young people seeking jobs – exacerbated by the fact that employment provides the precondition for acquiring the status of adulthood and being able to marry and have family. Failure to respond to this need risks to create widespread frustration that might turn into political opposition and violence. On the other hand, the youth bulge could be a decisive asset instead of a liability for these countries, if governments and the private sector manage to address it adequately by creating quality employment opportunities.

Environmental concerns – and, as an extension of this, questions of food security and water supply – have been aggravated through the long-term mismanagement of natural resources. Nevertheless, these concerns have so far not been on the top of the political agenda and have been addressed mostly through the unsustainable practice of food subsidies by governments or the purchase of foreign land in order to guarantee grain supply for domestic consumption.

The New Balance of Power: Key Actors for the Region

The subsequent session then looked at how the policies of regional and international actors and their shifting relations shape the region.

For Saudi Arabia, the uprisings of the Arab Spring have consolidated its sense of insecurity, which – coupled with seeing its own survival as absolute priority – has led the country to keep close relations with countries in the Levant region that it identified common interests with.

In the case of Turkey, it was remarked that both the 2007 elections as well as the Arab Spring changed the country's policies towards the region. After the elections, Turkish foreign and trade policy was characterized by diplomatic and economic initiatives aimed at fostering ties with a broad range of states in the region. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, Turkey positioned itself and was seen by many external experts as a model for a moderate Western-oriented Muslim-majority democracy. Turkey's efforts to support the democratic aspirations were meant to create foundations for cooperation in the long term. However, the developments shaping the political transitions – above all the ousting of Egyptian President Morsi – decisively hampered Turkish efforts to establish close ties with the countries and the Arab Spring is now said to be a litmus test for the AKP policies to the region. An increasing focus on national security rather than political initiatives has further led Turkey to adjust its foreign policy in the Levant region.

For Iran, its sense of strategic isolation in the region creates dominant themes of resistance, particularly among the country's elites. Iran's strategy to restore its regional relevance is based on a diversified approach of hard- and soft-power support for state and non-state actors, creating proxy-group relations with the latter. The most prominent example of such a relationship is Iran's support for Hezbollah, which by some observers has been termed the development of a kind of "Shia regional army". In recent years, Iran however seems to have overextended itself with the support for states and non-state actors in the region, particularly its engagement in Syria, which is seen to potentially motivate a more pragmatic Iranian approach towards the Levant.

With regard to Egypt, which sees a central role for itself in the regional and also global game of power, the developments after the ousting of President Mubarak have drastically influenced Egyptian foreign policy. While under President Morsi, the US, Turkey and Iran were seen as close partners, under the new President el-Sisi Egypt's foreign policy alignments changed to the exact opposite, inserting itself as part of the "anti-revolutionary coalition". This meant that ties with former partners such as Turkey, Qatar and Hamas have been cut or severely deteriorated, while Saudi Arabia, the UAE as well as Russia and China are now seen as important partners. Egyptian foreign policy revolves around security and survival considerations and a harsh anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance, portraying itself as international leader in counterterrorism. While this foreign policy seems to be working well for el-Sisi internationally, domestically the question is how long it will still be possible to contain popular frustration against the government.

Concerning Russia's role in the Levant and its strategies towards the region, it was remarked that Russia neither has the ambitions nor the means of power to become the main power in the Levant. It was rather stressed how its foreign policy towards the region was influenced by the threat of terrorism it sees linked to the potential spill-over of radicalization tendencies to the Muslim population in Russia. Some observers thus speak of a pragmatic policy, as exemplified by the ongoing Russian support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, who is seen as the best option at the moment. Other observers, however, emphasized that the geopolitical interests of Russia to position itself as a strong power player in the region should not easily be overlooked as a motivation for Russia's actions.

Under President Trump, ISIS has been elevated to the most serious strategic threat for US security. While some claim that this threat is purposefully overstated, the effects on US foreign policy can already be remarked. Furthermore, experts highlight that US foreign policy under the new administration has become less consistent and thus less predictable, as exemplified by the swift change in stance concerning Assad as well as the intervention through bombing Syria after Trump's explicit promise to scale down foreign interventions of the US. Concerning a potential US-Russia cooperation on Syria, experts do not rule out such a development, whether in a narrow technical sense, such as a focus on counterterrorism, or in a broader political sense.

While the Levant has had and will continue to have a considerable impact on EU security, the EU is not one of the most decisive actors in the Levant. This limited role is judged to be due to its lack of a common foreign and security policy, as well as a lack of coherence between member states' policies. The EU is thus not perceived as a strong security actor. Some observers call the EU in its current role a "payer, not player" since it provides 55 percent of global aid and is without doubt important as donor, investor and trade partner globally, but has not translated this relevance into the field of security.

China, as another major international actor, has not published a strategy document on its priorities in the Levant region; however, experts have deduced some of the country's priorities from its activities and strategic moves. China's foreign policy has traditionally been based on the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. For the Levant, the country is aiming for a balanced foreign policy by attempting relations with all countries. It particularly aims to foster strong states in the region through support for political leadership and economic growth, as well as the fostering of regional cooperation to advance the region's security and economies. The region is, for example, also seen as a critical partner in the framework of China's OBOR ("One Belt One Road") initiative. And while until recently economic cooperation constituted the main focus of its efforts, security cooperation has increasingly begun to play a role. Additionally, China does not believe in a military solution to conflicts in the region, such as Syria and Libya, but rather aims for a political transition to stabilize these countries and through this the region more broadly.

The Way Forward

Faced with a myriad of challenges, such as the ongoing conflict in Syria, political and sectarian polarization, and interventions of external actors, a (re-)construction of regional order in the Levant remains a highly complex and difficult endeavor whose chances for success are judged as being slim by many observers. At the same time, however, recent developments such as offshore hydrocarbon discoveries as well as more broadly the issue of economic cooperation is carrying the potential for stabilization and maybe even peace in the long term, according to experts. In order for this potential to materialize, political animosities between states of the region will have to be overcome and pragmatism will have to be emphasized in their relations. Furthermore, external actors should have an interest in fostering stability and cooperation in the region instead of further contributing to imbalance and cleavages since, in the end, allowing for a new regional order in the Levant to form and to stabilize the region can also serve to enhance global stability and security.

The KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean is flanking and fostering this necessary process of regional and international dialogue through a range of activities, such as expert workshops and conferences facilitating the exchange of experiences and best practices as well as through publications highlighting challenges for the region, pointing to possible solutions and giving recommendations for decision-makers.



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