

EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

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Regional Conference „Jordan in a Changing Regional Environment“

4-6 November 2017, Amman

Jordan is located in a turbulent regional environment. It is situated at the center of several crises that came into existence or were exacerbated after the uprisings of the so-called “Arab spring”. In this context, KAS Jordan Office organized together with Al-Quds Center for Political Studies a regional conference from 04 to 06 November 2017 in Amman. This conference analyzed Jordan’s internal and external security threats, its position and interests in the region as well as the impact of current regional developments on the country.

Session: The Syrian crisis in its final phase, whither the future of Jordanian-Syrian relations?

The first speaker of the session was Dr. Turki Al-Hassan, who is a researcher in the Damascus Center for Strategic Studies and Research. He represented the position of the regime, but he has no official position in the regime. The second speaker was Dr. Samir Ayta, who is a Syrian opposition member who occupied the position of editor in chief of the Arabic *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The third panelist was Dr. Phillip Chite from the National Agenda for the Future of Syria, UN- ESCWA, an expert in the process of reconstruction. The final speaker was Dr. Amin Mashakbeh, a former Jordanian Minister and a professor of political science at the University of Jordan. These are the main ideas and recommendations that were presented by the speakers:

There exists a general belief among the conferees, that the Syrian crisis is nearing its ‘final phase’. The zones of “de-escalation” were clearly welcomed by all panelists but the speakers also agreed that substantial challenges will remain in Syria in the post IS stage. These include:

- The Syrian regime is not demonstrating flexibility in responding to the calls for political reform and transition in Syria, while the Syrian opposition is increasingly weak and its role is increasingly eroding, as it is unable to unify its ranks and vision.
- IS has receded substantially as a military and strategic threat but it is expected to remain a security threat in Syria and in the neighboring countries. In addition, the threat of Al- Nusra Front remains strong, particularly in Adlib, Quneitra, Daraa, and some other pockets. The war on terrorism has, thus, still not ended in Syria.

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- There is another problem that will face Syria as soon as the challenge of IS is overcome: the Kurdish problem. The opposition rejects the Kurds, the regime fears them and Turkey and Iran oppose them. The Syrian regime will not accept a Kurdish region according to the Iraqi pattern. The Kurds in Syria, however, aspire to establish a federal region with an expansive space of freedom and independence. There is, thus, the possibility for a new clash between the Kurds and the regime in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, the north eastern Badia, in case the differences are not resolved by political means and through negotiations.

- The panelists welcomed the Astana talks, considering them as complementary to the Geneva process. They look forward to and are hopeful towards a positive outcome of the Sotschi Process and the national Syrian dialogue, and there is an even greater bet on the Russian - American understanding to resolve the Syrian crisis.

- There exists concern regarding the role of Israel which could lead to complicating the opportunities for a resolution of the Syrian conflict. Israel does not want Iran in Syria, and it seeks to secure areas to the south. To that end Israel entertains ambiguous relations with al-Nusra that is present in that area. This is a cause for concern to numerous quarters, including Jordan, which is enthusiastic to re-opening the borders and crossing points between Jordan and Syria.

- Concerning Jordan, there was a sense of comfort amongst the panelists with the balanced positions adopted by the Jordanian governments throughout the years of the crisis, and an appreciation for the fact that Jordan unlike the Gulf states and Turkey had not betted on a military outcome and the downfall of the Assad regime.

- Jordan has three interests in Syria: prevention of terrorism from reaching the Jordanian territory, distancing the pro Iranian militias from its borders, repatriating the refugees or a portion of them to the areas of southern Syria from which they came, opening the border crossing points to resume the movement of people and goods from and to Syria, and through Syria to Lebanon, Turkey and the European Union. For Jordan, however, this is only possible if there is an official presence of the Syrian government (in civil and security forms) on the Syrian side of the border, as Jordan rejects dealing with militias and armed groups.

- There are calls for activating Jordanian diplomacy in order to overcome the obstacles preventing the opening of border points and the resumption of trade. But there is also a general belief that Jordan plays only a limited role and only has limited influence with regards to solving the Syrian crisis.

Session: Iraq post ISIS and the future of Jordanian Iraqi relations

The session featured the following speakers: The National Coalition leader (Sunni) in the Iraqi parliament, Dr. Ahmad Al-Massari; Member of the Shii Coalition close to Dr. Haydar Abbadi, Mr. Ali Al-Allaq; Dr. Mohammad Halayqah the former Deputy Prime Minister. These were the main points presented by the speakers:

- Though IS has been dealt considerable blows on Iraqi territory it is expected to remain, until further notice, a security threat, particularly given that it still has numerous cells and elements in Iraq.
- However, there are also positive developments emerging in the context of the war against IS in Iraq: including for example a growing sense of an Iraqi national identity particularly amongst the Arab component of the population, Sunni and Shii alike; the emergence of an Iraqi civic youth movement that criticizes corruption and the weakness of public services; the formation of electoral alliances that transcend sects in Iraq; the increasing openness of Shii currents to the Arab neighboring region.
- Post IS Iraq however will face a number of challenges, and if it does not manage to successfully deal with them, the country will be threatened by a reproduction of IS, or perhaps more "extreme" and even bloodier versions of it. Amongst these challenges are: dealing with the Kurdish question; reconsidering the political process and the political regime, making them acceptable to the different components and entities of Iraq; the challenge of the presence of armed militias and particularly of the Popular Mobilization Forces; combatting corruption and providing a higher standard of public services; reconsidering the relations with two neighboring countries: Turkey and Iran.
- Jordan has developed balanced relations with the various Iraqi political and social components and entities, but the improvement of relations between Baghdad and Amman faces major obstacles. These include:
 - The presence of a "lobby" that is opposed to Jordan which is influential inside the government, parliament and the Shii Coalition, the Maliki current in particular, which is a current that is very close to Iran.
 - The weak capability of the government to control the security situation in the western governorates and on the international highway between Amman and Baghdad.

- Finally, Jordan cannot considerably improve its relations with Baghdad as long as it has excellent ties with Iran, as this threatens Jordan's relations to at least two of its major allies: Saudi Arabia and the US.

- Jordan, however, has major interests in Iraq, some of which are of a strategic nature such as the oil pipelines from Basra to Aqaba, and perhaps the Iraqi gas pipeline (and perhaps also the Iranian pipeline).

- The Iraqi market is traditionally an essential market for Jordan. Jordan seeks to reenter that market again. In addition Jordan will strive to obtain a share in the process of reconstruction in Iraq. But there will be strong regional and international competition regarding that matter.

- The Iraqi prime minister Dr. Haydar Abbadi sent a letter to the conference in which he expressed support for the recommendations and ideas emanating from it with a view to bolstering and developing bilateral relations between Jordan and Iraq, which was well and positively received by the conferees.

The following sessions took place according to the program. These were the main points put forward by the panelists:

Session: Palestinian-Israeli negotiations

- There was a strong sense of pessimism regarding the possibility of concretizing the two- state solution and the opportunities for the emergence of a Palestinian state due to the growing influence of the religious and nationalist right in Israel, and the growing inclination of Israeli society towards extremism.

- There was serious concern regarding the orientation of the American administration headed by Donald Trump, regarding his aspired "deal of the century" and regarding what this could entail in terms of the marginalization of the Palestinian issue in favor of a normalization of Arab Israeli relations (contrary to what was provided in the Arab peace initiative).

- The Palestinian speakers criticized Jordan for having refrained from taking on the role as a mediator, helping the Palestinians to resolve their internal differences. Jordan has thus opened up opportunities for other Arab actors to interfere in that regard.

- Jordan was called upon to develop a „plan b" as the chances for a two state solution are diminishing and Jordan was asked to prepare for a political confrontation with Israel (against the backdrop of the ces-

sation of the peace process but also of Israel's targeting of the Hashemite custodianship over the holy places).

Session: Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council

- The Gulf countries face serious the challenges associated with diminishing oil revenues.
- The Gulf countries' support for countries such as Jordan has changed from providing financial assistance to more direct investments. This however, has created a sense a frustration amongst some Jordanians.
- The Gulf countries and Jordan are tied together through roughly one million highly educated Jordanian guest workers in the Gulf. Any political and economic changes in the Gulf countries are thus understood to have a direct impact on Jordan. There is fear amongst Jordanians that the remittances of these expatriates will decline in the future.
- Calls for diversifying the Gulf states' sources of income and widening the circle of their regional and international alliances were made.
- Possible impacts of the Qatar crisis and the recent developments within the ruling institutions in Saudi Arabia were discussed.

Session: Relations with Turkey and Iran

- Iran's interventionist policies in the MENA region and the countries expansionist policies were criticized.
- Nevertheless, the Jordanian speaker called for a limited normalization of Jordanian relations with Iran out of pragmatic reasons: (i) for economic reasons, (ii) as it is understood that some kind of normalization of relations with Iran might be a necessary requirement for Jordan if it seeks to develop its relations with Damascus and Baghdad.
- The Jordanian conferees also called for developing relations with Turkey, but also called on Turkey to end its support to political Islamic groups and to lessen its hostility towards some of Jordan's allies, such as Egypt.
- The Turkish speaker argued that Turkey offered a model of democracy and economic development for the region. Similar to the EU the MENA region could enter into a partnership based on peace, de-

mocracy and economic development. Turkey could function as the leading actor in that regard.

- This session featured the most heated discussion. Conflicts arose especially between the Egyptian and Turkish speaker, the Saudi (and Kuwaiti) and the Iranian speaker, the Iranian and the American speaker for instance.

Session: The threat of terrorism and the challenges facing Jordan

- The threat of terrorism inside Jordan continues to exist, and is in fact worsening as a result of the failure of the policies of confronting extremism adopted by the governments.

- A large-scale study conducted by the Jordanian Center for Strategic Studies notes a change in the organizational patterns of IS supporters in Jordan. While these supporters had previously mainly been loose individuals. Now, however, community structures were emerging between them and whole families can now be considered to be IS supporters and breeding grounds for IS ideology. The participants stressed that this rendered fighting this ideology ever more difficult.

- The panelists also criticized the absence of strategies to deal with the future IS returnees from Syria and Iraq.

- It was noted that IS is searching for new theaters of operation, such as Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Mali or Algeria and Tunisia. It is also expected that IS foreign fighters would not return to their countries of origin in large numbers immediately after the fall of IS in Syria and Iraq as they were more likely to move to these possible new theatres.

- There is no effective Jordanian governmental strategy to combat extremism to date, that there is no cultural national project to confront the phenomenon.

- The foremost challenges facing Jordan and spiraling youth radicalization is the economic challenge but also the slow pace of political reforms.

- Jordan is called upon to formulate a strategic plan to confront extremism that is grounded in six axes: good governance, good education, religious reform, justice in income and wealth distribution, partnership with the private sector and civil society, a national cultural and enlightenment project, provided that the forces and components

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of the state and society become involved in achieving them, in a climate of freedom, democracy and respect for pluralism.

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