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Chatham House International Roundtable Summary

A Changing Middle East and North Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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This is a summary of the second Istanbul Roundtable. The focus of discussion during three sessions over two days was the Arab Spring, in particular the implications for Turkey and the EU. This document presents a summary of those discussions, which were held under the Chatham House Rule.

The Arab Spring

There was a general consensus among participants that the Arab Spring had irrevocably changed the region. There would be no return to the status quo ante. Although the change was irreversible, what was unclear was the direction reform would now take. The process was likely to be uneven and non-linear. It was suggested that a longer perspective would be required to assess the success of the reform movements.

One participant argued that the root cause of the revolutions had been a crisis of Arab governance. Models of Arab governance had failed dramatically. With the exception of some of the Gulf countries – principally owing to their resource wealth – Arab states were unable to match the educational, economic, political and social aspirations of their people, particularly in terms of delivering representative, accountable government. One participant argued that the protestors wanted what Turkey represents: an Islamic representative democracy with a successful market economy.

Historical comparisons were made with 1848 and 1989. Several participants felt the process of revolution and reform would continue for a number of years. Currently, the republics of the Middle East and North Africa had fared worse than the monarchies but it was suggested that no regime's stability could be taken for granted in the longer term. No Arab government was safe or immune.

One participant argued that revolution was a three-stage process. The fall of dictators had to be followed by two things: economic revolution and institutional construction. Removing a dictator was only the beginning. Toppling Mubarak was an uprising, not a revolution. Mubarak was the civilian face of the power force in the country: the army. It was the army that removed him. Egyptians needed to turn the uprising into a revolution. This would take time.

Optimism and satisfaction were expressed about what the movements had achieved so far. In Egypt, although the pace of change had frustrated some and there had been ongoing violence, the fact that protests continued,

insisting the military be subject to democratic constraints, was seen as encouraging. Egypt's is an unfinished revolution.

At the same time, it was suggested that unless new regimes and leaders were able to deliver more than democracy, they also risked failing to match the expectations of their people. One participant argued that the new governments needed 100-day and six-month plans, to show changes that people could feel in their lives; otherwise, support for the revolution would be lost. This represented a massive risk for any of the new governments. Concerns were also expressed about the risk of sectarianism.

It was considered important for the revolutions to have demonstrable successful examples, particularly in Tunisia. Given its size and its economy, Tunisia was well placed to prosper. Other participants suggested that Egypt was much more important regionally and symbolically but that transition and reform there represented a greater challenge.

The West and the New Middle East

There was a discussion of how states in the West could support change in the region and engage with new leaders and actors. It was asserted that, for a long time, there were persistent myths that the Arab world was not ready for democracy, or that Arabs did not object to dictatorships. These had been shattered by the Arab Spring. One participant argued that the question was not whether the Arabs were ready for democracy, but whether the US and Europe were ready to accept democracy in the Arab world.

It was asserted that the West's principal problem was the ongoing perception of double standards. A prominent example was the outcome of the 2006 Palestinian Authority elections. Despite the support by Western states for the electoral process and the transparency of the election, the outcome was not accepted because of the success of Hamas. This discredited Western states' democracy assistance work. The Obama administration's current ambivalence towards the crackdown on protestors in Bahrain illustrated this once more. This perception made it very difficult to engage in the region as there were persistent assumptions that Western states brought a hidden agenda. One participant argued that the West must drop its ambivalence and embrace the changes in the region. The revolutionaries represented the same values as those promoted by the West.

It was also suggested that the capacity of the West's to 'control' or 'manage' events in the Middle East was continually overrated. Despite this, it was still

unfortunate that the EU was not poised to help, since it was consumed by its own internal crises. One participant argued that the West needed to concentrate on uniting economic development and political stability. The biggest reform the EU could make would be to open its markets and lower tariffs and other barriers to trade. Support for the development of a functioning market economy in the post-revolution states was seen as a priority. Another participant lamented that EU had given too little urgency to the process of supporting change in the region. For example, more could be done to shift aid flows into Tunisia and Egypt. Europe had both tools and experience. Outsiders could not 'do' reform for the people of the Middle East, but lessons could be learned from the democracy assistance programmes put in place after the fall of the Soviet Union, including the 'know-how' fund.

A discussion of what conditionality should apply to EU support produced mixed opinions. Some felt that the EU should be willing to accept limited conditionality as this would build credibility. Others thought the problem was that incentives from the EU were too low: it had to offer more.

Turkey's Regional Role

There was considerable discussion of Turkey's regional role and what the country could do to support change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It was suggested that US influence and presence in the region was lower than at any point in the last half-century because of declining economic influence, the Iraq war, the US relationship with Israel and the US connection to authoritarian governments. There was political space for others to gain influence. Turkey now had a pivotal role, and there were also growing expectations of what it could and should do.

It was noted by several participants that Turkey, as an Islamic government with a representative democracy and a booming market economy, could serve as a model for the region. The Turkish leadership, in particular Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was very popular across the region. There were few international leaders who could talk about reform and secularism and also pray with the leaders and the people of Tunisia and Egypt. One participant suggested that Turkey's real allies in the region were the peoples of the other Arab states, and not their leaders. Turkey had firmly aligned itself with the people and not their governments.

Another participant suggested that Turkey was less a model and more of an example. The Turkish story was unique, but it demonstrated the power of successful reform. This also gave Turkish politicians greater credibility when

discussing reform since they were able to speak from the experience of successfully building both a market economy and representative democracy. Given Turkey's extensive business and trade in the region and the cultural ties it shared, there were opportunities for it to promote a functioning market economy and private sector in post-revolutionary states, potentially through partnerships between Turkish and MENA companies, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Job creation was seen as vital. One participant argued that it was also important that sufficient resources and priority were given to maintaining security in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia as these were central to promoting economic growth.

Turkey also had a regional leadership role to play. It was asserted that Turkey had adapted well to a multi-polar world. It could put pressure on many states to reform owing to the influential voice it wielded in a number of countries, including Syria and Iran.

Turkey and Syria

One participant considered Syria to be now 'the eye of the storm'. It differed from other states in the region in being a secular regime with a Sunni majority but a very large number of minorities. It was probably unavoidable that unrest in Syria had taken a sectarian character. While Libya's revolution had very few consequences for its neighbours, the opposite was true of Syria, whose neighbours, including Lebanon, Jordan, Iran and even Israel, were profoundly affected. One participant thought the situation in Syria could still be reversed. Others thought that Assad had not taken one meaningful step towards reform, and that the outcome was inevitable.

It was asserted that Turkey had a key role to play in framing any solution to the ongoing crisis in Syria. It had already brought considerable pressure to bear on President Assad. Given their shared border, this was a pressing issue for Turkey. The Turkish government had already been very active, and might have to be even more vocal. One participant felt that more had to be done to manage the crisis. It was asserted that the demise of the regime would bring great benefits, not least to the Syrian people. It would impact on the Sunni–Shiite divide; it would be a big setback for Iran and also for Hezbollah. It was also suggested that Russia could be brought in to play a more constructive role

Iran

Iran remains an important ally of Turkey. The two countries share a border and a long history. It is a sensitive relationship but the Turkish government is putting pressure on Tehran to reform. One participant thought that probably no other country's leadership had as much influence over Iran as the Turkish government. But Turkey had vulnerabilities too, including its long border and reliance on Iranian gas supplies. One participant asserted that isolation from the international community had not worked on Iran and questioned whether there was more that Turkey could do. It was suggested that the crucial change was to make Iran comfortable with its assessment of the threats to its own security.

Turkey and the EU

A discussion of Turkey–EU relations highlighted many difficulties. While there was still considerable support for the reforms driven by the accession process, there was growing ambivalence about membership of the EU. The Turkish leadership remained supportive and overall in Turkey there was still majority support for membership. But it was put in a difficult position by the hostility in some parts of the EU to Turkish membership. Cyprus remained an issue; it was blocking the opening of the energy chapter of accession talks. One participant felt that this was a failure of the other 26 in the EU which seemed reluctant to put pressure on Cyprus. It was also noted that previously Turkey had been invited to observe parts of EU summits but this was no longer happening. This was seen as further undermining Turkey's status. One participant suggested that given the current turmoil in the EU and the likely reorganization and integration, Turkey might have a prominent role among the peripheral countries of a future remade EU – which could include the UK.

Israel and the Middle East peace process

One participant suggested that Turkey was uncertain what Israel wanted. Despite the recent political difficulties, economic realities helped determine the political character of the relationship. Bilateral trade between Israel and Turkey actually increased in 2011. One participant felt that the Arab Peace Initiative had lost momentum, but that the ideas needed to be resurrected. The political situation in Israel was difficult, but there also had to be progress on the Palestinian side in overcoming the divide between Hamas and Fatah.

Domestic Political and Economic Reform in Turkey

There was some discussion of Turkey's domestic political situation. Great emphasis was attached to the growth and reform achievements of the AKP leadership in the last 10 years. These were matched by ambitious plans for Turkey's future growth. The current government is aiming for Turkey to be among the world's 10 largest economies by 2023, 100 years after the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The last few years have already seen dramatic increases in per capita and nominal GDP. Expanding trade and supporting business were seen as central to this projected economic growth.

However, several participants emphasized that democracy in Turkey was still evolving. It had taken decades to reach its current position and this was still an imperfect democracy. This was one more reason to lower expectations of what could be achieved one year on from the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Concerns were raised over press freedoms in Turkey, in particular the number of journalists imprisoned. It was asserted that this was in part due to a diffuse judicial system which resisted central control by reformers, though the commitment to this reform was disputed. It was asserted that despite the critical views of many TV stations, there were no broadcasting restrictions. One participant suggested that the issue was as much about media ownership and conflicts of interest as about press freedom.

Potential Policy Ideas

Region

- Develop a new regional security architecture for the MENA region, modelled on the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, based on consensus, to create a forum to discuss security issues and promote collective commitment to democratic standards.
- Arab League to re-launch an Israeli–Palestinian initiative, with Turkish involvement and advocacy.

Turkey

- Undertake intense but discreet Turkish engagement with the civil and military authorities in Egypt, working with the grain of Egyptian attitudes.

- Expand economic support for private-sector development in MENA, focusing on job creation.
- Increase pressure on Syrian leadership to begin process of meaningful reform.

EU

- Liberalize markets to reduce barriers to trade and open markets for MENA countries.
- Develop comprehensive reform and assistance efforts to support democratic change, involving political and economic elements, with a strong focus on supporting the establishment of functioning market economies and accountable government. Ensure incentives are sufficiently high for partner states.

CHATHAM HOUSE INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLES

Chatham House International Roundtables are held in key locations around the world to explore topical issues of critical importance to global prosperity and security.

The structure of these Roundtables reflects the essence of Chatham House's approach – informal discussion among a small group of senior international and local political and business leaders. They provide an ideal environment in which to facilitate the development of shared ideas on how best to confront pressing challenges and harness emerging opportunities in international affairs.

The Roundtables are held under the Chatham House Rule and a non-attributable summary of the discussion and policy ideas is published online.

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