

HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL POWERS AND REGIONAL ACTORS FORM MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS?

Abstract: The following note reflects the discussions held during a private roundtable in Istanbul intended to tease out actionable policy recommendations for how international powers and regional powers in the Sharq (MENA) region can form mutually beneficial relationships. These exchanges took place on the margins of Al Sharq Forum's conference on October 8-9 examining the post-crisis regional order in the region. There was an underlying sense among participants that new analytical models needed to be developed to more effectively deal with the rapid changes that the region is undergoing, with a particular emphasis on what this means for international powers and their evolving role in the Middle East. It was argued that the ultimate aim of any such a model should be to create a sustainable, stable, multi-ethnic and pluralistic regional order.

What Drives the Policies of International Actors?

Given the legacy of British and French colonialism as well as more recent US and Russian military interventions, there are serious questions as to whether engagement by international powers in the region is inherently negative, or whether there is scope to encourage a more constructive role for these actors.

International powers' regional policies often appear short-sighted and reactive, driven by a need to protect their national interests and contain immediate threats such as terrorism and migration. As a result, each international actor has its own set of strategic calculations and priorities that frame their engagement with the Middle East.

Despite talk of a U.S. pivot away from the Middle East toward Asia, the reality appears to be more akin to a shift in U.S. power projection. Far from disengaging, the U.S. remains very much involved in regional dynamics given the proliferation of crises. Consequently, the U.S. is still the centre of gravity in the region and remains the reference point for other international actors as they seek to (re)calibrate their actions.

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Russia meanwhile has used its engagement in the Middle East to reconstruct itself as a superpower by exploiting U.S. vulnerabilities to restore a balance of power in the

region and elsewhere in the world. Russia is also keen to pursue its commercial interests (including arms sales) with regional states. All of this has resulted in the lack of a long term Russian vision for the region and necessitated a delicate balancing act between states with competing agendas (i.e. Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia). There is, however, room for constructive engagement with Russia over regional issues. For instance, the possibility of a quid pro quo in Syria in which Russia softens its support for Assad in exchange for a European loosening of sanctions against Russia over its actions in Ukraine. Russia's relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran might also help de-escalate the civil war in Yemen.

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Although Europe will never be able to isolate itself from the Middle East, the rise of populism has led countries there to face inwards. The loosening of EU cohesion, with power flowing away from Brussels towards EU member states, has meant a less joined up and less assertive policy towards the region. Nonetheless, Europe still has potential clout to use when it chooses (and is sometimes allowed by the U.S. to play a leading role either through explicit consent or through a diminishing U.S. footprint) whether in a diplomatic role (P5+1 talks and Israeli/Palestinian negotiations), in support of stabilization through its European Neighbourhood Policy (Tunisia), or in a military role (Libya).

Likewise, China's focus on the region continues to be based on economic opportunism. While it has up until now followed Russia's

lead in its foreign policy, a more assertive Chinese stance towards the region, coupled with expanding economic interests, could at some point create daylight between the two countries – although that moment still seems far off.

Turkey's interests, on the other hand, are multidimensional, due to deepening economic ties with MENA countries, including exports to the Gulf via land routes and GCC investment. This necessitates regional stability/peace, as well as avoiding regional power vacuums. A former high-ranking Turkish official addressing members of the Forum emphasized the necessity of maintaining regional borders while simultaneously opening those borders to ever greater levels of trade and free movement of people and goods. At the same time, Turkish foreign policy continues to be driven by a strong security dimension, with regional dynamics usually viewed through the prism of perceived attacks on Turkish sovereignty by the PKK, the flood of refugees into Syria, attacks by Daesh (ISIL) in Turkey, and the desire to ensure friendly or neutral border areas. This is compounded by the insecurity caused by the recent unsuccessful coup attempt.

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For its part, Israel has been good at keeping trade and politics separate as it attempts to normalize its relations with Sunni states. While it remains unclear whether Israel would block or contribute towards a new regional architecture, regional powers must



set clear limits on what can, and cannot, be achieved with Israel in terms of security arrangements absent a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

The Consequences of Multipolar Competition within the Region

The multiplicity of actors involved in regional conflicts and the growth of interstate rivalries has significantly worsened regional instability. International competition has also fed the rise of regional sectarianism and enabled the proliferation of various non-state actors and their transformation into proxy forces for international powers.

The promotion of sectarianism and national division has become deeply embedded within Western thinking as policymakers search for the simplest solution to intrastate conflicts. This has led to an overreliance on state division within conflict transformation / resolution situations.

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At the same time, it is clear that President Obama has failed to live up to the pledge made during his 2009 Cairo speech to forge a new relationship between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The U.S. appeared to have turned a new leaf during the Arab Spring by abandoning its support for autocratic regimes. Yet the U.S. now appears to be repeating previous mistakes through its renewed commitment to the stability/strongman formula in order to counter short term threats such as radicalization,

refugee flows and internal displacement. This approach has come at the expense of promoting democratic representation and pluralism. Based on past precedent, renewed support for regional strongmen is unlikely to succeed over the long term.

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Developing a New Model for the Region

If international engagement is more likely than not to be detrimental to the region, the question arises as to how regional actors can minimise the possibilities of external interventions. Over the short/medium term, the key is to be found in regional de-escalation. This means resolving those geopolitical factors and regional rivalries that provide openings for international interventions. Over the long term, stability and structural transformation within the region will require a new model that can redefine power relations between regional actors (and their international backers). A new regional security architecture may be one avenue for achieving this. An economic union similar to what was created in Europe after the devastation of World War II may be another.

Any new regional model must avoid a “winner takes all” approach to governance by countering the politics of exclusion that tend to dominate Arab governance. Within the post-Arab Spring political landscape, those gaining power through elections have only been able to sustain a new social contract with their citizens in Tunisia. In Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, election results have been challenged internally and by external regional actors seeking a return to the previous status quo or seeking to offset electoral results through violent means. Beyond leading to



the exclusion of groups from decision making processes, this has created a limited basis for national trust, which plants the seeds of future instability.

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Preserving the Nation State Model?

It has become apparent, especially in Syria and Iraq, that multipolar competition between international (and regional) actors is proving dangerous and destructive for the region’s fabric of nation states and the future of its inhabitants. The Iraqi and Syrian nation states had initially been multi-ethnic, albeit authoritarian. Yet the breakup of these states as a result of uprisings and external interventions has led to the unraveling of the nation state model and bred competition amongst different identity groups. In the Iraqi situation, a previously excluded group has come to power, excluding the previously dominant group, perpetuating this “winner takes all” approach and deepening communal divisions. The same risks are present in Syria if adequate mechanisms are not created to ensure popular representation and plurality.

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In the post-Arab Spring environment, political identity has been interpreted through the lens of ethnicity. Fostering a national identity that would allow independent voters to cast their votes across the political spectrum requires a new model of integration that opens up the space for more inclusive (and non-sectarian) political participation within

national borders, and creates mechanisms to include different groups in the running of regional societies. This model will have to empower local voices (vertical representation) in addition to those voices reflecting regional interests (horizontal representation). More agency will also need to be provided to local non-state actors, including civil society.

There was an emphasis by participants on the necessity of political systems that allow for and promote pluralism in a region with such tremendous diversity and with so many boundaries created or influenced by foreign powers.

Regional Ownership: What Role for International Powers?

Regional transformation must be owned by regional voices. The central premise of any new model or power dynamic should be one in which regional agency is assured and an international scramble for the Middle East avoided. Integral to this will be developing and deploying regional smart power vis-à-vis international powers.

Multilateral cooperation between regional and international actors can have positive outcomes, provided there is support for a common goal and a clear division of labor between actors. Multilateral cooperation through the P5+1 format, for example, was essential in reaching an agreement with Iran in relation to its nuclear programme and averting serious regional conflict. Such international forums do however show their limitations when there is a lack of unity or when they are monopolised by one power, such as when the U.S. dominated the international Quartet to support the Middle East Peace Process.

A more positive international engagement should support regional actors in their efforts to achieve the following:

- Supporting post-conflict reconstruction.



There is a need to start thinking about a “day after” plan before wars end, and in advance of conflict resolution efforts.

- Including women in peace-building efforts as well as all other facets of politics.
- Stabilizing the region without relying on authoritarian regimes and weakening democratic mechanisms for popular representation.
- State-building in the absence of strong state institutions in post-conflict transitions.
- Economic transformation for rentier states in order to stave off economic crises.
- Dealing effectively with the growing role of non-state actors in both conflict and post-conflict situations.
- Averting future conflicts that could arise as the result of water crises and food insecurity.
- Promoting transitional justice and the development of post-conflict truth and reconciliation mechanisms.

Lessons Learned from Other Examples

There are lessons to be learned from other countries and post-conflict transitions. While each context is unique, examples from other parts of the world can offer insight into how to deal with crises in the Middle East as well as provide a series of best practices to emulate and past mistakes to avoid. For example:

- South Africa, which saw civil society participation and representation within the anti-apartheid movement.
- Liberia, and its relatively successful model for post-conflict resolution.
- Nepal, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives within the conflict resolution

process, including local women’s activism, and civil society consultancy through the promotion of a “Women, Peace and Security” (WPS) agenda.

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- Columbia, where worries about the effectiveness of transitional justice mechanisms and a relinquishing of leadership responsibility by the government in favour of a popular referendum have jeopardized a historic peace agreement with FARC rebels.
- Tibet, and the effective use of international advocacy and campaigning to promote Tibetan rights, narrative and culture.

The Role of Civil Society

Vibrant and transparent civil society participation within the region will be important in securing meaningful change and allowing this to filter down to the grassroots. Regional civil society organisations have an important role to play in developing and advancing a coherent set of policy recommendations and help a more meaningful transition toward a post-crisis regional order.

This can be achieved through Track II initiatives outside official forums and grassroots engagement. As has happened elsewhere, civil society can play an important role in the promotion of dialogue in conflict and post-conflict situations by acting as neutral mediators able to engage with all parties.

Civil society can act as an echo chamber in the creation of a domestic feedback loop in support of certain advocacy/policy positions and help these resonate with domestic publics. To this end, there needs to be a stronger voice within the diaspora pushing back against



inaccuracies and mischaracterisations found in the international media and Western discourse relating to the Middle East that promotes sectarianism (i.e. the references made to “Kurds, Sunnis and Shi’ites” is wrong since most Kurds are Sunnis, etc.). Such western depictions are also reductionist as they lump all “Sunnis,” “Shi’ites,” “Kurds”, etc. into single groups with one set of interests. Consider the existence of a Kurdish party in Turkish politics, the relationship between the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and the PKK and its affiliated groups. This level of complexity rarely enters into western public discourse and can often lead to policy prescriptions divorced from the realities on the ground.

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A stepped up, more effective regional role vis-à-vis international powers will above all require the identification of sources of leverage and means for exercising these in support of policy objectives. This means understanding what motivates international actions and where international interests lie in the region (i.e. material interests; energy dependency; capturing markets; security; financial investments; sovereign funds; etc.).

Building on traditional lobbying techniques, it would be useful to explore coalition-building options and institutional entry points within key countries; to map the multiple centres of power that exist within many states (i.e., going beyond DC and Brussels and including cultural and economic thought leaders); and to look at how to engage with business interests.

EVENT DESCRIPTION

Envisioning a Post-Crisis Regional Order in the Sharq Region, organised by Al Sharq Forum, took place in Istanbul at Swissotel the Bosphorus on Oct 8-9, 2016. The event brought together over 90 experts, academics, politicians, high level officials from the region and the West. Around 450 people attended the panels on the 8th. On the 9th, invitation only closed round tables were held, and these reports are produced as a result of these meetings.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org



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