Working Group 2 – Report on “Prospects for Peace and Security in the Middle East”

Co-chairs: Cliff Kupchan (USA), Arnold Luethold (Switzerland), Peter Jones (Canada)Co-Rapporteurs: Poul-Erik Christiansen (UK) and Masha Rouhi (Iran)

Presentations and discussion in this working group were arranged around five main country-specific themes, namely Iran, Egypt, Israel-Palestine, Libya and Tunisia, with a focus on the implications of these cases for the region’s peace and stability.

Iran
With respect to Iran, discussion centred on three aspects: Iran’s relations with its neighbours in the Middle East region and the effects of the ‘Arab Spring’; Iran’s relations with the West in respect to its nuclear program, in particular with the US; and Iran’s domestic politics.

There was a general feeling that the configuration of the Iranian political system is complex but that continuation of the nuclear programme, particularly enrichment, is the one point of national consensus and that no internal group or faction would seek to alter this course. A few participants felt that when there was a lack of unity within the Iranian system it becomes harder to negotiate with the country as a whole, and therefore any attempts to provoke division would be counter-productive.

Regionally, there remain some tension points between Iran and its Arab neighbours. It was observed by a number of participants that since the revolution Iranian foreign policy has been decided by calculations of national interest and pragmatism over ideology – as a result it was felt by some that Iran would build confidence and pursue cooperative policies with states of the region as the Arab Spring unfolds. One suggestion was that the Arab League could create a forum for discussion with Iran. Changes within two countries, Bahrain and Syria, were highlighted by many of the group as key strategic concerns for Iran.

It was suggested that in reaction to developments across the Arab world the security environment is inevitably changing and states would seek a new regional security architecture. It was noted that Iran perceives itself as having a major role in building this structure but would not seek to significantly alter the geo-strategic map of the region.

Egypt
The group was clear that only four months after the revolution judgements cannot be made with any certainty – there is, of course, a wide range of issues to be debated and resolved internally about the nature of the future state. There was a general feeling among the group that there would be a separation of religion and state and it was suggested that the Muslim Brotherhood would not try to dominate the political landscape, while also respecting the balance between religion and state policy.
There was some concern expressed over the future role of the army, given its current responsibilities and possible ability to protect its special status under a new constitution. However, many participants felt that the nature of recent events was far from a coup d’état and that the army would relinquish power when a new government is democratically elected. Moreover, although instability is significantly affecting the economy in the short term, it is again a factor that cannot be addressed or contained until a new government is in place.

An immediate apprehension foreseen was the position of a new government with respect to the peace treaty with Israel. However, a majority of participants stated that it would be in Egypt’s national interest to respect its international legal obligations. A few emerging features in Egypt’s foreign policy were mentioned, such as greater emphasis on its immediate neighbourhood in North Africa, the opening of the Rafah passage to Gaza, and a focus on stronger ties with Iran.

Palestine-Israel
The group discussed the implications of the Palestinian reconciliation agreement – many felt that national unity was an important step, not just because it was the Palestinian people’s desire but because one united front is required to proceed in meaningful peace negotiations. From the Palestinian perspective it was considered this would help with the September campaign to gain membership at the UN General Assembly. It was also believed to be significant because it engaged Hamas with an agenda to move forward with rebuilding national unity, institution-building, reaching out to the international community for support, and abandoning violent confrontation. It was mentioned that Hamas has committed to a ceasefire for the duration of negotiations. Participants’ articulating the Palestinian perspective also stressed the importance of non-violence, concern over Israeli complacency and that the UN vote would alter the balance of power and create the conditions for a meaningful peace process.

From the Israeli perspective there was scepticism that the UN resolution in September would actually affect the political situation on the ground – rather, having raised expectations among the Palestinian population, it may ultimately result in frustration and violence. It was held that direct bilateral negotiations would be a more helpful way to proceed toward a mutual agreement. However, there was doubt expressed as to whether Hamas would prove a serious partner for peace and that there would be problems for the Palestinian reconciliation based on the different agendas of both parties. Major concerns from the Israeli perspective include the unwillingness of Palestinians to accept the idea of Israel as a Jewish state, the impracticality of a total cessation to settlement-building, and the security challenges a new Palestinian state could potentially create for Israel.

One of the participants argued that re-emergence of the one-state solution can be attributed to frustration at the failure of negotiations. However, there was more general agreement among the group that it was not a feasible option and that it was in both sides’ interest to proceed on the basis of a two-state solution, along the lines of the ‘Obama formula’ with reference to the 1967 borders plus swaps. The main challenge was perceived as convincing Prime Minister Netanyahu that this is the right course of action – a certain responsibility for this approach was seen by some as lying with the US.

There was consensus that given the long-standing atmosphere of mistrust there should be a deep understanding and acceptance of both sides’ narratives and rights in order to meaningfully engage in a peace process. There was discussion about the security implications for both sides on issues such as borders and checkpoints, military presence in the Jordan River Valley and containing violence. It was
widely understood that there would need to be high levels of cooperation and coordination in future security arrangements.

The implications of the Arab Spring were discussed in the group, with a great deal of uncertainty of how the evolution of events will impact the direction of the peace process. There was an agreement that, whatever the outcomes in the region, the status quo regarding populations and governments will be significantly affected. One participant noted that the Arab Spring has reduced the fear factor in the involvement of people with their governments’ policies toward the Israel-Palestine issue.

**Libya**

The current situation was acknowledged by the group as fluid with high levels of uncertainty surrounding any outcome. Even with an influx of weapons, the rebels would not have sufficient capacity to launch an attack on Col Qaddafi, who has dug deep and was generally seen to be capable of holding out until the bitter end. Given this context, one participant suggested three possible scenarios: a partition along East-West lines back to the previous situation before 1965; one state without Qaddafi as leader; or civil war which could last ten to fifteen years.

It was observed that while the NATO airstrikes have continued at a robust pace, the US and other leading powers are unlikely to maintain this pace into the fall for domestic political reasons, and that especially in the US, a broad strategic retrenchment based on political and economic factors is possible.

There was some concern expressed at the possible involvement of Algeria, which does not back the rebel forces of the East. A number of participants noted with interest the Arab league position in support of the action taken against Qaddafi. There was also recognition that depending on the outcome, the future could hold an opportunity for a Mediterranean security architecture involving North Africa and Southern Europe.

**Tunisia**

Participants welcomed the revolutionary changes in Tunisia that have opened up a broad opportunity for political participation, comprising, by one estimate in the group, some 94 political parties. With this, though, have come a number of related security, social, and economic challenges.

There was a sense that the countries of the West greeted the changes in Tunisia with fear, focussing on the possibility of Islamists coming to power. However, it was the opinion of one participant that many of the Islamist parties have been building a new image and culture, in so far as they have engaged with secular parties with a view to the possibility of working together in a future coalition.

With respect to outside assistance from states or institutions, it was underlined by one participant that while the people want to benefit from best practices it should not be the case that these are tied to conditionalities – rather, there should be a focus on creating partnerships to support and fund initiatives. There was also the suggestion that those individuals engaged in this political process should not be overly subjected to testing or verifying credentials by external actors.

[www.pugwash.org](http://www.pugwash.org)