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# Challenges for Policy-oriented Research on the Middle East

Changing Actors, Reform Priorities, and Security Approaches

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# Table of Contents

- 5     **Preface**  
*Muriel Asseburg*
- GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS: CENTERS OF CONFLICT,  
REGIONAL ACTORS, AND SHIFTING POWER BALANCES – IS  
OUR CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK STILL APPROPRIATE?**
- 7     **Introduction**  
*Volker Perthes*
- 9     **Old Phenomena in a New Guise: the Middle East as an Arena  
for External Conflict**  
*George Joffe*
- THE STATE: BETWEEN AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION,  
DEMOCRATISATION AND FAILURE**
- 13    **Introduction**  
*Gudrun Krämer*
- 16    **The Resilience of the Nation State as Unit of Analysis in the  
Middle East**  
*Guido Steinberg*
- 19    **A Balance of Weakness: Changing Societies vs. Unstable  
Regimes**  
*Samir al-Taqi*
- ACTORS IN THE REGION: ISLAMISTS, AND WHO ARE THE  
OTHERS?**
- 21    **Introduction**  
*Isabelle Werenfels*
- 24    **Creating Ideologies: Islamists as Religious Nationalists**  
*Avishai Ehrlich*
- 28    **If Islam is the Solution - What are the Problems?**  
*Johannes Reissner*
- EXTERNAL ACTORS: OBJECTIVES AND CAPABILITIES**
- 31    **Introduction**  
*Scott Lasensky*
- 33    **Conceptual Paradoxes in Middle Eastern Societies**  
*Mahmood Sariolghalam*

**35 The European Union's Objectives, Policy Approaches and Instruments in the Middle East**

*Christian Berger*

**SQUARING THE CIRCLE: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF REFORM, SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS, GLOBALISATION, DOMESTIC AND REGIONAL SECURITY**

**38 Introduction**

*Muriel Asseburg*

**40 Research Priorities Beyond the Fog of Culturalism**

*Alvaro de Vasconcelos*

**44 The Keywords**

*Ulrich Wurzel*

## Preface

*Muriel Asseburg*

This report presents the main contributions to a workshop held at SWP in Berlin, between 12 and 14 October 2006. The aim of the meeting that brought together European and US academics and policy makers with experts from the region was two-fold: to reflect on policy and research approaches towards the region, and to brainstorm about issues that need further studying or re-studying, i.e. to reconsider the research agenda for those concerned with the Middle East.

This was done against the backdrop of our assessment that we can observe a certain tendency among policy-oriented researchers to concentrate heavily on those issues that are relevant for German and European policies rather than on those that effectively shape dynamics in the region. This might stem from the fact that political perception of the Middle East is essentially determined by several (long-lasting) conflicts (Israel/Palestine, Iraq, terrorism and the nuclear dispute with Iran), which has led to a certain lack of awareness of changing actor constellations on the national and regional level, as well as societal and elite change. Moreover, the role of external actors is usually not reflected upon sufficiently: what are their interests and instruments to exert influence on developments in the region? How do they interact with each other as well as with regional dynamics?

The workshop therefore tried to address, amongst other issues, three lead questions:

- How can relevant actors be identified?
- How can possible future developments be grasped? Why does policy-oriented research focus on some issues and ignore others?
- Are the concepts in use still valid or is it necessary to develop alternative approaches to understand dynamics in the region and between external actors and the region?

The five chapters of the present report reflect the five sessions of the workshop: Session I 'Geopolitical dynamics: centers of conflict, regional actors and shifting power balances' focused on regional dynamics such as conflicts, resources and the influence of external actors rather than looking at developments within states. Session II 'The state: between authoritarian consolidation, democratisation and failure' concentrated on the nation state as a unit of analysis. Questions addressed concerned the relation between state and (civil) society as well as the concept of the state.

In session III ‘Actors in the region. Islamists, and who are the others?’ developments within societies of the region were analysed: Who are the actors that need to be considered relevant? How can they be reached? Session IV ‘External actors. Objectives and capabilities’ focused on the interests, agendas and priorities of external actors as well as the instruments and power they possess to realise their policy goals. In session V ‘Squaring the circle. The interdependence of reform, socio-economic crisis, globalisation, domestic and regional security’, finally, the linkages between the different dynamics and policies were discussed.

The organisers of the workshop would like to express their gratitude to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation for their kind support and the United States Embassy in Germany for bearing the travel expenses of the American guest. We would also like to thank Sabine Reinkober who took the minutes and corresponded with the authors in order to get all contributions authorised – this volume would not have been possible without her commitment. Finally, we thank Eva Dingel for reviewing the manuscript.

# Geopolitical Dynamics: Centers of Conflict, Regional Actors, and Shifting Power Balances – Is our Conceptual Framework Still Appropriate?

## Introduction

*Volker Perthes*

This first session – and the whole conference – does not aim at explaining what is happening or changing in the Middle East, but rather what we have to do to understand it and which questions we have to ask. Hence we need to consider whether our frames of analysis and our conceptual frameworks are still appropriate or whether we have to adapt them in order to understand what is going on in the region. As we are starting out with the broad concept of geopolitics and geopolitical dynamics, I briefly thought about what some of the concepts are which we may put into question without necessarily having new answers and ready-made concepts available. I came up with seven concepts to be reviewed.

The first is the main concept of geopolitics: borders or frontiers. We are used to thinking that in the Middle East, as much as in Africa or other post-colonial regions, borders are stable. In a post-colonial compromise or consensus, the boundaries drawn by colonial powers had generally been accepted. In the Middle East this consensus is now coming apart. Colonial borders drawn in Iraq some eighty-five or ninety years ago may well be challenged, and if that happens, and borders are redrawn in Iraq or in Iraqi Kurdistan, other borders in the post-colonial Middle East may be questioned as well. Moreover, when we speak of borders, we should also discuss frontiers of domination. Even in the Israeli-Arab fold, frontiers that have never been accepted as borders and have never have been internationally legalized, have been quite stable for the last 40 years. The 1967 war was 40 years ago and the de facto borders that have resulted from it have now changed with the withdrawal of Israel from Gaza. Thus, frontiers here may also be put into question.

The second concept emphasizes centers of power. By centers of power we mean Arab lead states, or a coalition of states leading at a certain moment in the history of the Middle East, and we address axes and triangles of leadership in the Arab world. But now we may have a situation where centers of power are actually combinations of state and non-state actors. Therefore I think it is necessary to ask whether confessionalism and

sectarianism might mix with geopolitics, even for people who do not necessarily focus on sociological structures. For instance we have concepts that point out a “Shi’a axis”, “Shi’a oil” or “Sunni resistance” in the Arab world.

The third concept concerns those of us who have been following Barry Buzan and others in defining the Middle East as a security complex or security region. This may be challenged, not only because the Maghreb has basically defined itself out of the Middle East a couple of years ago, but also because the idea that security between the Gulf and the Near East is indivisible, is increasingly called into question. As a result some actors already speak of subregional security. The political concept that security in the Gulf is closely interconnected to Israeli nuclear capabilities, still defended by the Arab League or Egypt, is increasingly subjected to pressure.

The fourth concept concerns the Arab security state which Nazih Ayubi and others have been speaking about. Maybe the Arab security state still does exist, but some of the Arab security states seem to be turning into failed states. Hence we may have a combination of the Arab security states as we have known them, and a failed state in their neighborhood, or we may even have the two phenomena in the same state.

The fifth concept deals with non-state actors. This is not new as we have always had non-state actors in the Middle East: the PLO, some of the Kurdish parties or the Polisario in the Western Sahara have been active for some time. Nevertheless the new development here is that we were used to seeing non-state actors going to war in order to achieve statehood. They were basically warring non-state actors because they were lacking a state, and this has changed. See for instance Hizbullah, which is commonly classified as a non-state actor but does not demand a state and still is able to go to war with a neighboring country.

The sixth concept stems from L. Carl Brown who saw the Middle East as “the most penetrated international system.” Maybe this is still true but perhaps we should rather think about mutual penetration nowadays. In the Iraqi case, some Americans are now speaking of the “Iraqi occupation of the United States.” Others acknowledge the Al-Qaeda projection into Great Britain, France, and other European countries, so there may be much more of a mutual power penetration than we had in the past.

The seventh point is more a concluding remark than a concept. Let me put the question whether the Middle East – which we have used as a concept for this conference – is still a relevant region as such or as to whether it is actually subdivided into parts within that greater region. There might be some states which are closely integrating or associating themselves with Europe, i.e., the European Neighbourhood Policy part of the Middle East. Then we can identify a region of failed states and chaos reaching from Iraq, to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Finally somewhere in between we find a few globalized cities, like Dubai and others, who refuse to be part of the region in the first place and try to find a place in the globalized system.

## Old Phenomena in a New Guise: the Middle East as an Arena for External Conflict

*George Joffe*

In my view one cannot see the Middle East in isolation; one needs to set it in a wider context, as an example of the way in which geopolitics can actually operate – not just for the region but on a global scale. It needs to be remembered, too, that it is a tool for analysis which has been revived after a lengthy period when it was suppressed for political reasons. As a result, I would also like to raise some objections to what has already been said.

1. First, I must object to the idea that the state is disappearing. It seems to me that, today, the idea of the state has generally been reinforced, whereas in the 1990s the proposal that the state was disappearing was a constant theme. We learned of the “neo-medievalist paradigm”, of which the European Union was the best example; that geopolitics had been replaced by geo-economics, in which the United States would dominate a global market economy as the single hyper-power. However, in reality, much older concepts were reasserted, not least those associated with scholars like Halford MacKinder, in which the Euro-Asian landmass confronts the seaborne empires. In that context, the Middle East ceases to be a discrete and separate region in itself, but is instead a region trapped between two other regions, each looking to dominate it, a “shatterbelt”, in Saul Cohem’s words. In some respects, such ideas seem to parallel those inherent in Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” within the global environment predicated by Fukuyama’s “end of history” – a timeless conflict which is also ahistorical and merely “événementielle”.
2. Yet, despite globalisation and the role of supra- and sub-state entities as organising principles in a globalising world, the Westphalian concept of the state has persisted as an explicatory category. Interestingly enough, in that context, state boundaries in the Middle East defined at the beginning of the 20th century and then apparently immutable, appear now to be permeable and changeable. In fact, they are not actually changing, but, as in the case of Iraq, new kinds of state boundaries are being defined. It is not the external borders of Iraq that are going to change, but the internal significance of these boundaries will alter as administrative boundaries become – or could become – international borders. The

same applies to Israel and Palestine. In my view this is the repeat of a very old tradition which goes back to the First World War, for this is the point when the international boundaries were originally formed as one of the outcomes of external pressure on the collapsing Ottoman empire. Today, external pressure is exerted by the United States and Europe, which thus repeat an old pattern of behaviour, even as they imagine that their motivations are novel!

3. Another issue is that, in terms of states and regional systems, there has been a dramatic change since the end of the Cold War. It has become impossible to treat the entire Middle East as a single analytical unit. Instead there are four or five different units in geopolitical terms, each of which reflects its own paradigm or is united by certain common themes. These common themes do undermine the primacy of the state as the unit of analysis, for they highlight the growing role of new factors inside the Middle East equation, with sub-state and super-state actors playing a significant role. The sub-state actors, such as political Islam, reflect tensions inside the region, generated again by external forces. I do not think that either moderate or extreme political Islam, as manifested in the region, is simply the consequence of an internally generated dynamic. It seems to me that, to a very large extent, it is the consequence of external pressures which are partially dialectical, or at least antiphonal, in nature.
4. Indeed, a new theme inside the region is the growth of the utility of the dialectic as an explanatory mechanism, as a means of defining the way in which the region itself is undergoing change. Had there not been external interference, in the form of the effects of American and European policy, some manifestations of such themes might not have occurred in the way in which they have. Yet the effect of such themes is still primarily felt at the level of the state. Indeed, one of the primary targets of sub-state actors is still the state. Despite its failures and shortcomings the state still reasserts itself as an object of analysis. The state as an entity defining the nature of politics in the region is simply not going to disappear despite the pressures of globalized sub-state actors (in particular in the shape of international or trans-national radicalism), or the growing interpenetration between the region and other regions as a result of the effects of economic globalisation, and of the demographic penetration of Middle Eastern and North African populations into Europe.

What does this mean in terms of state stability? The problems that the state faces are very real and are not simply a consequence of internal failure but also of external pressure. Even if, in the short term, these pressures may not be successful in determining the nature of the political

process in the region, they nonetheless continuously modulate it. Nor can external powers be excluded from the region by their own failures; however, the kind of pressures that they can exert upon it will change. In this respect, the reassertion of the American vision of a realist paradigm in international affairs is highly significant, as it has been the primary generator of action within the region in recent years. The American approach is not simply a question of democracy as a supreme mode of governance which also guarantees American security, alongside self-interest in terms of access to regional resources such as oil and gas. It is also an attempt to highlight fundamental differences between the state process in the Middle East and North Africa and that inside Europe and the United States.

The consequence is that there is a growing divide between the region and external powers, as the former seeks to reject the external influences imposed upon it by the latter. As a result, discussion inside the region over the future nature of the political process exhibits a disturbing and alienating duality. Although internally-generated paradigms have acquired a new-found prominence as a reaction to external pressure, some elites increasingly resonate to external paradigms instead, arguing that the Western model of democratic governance has universal significance. This suggests that external actors are still significant and will continue to be so but the point is who are those external actors going to be? The obvious response is that the decisive external actors will be determined by demand in the global marketplace for energy, as the Middle East is and will continue to be the primary source for hydrocarbon energy. Its dominant role is attracting new actors that will also influence the region itself. The real change in the nature of these actors will be determined by the growing inability of the United States to dominate regional developments and the increasing role of new players such as China, India and Russia, once again a player in the energy market. None of these states is economically as significant as either the European Union or the United States, but they are growing at a far faster rate, and their penetration of the region is far more rapid as they seek to guarantee all-important energy supplies.

In the future they may also dominate regional politics and already national foreign policy in the Middle East has begun to reflect the fact that the region, in terms of energy supply, is geographically closer to South East Asia, China, and India, than it is to the "West". That seems to be increasingly true for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, such that a new pattern is emerging, whereby the Gulf region is beginning to resemble South East Asia in terms of economic success, whereas the rest of the region is in relative decline. The production and sale of oil and gas, in combination with small populations, allows them access to success within the globalized world which is denied to high capital absorbers and to those states of the region who simply depend on rent to finance the services of the state.

The Middle East, therefore, finds itself in a weak position, similar to that of the past, where it continues to represent a zone of confrontation

between the Asian core and more distant areas – in geographic or cultural terms. All are anxious about access to energy, which, ironically enough, suggests that the possibility of major global conflict will decline, both because of the implications of the growth in asymmetric warfare and also because of the overriding global interest in energy access. However, all are prepared to use the Middle East as an arena in which external dominance can be imposed in order to guarantee energy access. Thus its use as a surrogate arena in which the arguments between competing external powers are fought out, is reasserted, in a strange recreation of the Cold War – precisely the outcome that the policy objectives of major external powers were designed to avoid during the 1990s. As a result, that decade turns out to have been a period of transition in which the appearance of new possibilities of resolving regional conflict has been subordinated to the realities of the failure of regional states to respond to the imperatives of external policy. In the 21st century many of the old paradigms have begun to reassert themselves and the Middle East is still the victim of external powers because of the resources it has to offer, just as it was in the 20th century. This external self-interest has been dignified by an appeal to a Manichean view of realism which seeks to determine patterns of the organisation of the state. And this, in turn, means, that the freedom of the region to operate autonomously in determining the outcomes of regional problems is reduced.

Sub-state ideologies of particularistic nationalism or super-state ideologies of political Islam do not represent viable, independent alternative models by which the Middle East can begin to reconstruct itself, even if the paradigm of the state continues to assert its power in terms of a mass of new states or the vision of a single state unified around shared cultural values. Such ideologies seem to be mere responses to the external pressures applied to the region. In these circumstances, the aspirations of populations in the region, the ability of regional states to restructure themselves in response to the problems they face and to operate as viable political entities is reduced. In the decades to come, we are going to see the repetition of many of the problems of the past, even if cast in terms of a new vocabulary and structured in a new guise.

# The State: Between Authoritarian Consolidation, Democratisation, and Failure

## Introduction

*Gudrun Krämer*

Among academics there still seems to be a tendency to consider state-centered approaches old-fashioned. There was a time when leading experts held that the state had become an irrelevant unit of analysis. In order to be forward looking, both scholars and practitioners felt impelled to go beyond the state, and not to be limited by dated themes and concepts. It seems to me that scholarly opinion is slowly changing. Practitioners are still dealing with states as relevant actors, and they are still widely thinking in terms of the Westphalian state when it comes to the Middle East and to assessing what has been achieved there in terms of state-building, effective governance, political action, and interaction. Much of what we hear about the failure of state performance or state failure is measured against an idealized model of the Westphalian state as it developed in Western Europe and other parts of the world, that is a state with clearly defined and internationally recognized borders. But perhaps we can discuss the concept of borders, or boundaries, and to what extent it matters to us analytically.

Second, it is widely assumed that the people living within a given state form a people, that is to say that they are bound by a number of definable features, such as common descent, a shared history, language, culture, religion, or ethnicity, features that forge a nation. The assumption that the modern state is actually a nation state, is I believe highly relevant to our discussion. In my view it is a paradox that we frequently speak about the nation state in the Middle East and at the same time are fully aware that in this region only very few nation states exist. There are territorial states, but not necessarily nation states. Saudi-Arabia for instance is not a nation state; Libya probably is no nation state either; Egypt probably is. Despite all our knowledge about the theoretical definitions, the history and the self-understanding of the political units and population groups concerned, we still keep using the term, and we are measuring Middle Eastern states against the backdrop of the European nation state.

The third important point in this context is the idea that the state has a government which monopolizes the legitimate means of force or coercion. I think it is this third element which very often leads people to the conclusion that states in the Middle East are not real states. At least they

are considered as not fully developed states along Westphalian lines because in many cases – though by no means in all cases – significant parts of the population are armed, and therefore are in a position to challenge the state or government monopoly over the (legitimate) use of force and coercion.

When looking at the state, one of the crucial issues for us is the issue of transformation. Here I would like to emphasize path-dependency: we have to assess change or transformation in terms of local parameters, which vary considerably within the region, so as to evaluate to which extent individual states have “transformed” themselves within the last one or two decades. Here we have to ask for the trajectory as well as for the link between economic and political development. Do we observe such a nexus between political change – to the extent that it exists – and economic change? Do we see the “package” of liberalization and democratisation on the one hand, and movement towards a free market economy on the other, either within individual states or on a broader regional scale? This does not seem to be happening in the Middle East: there is apparently no structured transformation leading towards an opening up of social space, economic space, and political space within individual states.

This whole complex is addressed by the title of our session, “The state between authoritarian consolidation, democratisation and failure.” I wonder which kind of consolidation we are speaking of as we observe different models in say, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, or Algeria, and I think their trajectory is quite unclear to most of us. Interestingly, the title does not mention the fashionable and very suitable term of good governance, which provides a more open term for what we consider desirable: it comprises the rule of law which is basic to economic as well as to political development, and transparency which is deeply relevant to both spheres as well as to stability. In this context there are several questions that have to be asked: How do we measure good governance? What are the trajectories within individual states? Is it possible to generalize across the Middle East? And what are the alternative models? I was very interested in the remark someone made in our first session that maybe Singapore is a more relevant model for some states in the Middle East, such as certain Gulf states. China also may be appealing to some people in the Middle East as a model to be emulated rather than Western ones as projected by individual Western actors and international organisations. The question here is whether economic and political ties with India and China will at some point translate into model-building and model-taking which will then replace the models taken from the West.

The last point in my introduction is failed states. They are the source of deepest concern for people living within these states, for their neighbors, for outside observers, and political practitioners. But how representative are they of developments within the Middle East? Do we see Iraq as a failed state that might impact on other states in the region? Do we view it as a special case? How about Palestine? Do we assume that state failure there, to the extent that we can speak about state failure at all, will spread

beyond the narrow confines of Palestine itself? The same applies to Lebanon. What then is the weight of the failing and failed states in the region beyond their own territories: Are they representative of what is happening there? This again brings up the question of whether the Middle East is a relevant unit of analysis, political action and interaction for European policy makers and others.

Another highly relevant issue is how these developments are analysed and explained. Unfortunately, they are often analysed in terms of culture. As someone teaching Islamic Studies I have an instinctive reaction against culturalist explanations, which try to link state development and failure to Islam as a religion, a legal framework, and a culture. I wonder whether this is an overreaction on my part in the face of all this awful, stupid, and superficial talk about Islam and its impact on people belonging to the Islamic faith. I would be extremely interested in having a discussion on this issue because somehow it manages to creep into most relevant debates.

## **The Resilience of the Nation State as Unit of Analysis in the Middle East**

*Guido Steinberg*

From the mid-1980s onwards, the importance of the nation state – which had been the dominating actor in world politics during the Cold War and before – seemed to diminish. Political science concepts dealing with the nation state, with nationalism, the balance of power and related issues came to be seen as old-fashioned and no longer appropriate to the world after the end of the superpower confrontation. Rather, societal players became a preferred object of study for many political scientists, not least among them those dealing with the Middle East.

### **The Civil Society Paradigm**

First, the state came under attack by proponents of the civil society paradigm. The peaceful revolutions in Central and East Central Europe after 1985 had shown that societal actors could build movements sweeping away authoritarian regimes in seemingly functioning, stable nation states. To many observers, it seemed only a matter of time until new waves of democratisation would lead to similar changes in other parts of the world. As a consequence, the study of civil societies became one of the most popular topics in Middle East Studies during the 1990s. However, as yet, most Islamists – as the most powerful representatives of Middle Eastern civil society – have not been able to challenge authoritarian regimes effectively or even topple them.

### **Globalisation and the Rise of Transnational Actors**

Secondly, the notion of the state as the central object of study in international relations was challenged by the emergence of new transnational actors in international politics. Since the 1990s, the world seemed to enter a new era in which nation-states would lose importance and would perhaps even be reduced to insignificance. This trend had its influence on Middle East studies as well, and gained special importance in the study of international relations in the Arab and Muslim worlds after the events of September 11, 2001. Especially non-specialists stressed the emergence of al-Qaida as the predominant example of a transnational actor having transcended national boundaries and having built a terrorist organisation of truly global character and reach. However, while the new transnationalism might have weakened the nation state in the Arab world, it – and

especially militant groups fighting these states and their respective governments – did not even come close to threatening their existence.

### **Consequences for Policy-oriented Research**

As a consequence, the study of the nation-state, their elites and their adversaries will remain a central topic, although one that should not be studied without taking the importance of non-governmental – national and transnational actors into account:

1. The state is not the single most important actor in international relations any more. Increasingly, Western governments have shifted their policies towards strengthening civil societies in order to foster political reform. This is justified, but the persistence of the nation-state and its authoritarian regimes should not be underestimated. This holds especially true in the Middle East and North Africa. Substantial changes were brought to the region by foreign intervention in Iraq – by a quite traditional war between nation states and their militaries – rather than by revolutions. Furthermore, authoritarian regimes have profited from the fight against terrorism after 9/11 insofar as they are able to gain Western support in order to fight Islamist militants. Thus, the study of authoritarian regimes and their consolidation will remain important.
2. That the state still plays a role is best seen when weakened states fail. Somalia, Afghanistan, and – perhaps most importantly – Iraq show that the absence of governmental authority usually provokes severe crises, often civil wars, foreign intervention and regional instability. The study of the reasons for state failure and ways to rebuild these states will be an important part of policy-oriented research in the future, especially with regard to Iraq and perhaps the Palestinian territories and probably other, new candidates that we might not be aware of yet.
3. Militant non-state actors have shown that they are increasingly capable of weakening their adversaries. This applies to the insurgency in Iraq, where the US military has not been able to contain the rebellion in the course of three years and where violence will probably increase in coming years. As important has been Hizbullah's success during the Israeli campaign in the summer of 2006. Although the organisation was seriously weakened by the Israeli offensive, the Israeli government did not manage to destroy it, so that Hizbullah could even claim victory. Therefore, it is highly likely that similar forms of conflict will become a model. The study of insurgency and counter-insurgency will be a very important field in the coming years.

Finally, the challenge that Islamists pose for the governments of the region will be a crucial field of study.

## **A Balance of Weakness: Changing Societies vs. Unstable Regimes**

*Samir al-Taqi*

The topic of this session is the relation between the structure of the state and democratisation in the Middle East. To understand the current structure of the nation state in the Middle East, it is necessary to recognise the fact that the nation state was not formed around national economic, political and social unity, but rather has been established by the Sykes Picot Agreement of 1916 as a territorial state still needing to build a national identity.

Another crucial point resides in the fact that the nation state in the region embarked on the challenge of development and modernism while under immense pressure from colonizing western forces, which created the sense of defeat and generated a challenging concept of identity based on its history rather than its future.

Also, the nation state in the region tended increasingly to adopt a rent economy as its main source of wealth, which further helped in freezing social and economic development. Subsequently, it allowed a welfare state based on a backward casting of identity coupled with an extremely conservative society trying to postpone socio-economic development and the change of the means of production. As a result we can observe a certain stratification of modes of production that persist in traditional parts of our societies. A large proportion of the society was kept living completely under traditional values and modes of production.

The rise of armed or violent non-state actors that was mentioned in this debate is connected to the collapse of the welfare state and the disappearance of the role it played as a solidarity system. This collapse also impacted negatively on people perceiving themselves as citizens. As a result, other kinds of affiliations within the tribe, the confession, or ethnicity have become more important. They are a substitute for the lack of solidarity within the society, which does not necessarily translate into violence. In the case of Syria and its multiple non-violent social conflicts those subnational structures play a major role in substituting the role of the state and civil society. Here we have to take into account that the level of failure of the authority is not measured by the level of violence which is spread.

There is also a phenomenon that I would call a balance of weakness, where on one side we find the authority, and on the other we find a revived society, which is aware of the weakness of the state. Hence people try to reorganize themselves according to either confessional, ethnic or regional lines to substitute for the collapsing role of the authority. Let me point out the Syrian example to illustrate this balance of weakness in our society. Here, the state is under pressure from two sides. First, it is under

pressure by external forces through globalisation, the “war against terror,” and the breakdown of the peace process between Israel and its neighbouring countries, which all call into question state legitimacy in the eyes of its constituency. Second, internally, it is under pressure due to the failure of development, the failure to defend the interest of the nation, and the failure to derive its legitimacy from a pan-Arabic or pan-Islamic national affiliation. Subsequently we can observe the faltering of domestic authorities, and as these authorities neither have any mechanisms for management at the grassroots level, nor for conflict resolution within the society itself, this constitutes an enormous threat to the civil order.

The idea of democracy does not seem to be a notion that would make people move in our societies, but this is an erroneous assumption. The consciousness of the necessity to preserve the state through a consensual democracy, e.g., similar to the Turkish model, is very much prevailing not only among the elites but even among people at the grassroots level. Some of the reasons for this are the fear of state collapse, corruption, and the necessity to embrace populations which are quite diverse in terms of ethnicity and tribal structures. Thus, it is not the best option to follow models like the Chinese way. In my view Syria has already overcome the experience of China, for the relation between Syria and Lebanon was that of a relation between two economies, with one of them being closed, breathing through the other, open economy, and at the same time governed by a system of corruption.

Hopefully this balance of weakness will make new forces emerge in Syrian society, and this example could spread to other countries in the region. Those forces could remodel the political scene and build a new system of values. Indeed, a recent study in Syria revealed a new system of values among youth, which appears to be completely contradictory to the old generation. This might turn out to be a driving force for change.

# Actors in the Region: Islamists – and who are the Others?

## Introduction

*Isabelle Werenfels*

Three years ago we had a conference here at SWP entitled “Looking ahead” and with a goal similar to that of today’s conference: discussing concepts and methods for analysis of the MENA region. Surprisingly, none of the papers at that conference dealt explicitly with the issue of Islamists. Certainly none of the participants would have denied that Islamists are an important political force in the MENA region. However, the fact that they hardly played a role in our discussions three years ago appears to me symptomatic of the ways in which the issue of actors in the region has been approached in general – both by policy-oriented researchers as well as policy makers. I would like to mention four tendencies that I consider important in this context and that point to conceptual traps and to the difficulties of thinking beyond dominant mind-sets particularly when it comes to Islamists.

- A tendency to analyze political developments in this region through the lens of transition and democratisation experiences made elsewhere: Models derived from democratisation processes in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe feature actors such as civil society, reformers or liberalisers, hardliners, unions, the bourgeoisie, a new business class, etc. Islamists, however, are very difficult to fit into these models, for they are reformers in some respects, hardliners in others. Instead of adapting our concepts we (meaning both policy-oriented researchers and policy-makers) have tended to focus much more intensely on the so-called “others”, that is on those that better fit into our transition or democratisation concepts. As a result we were not so much looking at realities on the ground but were – sometimes desperately – trying to find actors such as “secular reformers” or a “civil society” in the Western sense. Questions such as “What if there are no others apart from the Islamists that really matter?” were hardly ever raised. And it still appears to be difficult for us to think, within a scenario of a pluralist political scene, of different Islamist actors with few and marginal other actors.

- A tendency until very recently to apply different standards to Islamists than to other political actors in the region: Islamists were primarily judged on their assumed intentions and not so much according to their political actions. Their rhetoric, moreover, was taken more seriously than the rhetoric of other political actors. An important positive development in this respect has been that political scientists have in recent years stopped singling out Islamists as a special case, and started to analytically treat them in the same way they treat other political forces in the respective states, that is as political actors and not as religious actors.
- Too narrow an elite focus and too little a focus on social and societal developments in the countries of the region: This has presented another methodological and analytical trap. The Hamas election victory in early 2006 is illustrative of this: One could argue that European researchers and policy-makers would have been much less surprised about the election results had their understanding of the concerns of the Palestinian population, of developments at Palestinian universities and in Palestinian society in general been deeper. A crucial question that was ignored but that should be asked – not just in the Palestinian case – is: Are the incumbent elites capable of solving those problems on the ground that are of no concern to Western policy makers, but of great concern to the local populations?
- A hesitance, particularly by policy makers, to deal with “the Islamist reality on the ground” – not just because of normative qualms but because no ready-made recipes for dealing with this reality existed: Generally, there appears to be a tendency to look away from situations or developments on which policy makers think they have no influence and see no options or room for manoeuvre for Western action. The issue of Hamas is again quite representative of this tendency: Researchers at this and at other European institutes in dialogues with European policy makers time and again brought up the possible scenario of a strong showing of Hamas in the upcoming elections. They posed the question how Europe would deal with such a victory given the fact that Hamas was on the list of terrorist organisations – a fact which precludes cooperation. Judging from the panicky European reactions after the Hamas election victory it was, however, clear that no preparations for this situation had been made following the credo: We only deal with a challenge once it has become so big that we have no choice but to face it.

The above examples show us that there are a number of lessons to be learned from mistakes of the past when dealing with the various actors in the region:

Firstly, there is a need to get away from deductive and overly normative approaches that depart from concepts such as democratisation and transition, and instead look at developments on the ground without

having the normative goal of democratisation cloud our vision. One way to go is to identify structural deficits and popular demands in the different countries, see to what extent incumbent elites – Islamist or other – can solve problems arising from these deficits and satisfy popular demands. And to ask who is likely to profit if the elites fail. Today it is clearly the Islamists. But what if they are in power or come into power in countries such as Morocco and if they do not manage to solve problems such as unemployment? Maybe movements such as North Africa’s “chômeurs diplômés” will team up with unions to form a new left? But maybe – given that there appears to be no alternative vision or ideology around that can compete with the Islamists’ – it will simply be new and different Islamist actors? Another scenario may be an absence of a legal and organized political forces regarded as capable of solving acute problems and demands.

This brings me to the second point: Looking at future challenges means thinking in multiple scenarios. These should obviously include not only national actors and factors but transnational (structural) factors. For instance, what problems and discourses will migration bring to North African countries? Which actors will profit from this? And what could demographic changes in the MENA region – that is, a youth bulge in the short and medium run and aging populations in the long run – imply for actor constellations? Obviously, we also need to think about how external actors strengthen or weaken the different domestic actors in MENA states.

Last but not least, looking ahead means to start with introspection: Clarifying for ourselves why we choose a certain analytical perspective, making the choice of approach a conscious decision and separating ourselves from wishful thinking. In other words, thinking of how to analyze and work with the existing political actors rather than searching with a microscope for actors that would please us more.

## Creating Ideologies: Islamists as Religious Nationalists

Avishai Ehrlich

I was asked to review the actors in the region and I would like to start with the so-called "Islamists". Let me start with a relevant anecdote: During the fifties, Khrushchev, who helped Nasser build the Aswan Dam, gave a speech in Egypt in which he disputed Nasser's concept of "Arab Socialism". The Soviet leader argued that there could not be an "Arab Socialism", socialism was internationalist, neither Arab nor Russian; 'nationalism' and 'socialism', he argued, were mutually exclusive. Alas, reality is slightly more complicated and ideological combinations and hybrids did and will continue to exist. I think that what is called nowadays "Islamism" is in fact such a hybrid; a combination of Islam and nationalism. What we presently observe in the Arab world is *not* a mystical mass conversion to religion, but rather new socio-political movements. Hamas and Hizbullah blend nationalism and religion into a political theory of action in the same way that Jamal Abdul Nasser and Michel Aflaq blended Pan-Arab Nationalism and Socialism in a previous period. A significant number of Hamas' older supporters were Pan-Arab or even Marxists fifteen or twenty years ago. They have not turned to Hamas because they suddenly saw the light of Allah, but because the main discourse of critique and struggle for national change was transformed after the collapse of Communism. In a period where secularism and socialism were the main, hegemonic discourses, national and ethnic struggles were conducted under secular socialist banners: Nasserite, Ba'athist or Marxist. In order to carry on the *muqawama*, the resistance, under a changed hegemony they adapt their arguments to other *Weltanschauungen* and discourses. Mohammad Khatami tried blending Liberalism and Islam into the "dialogue of civilizations", while Dr. Azmi Bishara, an Arab secular MP in Israel, tries to combine Liberalism and Nasserism.

Religions are a vast cultural repository; within religions' long historical teachings one can find almost anything: Conservative arguments for defending existing political orders as much as revolutionary reasons for challenging their authority in the name of divine principles. Religion is an excellent source for assumed identity; solidarity among believers is a source of trust which is necessary for cooperation and creation of community. Religion is being drawn upon in protracted conflicts in order to continue the struggle under very hard conditions.

Some comparisons with other countries reveal similar patterns: India, from its inception as an independent state in 1947 to 1977, was ruled by the Congress Party which, under the Nehrus, expressed a secular socialist

version of nationalism. However, in 1977 Congress lost the elections to the BJP which represented a national-religious version of Indian nationalism, which is Hindu supremacist and virulently anti-Islamic. In Israel too a secular, socialist nationalist hegemonic discourse has been transformed since the 1970's to another nationalist discourse largely couched in mystical religious terminology. I do not think that this signifies an increased belief in the Divine; it rather indicates that religion was mobilized and incorporated into the nationalist ideology. The protracted conflicts in which India and Israel are involved adds to the importance of ideological mobilisation. Rather than use the term Islamists, I would therefore prefer 'religious nationalists'. What we are observing is a process of 'politicisation of religion' or, as some would prefer, 'religionisation of politics'.

Politicisation of religion should also be seen as a resource for the mobilisation of international solidarity: an illustrative example would be Zionism and the Palestinian national movement. Zionism - even the name connotes a deep religious meaning - appeals to deep Messianic yearnings embedded in Judaism. Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem and the leader of the Palestinian national movement from the 1920's onwards, mobilized the Muslim world by sounding the alarm about dangers posed by the Jews to *Al-Quds*, Jerusalem. The *Haram Al-Sharif* was renovated and got its golden dome with money donated mainly by Indian Muslims. Calling for solidarity within a world religion entails the internationalization of a national conflict.

Hizbullah also falls within these national-religious movements to the extent that it represents a force within Lebanon that stands for complete sovereignty through armed resistance, against Israeli occupation and other 'Imperialist' forces (but notably *not* from Syrian intervention!). Lebanon is based on religious factionalism; the Shi'a are the largest of the factions. Lebanese Shi'a ties with Iran are not new; Iran has been the spiritual centre for Lebanese Shi'ism for many decades. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, and especially after 1982, Iran tried to blend Shi'ism and Iranian nationalism as a source of mobilisation in its long war against Saddam's Iraq, and now again in its conflict with the US and Israel. Returning to Hizbullah, I would argue that the present alliance between Iran and Hizbullah is for Hizbullah a political resource for the *muqawama*, and for strengthening its hand in the internal Lebanese struggle for dominance. For Iran, Hizbullah and Shi'a solidarity are a resource for its struggle as a regional power.

With regard to other actors in the region, other than the 'Islamists': all actors in the Middle East, including the 'Islamists', must be seen within an international and global context. As there is so much meddling by outside actors in this region, it is wrong, in my view, to look at internal or domestic actors, and completely dissociate them from international forces, since in many respects internal actors are supported or even created by external forces.

There is a vast activity of international agencies in the region: religious agencies, UN agencies, EU agencies, OECD, World Bank, other states' aid and development programs, international NGOs. These agencies have developed a vast array of aid projects for refugees and dislocated people: they provide food, medical care, vocational training and education, they initiate economic projects for the development of infrastructure and to encourage enterprise; they promote civil rights, education for democracy, minority rights, litigation, women's empowerment, ecological issues, etc. The area is also a major focus of news. Overall, huge sums of money are deployed. All these agencies, commercial and non-profit organisations rely on local personnel for language, security and cultural resources and they have become an important source of employment to large numbers of educated people. This is a sector which we must not ignore. It is the 'civil society sector', but it is a civil society that is very dependent on external donors and their interests. Some would call it a 'comprador civil society'. I do not intend this as a criticism of any particular institution but the overall effect that they produce should be considered as it has political consequences.

A case in hand is the German system of political foundations. The German government funnels finances to German political parties who in turn create foundations active in many countries to promote cultural and political activities corresponding to their beliefs. Many NGOs in Israel involved in civil rights, promotion of peace and reconciliation, with women's issues, or acting to improve the situation of Arab Israelis, are financed by these *Stiftungen*. Israeli NGOs have been accused of acting on behalf of 'foreign interests'. The same applies to most of the Palestinian NGOs. As the money of these NGOs comes mainly from outside, most of them can be seen as acting on behalf of external forces which, at least in nationalist eyes, reduces their legitimacy. That problem has to be faced.

A third group of domestic actors is economic elites. There was a debate in Israel during the Oslo years about the position that economic elites took towards the peace process. Some academics were looking for 'progressive' forces within Israeli society whose interests would tally with the Oslo process. They came to the conclusion that economic groups whose interest was export, had an interest in the peace process. When the Oslo process failed, there was a rush to explain the reasons for the failure. The assumption that economic circles had an interest in ending the conflict with the Palestinians now seemed too broad. Some export industries had, indeed, an interest in certain aspects of peace, but these did not necessarily amount to ending the conflict. Also, it is difficult to separate the effects of Oslo from the effects of the demise of the Soviet Union which took place at the same time.

Israel (as well as Germany) benefited greatly from the demise of the Soviet Union, firstly because of the opening of new markets for Israel in Russia and Eastern Europe, which fuelled Israel's economy; this was in the interest of the globalizing elite. Secondly, Israel gained a million and a half Russian Jews, whose human capital was worth much more than all the

United States' aid to Israel since its inception. These immigrants boosted Israel's hi-tech sector. Thirdly, the break-up of the Soviet bloc hastened the collapse of the Arab boycott which burdened the Israeli economy; the collapse of the boycott was a great boon to Israel's economic elites. Many non-aligned countries such as India, China and Indonesia now became open markets for Israel. An important effect of peace was thus achieved without giving up territories in the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli economic elites nowadays do business with the economic elites of other Middle Eastern countries; there is, for example booming commerce between Israel and the Gulf States.

A fourth group of important internal actors is the army. The lack of victory in the war against Hizbullah in the summer of 2006 undermined the legitimacy of this government and of the current military leadership. The current Israeli government is the first not composed mainly of generals, even though they still have a fair amount of representation. Israel's government is at present in the throes of a crisis of trust and has very low credibility. This curtails its ability to undertake new peace initiatives and new risks.

My last, fifth, group of actors is youth. In the sixties, youth, as a social category, was a major concern for sociologists; everyone was talking of the rebellious youth of the 1960s. Considering the demography of many Arab societies, where most of the population is made of people below the age of 18, youth is still the most important category in society. The potential of youth to be a major agent of radical change depends on the availability of alternatives for young people. In democratic market economies nowadays youth have other opportunities. Only those with fewer skills for the employment market still find the army attractive. In societies in protracted struggle, joining the resistance is the way for young people to express excitement, adventurism and idealism. However, youth is a transitory category. Young people grow older; if they do not die in battle, or rot in prison, they start to think about how to capitalize on what they did when they were young. Hence, they become the next establishment. Today's corrupt Palestinian leaders were yesterday's young heroes. Among young people in the region, a polarization can be observed – an example being the March 14 movement in Lebanon. In Israel the young are much more individualistic, on the one hand, or more nationalist religious on the other. Young people in Israel are much less active in politics than they were before, unless they are settlers or their supporters.

The actors that I have mentioned here are not the only ones; for example, women could be counted among other social categories not included above. In addition, more could be said about each group mentioned. The groups I have mentioned should not be overlooked in research about the current Middle East and it is to be hoped that this short introduction will serve to initiate a wider discussion.

## If Islam is the Solution - What are the Problems?

*Johannes Reissner*

Without doubt we need to have an idea of the kind of actors we have to deal with. However, I think that the discussion whether we should deal with Islamists at all or only with “moderates” is misleading. Do we really have a choice? And, as Muriel Asseburg asked, ‘who are the others?’ Western debate about political actors in the region suffers from a kind of modernisation bias. We focus too much on possible partners for modernisation and democratisation, instead of looking at the societies in which the political actors are embedded and in which political decisions are made.

In particular when Islam becomes involved, the semantics we use in discussing political elites, political actors and the respective societies are too often the semantics of deficits and of ‘not yet’: ‘not yet developed’, ‘not really democratic’, ‘still struggling with modernity’, ‘traditional’, ‘in need of enlightenment’ or ‘of secularisation’ and so on. Even if we were convinced that these descriptions were true: We should be aware that these are the semantics of exclusion and, whether we mean it or not is irrelevant.

Irrespective of our descriptions, the societies of North Africa and the Near and Middle East are part of global society and they are marked as Muslim societies. With the marker ‘Muslim societies’, the multiplicity of identities within the societies, national, ethnic or otherwise, is not denied. Today, even staunch secular nationalists and non-Muslims in the region have to bother with Islam one way or another, and even if they do not like it at all, the Western obsession with Islam and Islamists ensures that they have to.

By global society I do not mean the ‘international community’, but what is constituted by global communication and characterised by the **pre-dominance** of functional differentiation and growing contingency. Predominance does not mean that other types of differentiation, such as segmentary or hierarchical differentiation are excluded. They may be even reinforced on the local or regional level.

We can draw a triangle with global society at the top, Middle Eastern Societies marked as Islamic in the right/eastern angle, and Western societies, which are of course also part of global society, in the left/western angle. Global society at the top functions as the category of inclusion. Both Middle Eastern societies as well as Western societies have to struggle with functional differentiation. While relations between Western and Muslim societies may still be conceived overwhelmingly in terms of exclusion, functional differentiation of global society affects both, and one of the

consequences is that conceptualizations in terms of centre and periphery are becoming meaningless.

Functional differentiation is commonly understood as the basic structure of modernity, which was triggered in the West. The problem is that we still conceive modernity in terms of our 'project of modernity', but today this 'project' does not match with what may be called the 'existing modernity' of the global society at the top of our triangle. It was called into question by its own consequences. Habermas has characterized the 'project of modernity' as unfinished (some even say: 'un-finishable'), and indeed, it is a teleological construct, promising that 'if modernity is handled properly, in the end everything will be fine'. The problem is: Within our Western societies, in a manner of speaking 'at home', we practice critique and self criticism as integral parts of our modernity, but vis-à-vis Muslim societies, we too often present modernity and modernisation in an overly optimistic manner with respect to their benefits, or, as a member of the foreign office put it: a "*Heile-Welt-Moderne*" ("ideal of modernity").

Our tendency to present western development as a "model" may be a leftover of the Cold War, when we felt compelled to embody the better model. However, the West definitely is no longer accepted as a model by the societies of the region. With their slogan "Islam is the solution", Islamists invented the most powerful formulation to describe a fact, which politically becomes translated into a new wave of *tiermondisme*. The West is not necessarily considered useless, but what is useful is decided according to one's own interests.

In finding out who our political counterparts are we should overcome our modernisation bias and its concomitant illusion that if politics fail, convergence in modernisation will heal the wounds. Does that mean, constructive intervention with respect to modernisation, more democracy and so on is impossible? Systems theory indeed denies the possibility of intervention at all because of growing complexity of societies and contingencies. It understands efforts to direct or to govern developments as mere irritations for the systems concerned. But modesty, not resignation is the catchword. Perhaps one can only observe so-called meta rules, or main drivers of a particular society, and analyse what the policy makers are embedded into. (If for example the Europeans had had to offer something to the Iranians which really could fulfil their quest for recognition and national pride, perhaps, the nuclear debate would have taken a different turn.)

The time factor is important: Western societies as well as Middle Eastern or Muslim societies struggle simultaneously with the exigencies and contingencies of global society according to their own historically fabricated conditions. Of course, differences in development do exist, but: So what? Political decisions are made today, and the only reasonable criterion for assessing what follows from this or that decision is: does it serve living together as peacefully as possible or not?

What follows from these observations?

1. Globalisation is often described as ‘everything being connected with everything’. However, nobody can do everything at the same time and we should therefore act more consciously according to functional differentiation: do politics as politics, economics as economics and so on.
2. Does this mean that we should only follow our interests cynically and leave the peoples of the Middle East alone with this cruel modernity our forefathers have triggered off? Not at all: we should accuse and incriminate Human Rights violations wherever they take place and we should try to promote developments towards more freedom and democracy. In other words, we should act according to our values; deeds are asked for, not further declarations of belief in the universality of our values.
3. We have to look carefully behind labels. If somebody tells us “Islam is the solution“, we should ask: ”Fine, and what is the problem?“. The fact that someone is called an Islamist or a reformer does not tell us what he wants and what he will be able to decide and to accomplish in his society. And we have to distinguish: different discourses within a society may be very interesting, but do they correspond with the categories of the decision makers?
4. We also have to consider the role of the media carefully. The media provide us with most of our information, and everything beyond our tiny field of specialization is framed by them. Niklas Luhmann’s dictum, ‘What we know about the world and the societies we live in, we know from the mass-media’, has more truth to it than we may like to concede. But we can use the media to challenge the categories they use.
5. Therefore, research into the structures and the developments of Middle Eastern societies and their political actors is necessary. But we should not take Western historical developments and concepts as the only point of reference (we don’t need another book telling us that Islamic democracy is different from western democracy). Middle Eastern societies are part of global society and are confronted with the complexities and challenges of functional differentiation according to their own historical experience of which the often confrontational interaction with the West is only one, albeit an important aspect. Keeping the above mentioned triangle in mind, policy oriented research may occasionally help us understand why a particular way of behaviour may contradict transformation theories but makes sense in a country’s struggle with global modernity.

# External Actors: Objectives and Capabilities

## Introduction

*Scott Lasensky*

In considering the role of external actors, I will offer some brief thoughts about basic definitions, legitimacy, collective action, the relationship between power and influence and the limits of soft power. First, who are external actors? Most observers would agree that the three most powerful external actors in the region are the United States, Europe, and Iran – that is, if Iran is considered an external actor. But more generally, should we define external actors and measure their impact by the old criteria: foreign aid, military involvement or assistance, and maybe foreign investment? Or should we expand the view and include other indicators of external penetration – for example, social and religious factors? What about information? Moreover, what tools do we have to measure the activity of non-state external actors? These are of growing relevance.

The second point concerns the question of legitimacy. I would like to go beyond the question of whether the involvement of outside actors is either accepted or rejected. A more useful way to frame the question is to explore the conditions under which external actors are welcomed and acknowledged as legitimate, versus the conditions under which they are not. The legitimacy crisis currently facing outside actors is, in my view, as much a function of domestic problems as it is an outgrowth of policy missteps by the external powers. As client regimes lose legitimacy, how can outside actors continue to enjoy it? What tools can we use to measure this phenomenon beyond the rather rudimentary indicators like public opinion polls? Public dissatisfaction with Washington – at rates of 75 to 90 percent – only tells part of the story.

The third question concerns collective action. The end of the Cold War brought the promise of greater cooperation among outside actors in the Middle East – rather than the competition that distinguished the Cold War. Along with the change in the global strategic setting, cooperation should have been a normative aim, and outside actors should have been working in concert, as was the case with the Madrid peace process. But the record since has been different. So why has collective action been so difficult to achieve? And second, why is it so difficult to bring new powers, like China, India, or Russia (which is regaining strength), into a collective effort to stabilize the region and foster economic development and openness? With regards to Arab-Israeli peace-making and the issue of

collective action, for the first time there is a real collective body, the Quartet. Unfortunately, the Quartet's capability as a collective appears to be limited to endorsing the status quo. It has not proven to be a dynamic instrument that expands the win-set. In fact, the Quartet raises the larger question of whether collective action on Arab-Israeli peacemaking is still feasible. It also raises the question of whether collective action in the form of the Quartet is tied more to the imperative of alliance management than it is to conflict resolution in the region.

The fourth issue for policy research concerns the gap between power and influence, in particular in terms of the United States and its power endowments. As a proposition, these gaps might be due to structural changes out of our control, like the rise of mutual dependence and/or penetration, as suggested in earlier sessions. Alternatively, one could cite a lack of imaginative diplomacy, such as the failure to discover a formula to promote political change in settings where politics has long stagnated. On this last point, I think it is fair to say that external actors recognize the problems of the stability-governance trap, but nevertheless they remain unable to provide an alternative. Another explanation is that the gap between power and influence could simply be due to bad policy choices. Look at the Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite America's vast investment, Washington has achieved only modest results since the end of the Cold War. Iraq is a more glaring example.

My last remark concerns the limits of soft power. Rather than pointing to the gap between power and influence, another way to assess the capabilities of outside actors is to look deeper at the transformation from hard power to soft power – be it technological, economic, cultural, or even electoral. It may be a transformation that does not provide external actors with as much appreciable influence. In fact, it could offer much less. For example, in the 2006 elections in the Palestinian Authority Hamas adopted Western-style electoral tactics, including an impressive GOTV effort (get out the vote). Throughout the region, one can trace the adoption of trends from the West in a variety of soft power domains – elections, technology, economics, information and culture. But the difficulty (and frustration) for external actors is that soft power is much harder to deploy in a precise and directed way. It reflects influence, but not in a targeted form – or, at least, not in a form that outside actors know how to deploy.

## Conceptual Paradoxes in Middle Eastern Societies

*Mahmood Sariolghalam*

A number of paradoxes continue to shape Middle Eastern politics: Islamic solidarity versus nationalism, state control versus privatization, political Islam versus secularism, democracy versus state centralism, liberalism versus authoritarianism and conformist versus individualist political culture. A sociological explanation for the continuation of these paradoxes might be found in the divided nature of Middle Eastern societies. The harmony that one can witness in a country like Germany is not nearly found in a typical Middle Eastern state. For a German citizen, to be a European, Christian and a world citizen falls in harmony with being a German. In other words, all these diverse sources of identity actually reinforce one another. But for an average Middle Eastern citizen, for example to be an Egyptian, an Arab, an Islamist, a liberal and world citizen do not always conform with one another.

This phenomenon is a reflection of problems that stem from late or hampered state development. In almost all cases, the local sources of identity like Islam and nationality usually do not contradict one another because they have developed in parallel. The paradox arises when Western ideologies and globalisation processes are introduced into local cultures. This author believes that the root of the matter is that political Islam and liberalism cannot be juxtaposed. As long as a Muslim views Islam as a source of ethics, social harmony and local culture, he or she can also be a world citizen as well as a liberal. However, Islam is a politicized religion and it does have its own frame of reference and logic in every aspect of social, economic and political life. Moreover, Islam is a deductive construct and a normative ideology. At the same time, Islamic premises in political conduct are philosophically and conceptually different from liberal premises. In liberalism, all issues are decided on consensus and a majority vote. Not only Islam but no other religion can function on majority vote and consensus. In Islam, there are issues and directives that should be followed and are not debatable. A first conclusion is that one cannot believe in political Islam, liberalism and globalisation at the same time.

These cultural and conceptual paradoxes are real and they will not wither away soon. In understanding the Middle East, one needs to pay close attention to social dynamics. Middle Eastern societies are highly stratified. In Western societies, there are differences of opinion concerning policy, the nature of distribution and the direction of strategies. In the Middle East, differences are of a philosophical nature. Malaysia and Turkey have evolved as success stories because the nature of Islam in their societies is fundamentally cultural and ethical. Yet, the idea of political

Islam is imbedded in the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, political Islam is also part of the belief system of the mainstream Islamist groups.

The West cannot continue to condemn radical Islamists in the hope that moderate Islamists will replace them. There are deep internal contradictions in the Muslim world. Liberalism, and particularly political liberalism in the Middle East, is weak and where it is found, it lacks institutions. Yet, economic liberalism is evolving in the UAE, Malaysia and Turkey. While these paradoxes plague the domestic structure of countries in the region, the continuing conflict between the Palestinians and Israel cultivates fundamentalist and radical Islam particularly in the Arab world.

The information revolution and globalisation processes clearly have an impact on Middle Eastern societies. Yet the vast majority remains excluded from global thinking. A key deficiency among almost all Middle Eastern societies is the inability to organize. This particular cultural trait has emboldened states and weakened societies. The conceptual and cultural paradoxes in the Middle East will not be resolved easily. Economic progress and the empowerment of the middle class however will gradually temper radicalism and reinvigorate cooperation with the international community. The external actors will continue to maximize their commercial and economic benefits in the Middle East while on matters of politics and culture, they will muddle through. In other words, the capabilities of the external actors in shaping the parameters of the conceptual and political debates in the Middle East are marginal.

## **The European Union's Objectives, Policy Approaches and Instruments in the Middle East**

*Christian Berger*

The topic of this session is objectives and capabilities of external actors. I should like to add one more issue: the demands external actors have on researchers – after all that is the overall theme of this seminar.

Let me start with the objectives of the European Union as an external actor. Five or ten years ago the European Union prided itself on being a soft power, and was perceived as pursuing "altruistic" goals. This perception is now changing. According to the European Security Strategy adopted in 2003, the European Union is likely to face a number of serious challenges in the decades ahead: the first one being conflicts, and not so much international conflicts, but rather regional conflicts, internal conflicts in third countries, and cross-border issues such as organised crime, or trafficking of drugs, people, and arms. Another challenge is a growing disparity of wealth around the world. A third one is environmental challenges, and finally global population growth is a fourth major challenge. For the purpose of this seminar I will limit my intervention to conflicts and unevenly distributed prosperity. The European Union's main contribution in responding to these challenges is to help other societies fulfil their objectives, such as ensuring access to key services like health and education, having their political and economic aspirations fulfilled, including good governance and human rights, and meeting security challenges. The EU's support in achieving these goals will help reduce the negative influence of radical non-state actors.

In order to support partners worldwide, the European Union has developed a number of instruments and capabilities over the years. In the Middle East and the Southern Mediterranean, the European Union possesses basically two instruments: the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and the recently developed European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The main aim of these instruments is to support political and economic reform in the partner states. This does not only apply to the Mediterranean, but also to partners in the East. In addition, an increasingly operational security policy is being developed, in particular for soft security issues like conflict prevention and crisis management, but also with regards to hard security, which is becoming a "growth" industry in the European Union. The European Union – both at the Community level (the newly created Stability Instrument) and through the member states' CFSP budget – will significantly increase its funding reserved for conflict prevention and crisis management. At the end of the current budget cycle in 2013 it will amount to a total of € 800 million.

The main security instruments are: the Common Foreign and Security policy (CFSP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Concrete examples of these policies in the Middle East are the deployment of a monitoring mission at the Rafah border crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and the deployment of substantial national contingents with UNIFIL in Lebanon. Let me briefly refer to the issue of legitimacy that was addressed earlier in the discussion – i.e. the question as to when the European Union is accepted as a "player", and not only as a "payer", as critics would put it. In this respect, the years 2005 and 2006 were quite revolutionary. For the first time the European Union operationalised its role in the Middle East by deploying military forces in Lebanon and off the Mediterranean coast, and continued its support to the Palestinian civilian police. In the wake of Israel's disengagement from Gaza it was interesting to see that for the first time, Europeans would help negotiate an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis, and would provide a Third Party presence at the Rafah border post, an area quite sensitive from a security perspective. This was done in the context of the Quartet of course, which in itself was an important development as Israel interacted fully with the Quartet following the creation of the office of the Quartet Special Envoy, James Wolfensohn. However, I am not sure where we are with the Quartet today, and I fear we might be returning to the stage of the Quartet as an inoperational actor in the Middle East.

The EU follows three distinct approaches in conflict prevention and crisis management. One is conceptual in nature: It has become a principle of our work that without security there cannot be any development and vice versa, a notion that was affirmed by today's reasoning of the Nobel Peace Prize committee, which said that "without development and fighting poverty, security is out of reach". Another element of the conceptual approach is cohesiveness and complementarity, which means that all instruments at the disposal of EU member states and institutions should be deployed in pursuit of the same goals and should focus on the same objectives. The challenge here, however, is to achieve effectiveness and impact. Very often the challenge is not sufficient funding, good will, or credible concepts, it is rather – as pointed out by political observers – the difficulties enshrined in the current EU decision making processes which do not always allow for expediency and decisiveness in deploying available instruments. The EU's support for multilateralism is also part of this conceptual approach, which is to say that the EU seeks to cooperate with the United Nations and other multilateral organisations such as the OSCE, and it supports multilateral institutions like the International Court of Justice.

The second approach is the geographic concept of concentric circles of cooperation: with the starting point being the EU itself, then moving to the European neighbourhood, and then to Africa and beyond. The third approach is based on thematic concepts which focus on the areas of engagement related to the objectives mentioned above: security reform, the demobilisation, demilitarisation and reintegration of former fighters,

etc. These themes are currently being developed and will be implemented in close cooperation with partner states and international organisations.

My last point is the issue of demands on research institutes. We will need analysis based on fieldwork and policy advice provided by European think tanks in order to allow for a well-informed decision making process. We will also be looking for civil society actors, such as NGOs, that can help us implement programmes and projects in partner countries. The prerequisite will be expertise, and the required level of trust and confidence that is built on a concept of partnership between the European institutions and the research community.

# Squaring the Circle: The Interdependence of Reform, Socio-economic Crisis, Globalisation, Domestic and Regional Security

## Introduction

*Muriel Asseburg*

We have an extensive agenda for this session: we want to square the circle by looking at the interdependence of reform, socio-economic crises, globalisation, domestic and regional security. I do hope that this difficult task will inspire some new ideas for our research agenda, new ideas about how to tackle these problems, and about how these problems are linked to each other. Let me share with you the questions that I consider most important in this regards.

I want to start out with the question of reform: When we look at reform in the region the balance sheet of political as well as economic reform is quite bleak – with some exceptions of course. What we see is a trend of authoritarian adjustment, a redistribution of resources from the state to the state class, not an increase in popular participation in the decision-making processes, or the possibility to vote the leadership out of office. However, analysts as well as policy-makers at the same time are still sticking to the transition paradigm. We are still working with the “end of history”-thesis as the basis of analysis. At least, that is the case for mainstream analysis that is being done in Germany, such as the Bertelsmann Transition Index; or the assumption underpins frequently used terms such as “defective democracies,” etc. Now, if we say this is not what is happening, that we are not witnessing transitions, then actually what are we witnessing? What are the trajectories we are looking at? Which concepts would be more useful for grasping what we are witnessing and for understanding developments? And, when we look at the linkage between socio-economic development and the consolidation of democracy, is it “good governance” that is the precondition for socio-economic development? Is it a sufficient precondition? Or have we already surpassed the good governance paradigm?

The second point I would like to tackle is the influence of outside actors on reform processes in the region. So far, we have asserted that the impact has been quite modest. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is a good example for that. The EMP anniversary summit in 2005 as well as the November 2005 Forum for the Future meeting have witnessed a backlash

in the region against external democracy promotion initiatives that have been perceived as new imperial grand designs. The credibility of outside actors has been called into question strongly due to the latest wars that we have witnessed in the region as well as the Western stance towards the democratically elected Palestinian government. I think these developments have led to a rethinking of policy approaches in Brussels and in Washington. Still, the Western model is being used as the model for modernisation. We might overlook that there are other models that are attractive to the region. We have talked about China and Singapore yesterday. However, is there any serious research into the degree conditions in these states are at all comparable to the region we are looking at? What about societal structures, the economic basis, political culture? Another point is: if outside actors are not the ones who can help in opening up societies, then what are the factors working in this direction? In my view, it is mainly the unintended processes of globalisation that we are witnessing (transnational media, satellite television, etc.). Now the question with regard to these globalisation processes is: do we really understand what is happening there? Can we give recommendations on how to influence these processes or are they so chaotic that they cannot really be influenced?

That leads us to another question: How do we grasp changing geopolitics? How do we determine who will be important state or non-state actors? Do we have concepts or scientific approaches to do this, or is it actually the media who tell us who is important and who is not? My feeling is that we rely a lot on the media here, rather than trying to find out who will be important in the future and why. Wouldn't it make sense, then, to research determinants of the importance of actors? What are these determinants? Is the main determinant the access to or availability of resources?

Last but not least, let me remark on the linkages between socio-economic development and domestic as well as regional security. It is quite obvious that none is possible without the other. It has become extremely clear with regard to the Middle East Peace Process that the European approach, which had been assuming that socio-economic development would automatically translate into regional security, did not succeed. The European approach departed from the assumption that economic support for the Palestinians would translate into socio-economic progress and well-being for the individual Palestinian, which would then translate into a culture of peace which would, in turn, allow for conflict resolution, and thereby lead to regional security. But it did not work out because European support did not lead to socio-economic growth in the first Oslo years, it hardly alleviated the disastrous consequences of Israeli closure policies. Is there something more general that could be said about the linkage between development and security? And what does this mean for our research agenda as well as for our policy approaches?

## Research Priorities Beyond the Fog of Culturalism

*Alvaro de Vasconcelos*

An essential focus of our research agenda should be the deconstruction of the culturalist paradigm that is used to explain many of the crises, tensions and perceptions across the Euro-Mediterranean region. Broadly speaking, culture has replaced the equally all-embracing deterministic economic theories, which used to explain all political and social dynamics by reference to economic factors and structures. The latter views marked, even marred, the first years of the Barcelona Process with the conviction that economic development would lead to stability and, eventually, to political reforms and democracy.

The Huntington approach is still very popular, and even if most of the researchers are of the opinion that Huntington has been proved wrong, many politicians and practitioners adhere to culturalist viewpoints. They focus on culture (understood as “civilisation”) as the main source of tensions and crises in the Euro-Mediterranean region. For this reason many tend to believe that a “clash of civilisations” can be avoided through intercultural dialogue and other such initiatives like the Alliance of Civilisations. But in fact, such an approach deepens the cultural and civilization dimension of international relations. Huntington’s view is popular not only in Europe but also in the southern Mediterranean, where it feeds new forms of nationalism and has become the basis for many misleading interpretations of current trends in the region. There is, therefore, a pressing need to study any event that is explained according to “cultural” interpretations, and to deconstruct the “culturalist” paradigm.

One example of this is the analysis of the “cartoons crisis,” which erupted because of the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed in 2006 printed in the Danish press. The cartoons became controversial in Europe and the southern Mediterranean for essentially political reasons. In Denmark it was fed by pre-existing tensions between the Muslim communities and the influential and xenophobic far right, and in the Middle East the incident must be seen in the context of the regional and international conflicts and tensions contributing to the escalation of the crises in Syria and Lebanon. In the Maghreb, there are various worrying issues in relations with Europe, not least of which is the fate of migrant communities in Europe. In several countries the cartoon crisis was extremely important in terms of positioning the regimes vis-à-vis Islamist groups. As the EuroMeSCo report on the cartoons crises shows,<sup>1</sup> in order to achieve the aims of the Barcelona Process (the development of a Euro-

<sup>1</sup> Getting it Right: Inclusion within Diversity - Lessons of the Cartoons Crisis and Beyond. A EuroMeSCo Report, Lisbon: EuroMeSCo, December 2006.

Mediterranean agenda to support democratic reform, defend fundamental rights and combat intolerance) the fog of civilisational interpretations must be dispelled so that policy makers can see the social and political realities that it obscures.

### **The Study of Political Change**

If we free ourselves from the straitjackets of culturalism and relativism it will become clear that a key research priority is the study of political change underway in the southern Mediterranean. Genuine democratic reforms may not have happened, civil society actors find the pace of reform excessively sluggish in many countries, and some governments have actively resisted reform; and yet these societies are changing, and new civil society actors and political forces are playing a greater role. This is the case of the Islamists (both old and new), who have learned to play the political game more skilfully. It has become impossible to ignore them. Understanding reformist forces such as judges, political parties or NGOs is crucial. We need develop in-depth studies about new political forces, whether democratic Muslim or radical Islamist, and understand where they stand on key issues. To date there is little or no research on the willingness of such groups to accept governmental positions, or regional and international responsibilities. We need to understand the changes (and the pace of change) taking place and not only changes resulting from a top down dynamic but also – perhaps more importantly at present – bottom up dynamics. This should constitute a second major focus of our research activities.

### **The EMP as a Regional Project**

The third focus area should be regionalism. Except for Israel, the southern Mediterranean is one of the world regions that enjoys little of the benefits of globalisation. The integration of the region into the international economic system will depend on the creation of competitive platforms like MERCOSUR in South America. Regional integration could help the countries of the region take advantage of globalisation and contribute to global rule-making that takes social issues into account. There are no such groupings as yet, and the prospects are not bright in the Maghreb and the Middle East, but the Euro-Mediterranean region can become the basis for a real regional group, and a platform for the southern countries to shape globalisation and to give to it a more human face, to use the expression of the former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Thus, the research agenda should focus on the capacities of the EU to develop and create a Euro-Mediterranean regional group of this kind based on the principles of the Barcelona Declaration. Developing such a group will depend on reform in the southern Mediterranean and, crucially, on developments within the EU.

### **European Union: the Internal as External**

Thus, it is also necessary to study political trends in Europe and the external impact of Europe's domestic situation (European "intermestic" issues). This includes issues such as the way Europe deals with migrants and their communities (which shapes perceptions of Europe, particularly in the Maghreb), the nature of the links established by the EU and its member States between human rights and security, and the future of the European social model. Another central issue is the outcome of the debate on the identity of the European Union, which has a fundamental impact on Turkish membership of the EU. Thus, it is crucial to study the various dimensions of migration, the links established between justice and security, and the integration of Turkey, which is at the core of both issues. The latter will define us as Europeans and our ability to integrate the Euro-Med region. Rejecting Turkey means that we define ourselves culturally as a "Christian club". And in so doing, we lose our ability to integrate the region.

### **The Middle East and the Failure of Unilateralism: What Next?**

Finally the region must be studied in light of the evolving international system, in particular the consequences of the failure of the American unilateral policies. How do developments in the international system affect the region? Changes in U.S. policy and the "war on terror" put the Mediterranean and the Gulf at the centre of international and U.S. politics. The impact of the U.S. as a hyper-power making the region a policy priority cannot be underestimated. Americans want to change the region and have been unable to do so, but the impact of American policy – be it toward Iraq, Lebanon or elsewhere – is critical. The Middle East is now at the centre of political change and yet it is the victim of unilateral and ill conceived US policies, the effect of which has been to undermine the discourse and practise of democratic reform in various countries. Bad policy has also weakened the legitimacy of external actors, particularly of the United States, and of the credibility of their support for democratic reform.

### **Think Tanks that Think for Civil Society**

We need to develop a research agenda that is not the kind traditionally promoted by think-tanks that think for states; in my view we need think-tanks that think for civil society. Not only do we need more in-depth-analysis of non-state actors but also of the issues high on the agenda of such actors. This means shifting our focus in various ways. To give you an example from my experience with the EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Studies Commission) network: We organised a seminar on Civil Society and Human Rights with the collaboration and participation of a very large number of NGOs in the Maghreb. One central conclusion by the NGO representatives was the need to establish stronger relations with think-

tanks as providers of expertise and in-depth knowledge of the topics relevant to their activities, which were human rights, migrants, social rights, democratisation, freedom of expression, environmental issues, and the impact of international developments on their ability to put forward their agendas. The EuroMeSCo network already deals with some of these issues, but we need to pay more attention to civil society institutions and establish closer ties with them. This is a very important dimension of the role we can play when advising about effective means to integrate the region and to contribute to political change and peace.

This research agenda will call for international relations institutes, which specialise in interstate relations, to pay more attention to internal factors shaping the Middle East. In order for them to do so, they must develop a multidisciplinary approach, and work with specialists in political science, sociology and economics.

## The Keywords

*Ulrich Wurzel*

This session is called “Squaring the circle: the interdependence of reform, socio-economic crises, globalisation, and domestic and regional security.” Let me briefly outline my understanding of the linkages between the keywords.

First, in the economic realm *reform* mainly means economic policy reform. This economic policy reform is urgent, in particular in light of the prevailing and intensifying *socio-economic crises* in many of the Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, the framework conditions of these crises imply that the risk for *domestic security*, which is linked to any kind of change or reform, makes fundamental reforms not very attractive to most of the leaders and governments in the region. Reforms threatening too many powerful actors’ interests have the potential to undermine domestic security, while *globalisation* intensifies the need for reform. A crucial factor is time: the longer socio-economic reforms are postponed, the more difficult and threatening they become, at least for many of the parties involved. The link to *regional security* is that internal pressure and instability within countries will also have negative consequences for security and stability in the region as a whole. This completes the circle which still has to be squared: Many actors in and outside the region do not seek to pursue reforms despite the fact that such reforms would be in the long and mid-term interest of the concerned economies and societies.

To sum up: Many powerful actors have an interest in the status quo. Hence, no fundamental reforms will take place, crises will deepen, threats to internal security will grow, and this results in increasing threats for regional security and stability.

## Vicious Cycles of Stagnation versus New Developments and Actors

The cycle just outlined resembles a classical *vicious circle*. It is the usual image often presented in the media, but also in expert discussions and policy meetings as well as in academia. Such vicious circles are highly appealing to any kind of audience as they seem to be stringent, and thus provide an excuse for inaction on our side: If all the issues are linked in such a devastating way, it is quite understandable that we are unable to offer solutions to problems, a way forward or exit strategies – and therefore limit ourselves to analysing and commenting, while waiting for the explosions (or implosions) of whole societies and economies and the subsequent, related clashes in the international arena.

In my view, the very image of a vicious circle is wrong (and hence the conclusions, too) since this idea ignores the fact that there are *always new developments emerging*, even in the rather stable authoritarian regimes of the region: New processes and developments – in other words: changes – occur despite a seemingly stable or steady setting which is suggested by the image of the vicious circle. Policy-oriented research, therefore, should focus on identifying these newly emerging processes of change and the related change agents, even if hidden behind a veil of manipulated information provided by the authoritarian regimes themselves, as well as behind one-sided perceptions and outdated, stereotype-like scientific concepts in the form of “established wisdom” produced during earlier research on the region.

Quite often, however, socio-economic change in the region is *deliberate change*, which is carefully designed and consciously implemented in a top-down process by authoritarian rulers. To quote Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his famous book on 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, *Il Gattopardo*, written in 1958: “Everything has to change so that everything can stay the same”.

This change for the sake of non-change also seems to contribute to the astonishing harmony which is frequently observable between the representatives of Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes – often denying “their” citizens the most basic human rights – and representatives of the West, i.e. European state officials. The latter seem to be more interested in control and “stability” than uncontrolled change. In such a context, the dividing line between stability and *stagnation* becomes rather blurred.

### **Stability, Change and Redistribution**

Thus, according to my view, there is a certain *dichotomy* of stability and change: On the one hand, we find a very specific interpretation of the concept of “*stability*” as the main objective of many authoritarian regimes in the region. On the other hand, there is *manipulated change*, engineered in order to contribute to the same objective – regime survival and preservation of power. This kind of change, intended to keep the regimes functioning, and the interplay of stability and change materialises itself in *processes of redistribution*. If one of the primary tasks of policy-oriented research on the Middle East is to identify the most relevant new developments and actors which shape dynamics in the region, processes of redistribution are as such highly relevant new developments. Therefore, they should be a major theme running through any research on the Middle East, in particular as the analysis of redistribution processes also helps us understand changing positions, roles and relevance of actors.

The concept of redistribution describes a *rearrangement of the authoritarian rule* facing multiple challenges in terms of actors and issues. Redistribution is linked to push-and-pull-factors, with some exerting pressure, and others providing incentives. Redistribution stands first for the redistribution of *definition power* and of *decision-making power*. This concerns microeconomic decisions, macroeconomic policy decisions within the elite, within elite

coalitions and networks, and between elites and other groups of social actors in the respective societies. Second, redistribution is the redistribution of *assets, means of production, and means of accumulation* – including employment opportunities. Third, redistribution includes the redistribution of *access to goods and services*. This addresses mainly access to privilege, e.g. economic privilege, but also to public goods in the traditional sense. Finally it implies the redefinition of the *political and economic importance of individual states* in the Middle East, among other things the result of a redistribution of economic positions in a regional setting – see Giacomo Luciani who reminds us again of the different evolution of the GCC countries compared to Algeria, Egypt, or Syria for example.

With this background, researchers have to answer the questions (1) of what is being distributed, which concerns processes or developments, and (2) of who plays a role in these processes, a question that deals with the most important actors passively affected by and/or actively interfering with redistribution. In particular the redistribution of definition power, of decision-making power and of assets comes along with the *construction and reconstruction* of meaning, terms, concepts, discourse and ideologies by the most relevant actors.

### **Regime-directed Redistribution and Unintended Outcomes**

However, the fact that distribution and rearrangement is carried out by authoritarian regimes in order to secure their power *does not exclude* that during the process the development gets out of control, and that suddenly the project of redistribution and rearrangement of power takes a direction that was not intended in spite of all the manipulation and planning.

These situations are crucial: when control cannot be maintained any longer, and new unintended actors arrive on the scene. Someone said yesterday: “Suddenly there are people which are affected, which are suffering, which are backward, which did not have a say concerning their affairs during the last years – and these people may now reappear on stage, they are just there.” We have to search for these potential breaking points, these new actors and developments, which are unintended within the old equation of stability, to find the interesting spots.

### **How do Researchers Choose their Topics and Select Relevant Issues?**

According to my perception, and in particular with regard to economic research on the region, choosing research topics and selecting relevant issues is an opaque process. Economic research on the Middle East in a couple of European countries and also increasingly in the U.S. is done outside mainstream research. In a discipline like economics there are certain traditions, rules, and taboos, which provide an orientation for the proper course of research, thus the whole profession moves into a certain direction. In Germany for instance this is still dominated by rather

backward concepts such as neoclassical approaches, which remain weak in their core assumptions even if they are modernised.

Due to the lack of interest of mainstream economic research in the region, only a minority of people doing research on socio-economic issues in the Middle East are economists by profession. This entails certain consequences: On the one hand, it opens the doors for others, like sociologists, anthropologists, historians, or political scientists, which contribute heavily to socio-economic research on the Middle East. Accordingly, those people are not restrained by the narrow rules of mainstream economics, bringing in creativity and interdisciplinary work. On the other hand, the researchers are cut off from the mother-discipline of economics. Methodological and conceptual innovations arriving in mainstream economics are hardly embraced by research regarding the Middle East. This is a major deficit, and this situation, which is also present in other European countries and the U.S., leads to certain choices of topics, and to certain definitions of what would be an interesting and relevant research field.

### **Further Development of Established Concepts or Paradigm Shift?**

Let me finish with a quick word on concepts: When we ask ourselves, whether our concepts are *still valid* or whether we would *need alternative concepts*, this question doesn't consider the further development of the concepts already in use. Posed this way, this is a question concerning the need for a more fundamental change in our research approaches – paradigm shift. Quite obviously, in science and research, the *established concepts are always linked to the past* – they are imported from other research areas (in our case: research on other world regions) where particular processes have been happening earlier or faster or in a more intensive way. In addition, from what has been described in the previous paragraph, many concepts in socio-economic research on the Middle East are *not derived from economics*, but often have been created in different disciplines, making them very unique.

When *searching for new concepts*, a look to other regional study areas like Latin America, India, or China might be useful as we might be able to borrow concepts which are closer to our needs than traditional concepts of mainstream economics. The “advantage” of the Middle East in this regard is that its socio-economic development in many fields lags behind those in other regions. This means that in some other area studies the relevant processes may have already occurred and may have been analysed, turning out conceptual and methodological research innovations which possibly could be adjusted very fruitfully to the needs of our own work on the Middle East.