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THEMENSCHWERPUNKT

Re-thinking the Middle East – Historical Analysis and Current Threats

Ambassador Yakov Hadas-Handelsman*

Abstract: For a better understanding of the current situation in the Middle East a historical analysis is needed. Israel's biggest threat today is the terror organization Hamas, but the whole region currently finds itself in a time of turmoil. Thus, in order to comprehend Israel's position, one must look at the broader picture, in particular at the events during and after the Arab Spring. The international community must rethink its views on the Middle East in order to establish peace in the region.

Keywords: Middle East, Arab Spring, Islam, Israel, Hamas, Palestinian Authority (PA)

Stichworte: Nahost, Arabischer Frühling, Islam, Israel, Hamas, Palästinensische Autonomiebehörde

In order to understand the current situation in the Middle East, one must go back in history, starting about a hundred years back. No countries or borders existed back then; the Middle East was part of the Ottoman Empire. The political divisions of the modern-day Middle East are the direct result of arbitrary borders drawn by imperial powers during World War I based on war-time political calculations. Mark Sykes, representing the British government, and Francois Georges-Picot, from the French government, agreed upon these borders in 1916 which still shape and shake the Middle East of today, leaving a legacy that the region has not been able to overcome.

These divisions sped up the process of nationalism in the Middle East. In most cases, entities were created that did not exist before,

not only from a political but also from a sociological point of view. The borders divided already existing human alliances. They neither corresponded to the actual sectarian, tribal, religious or ethnic distinctions, nor took into account the wishes of the people affected by these borders. Until today, this leaves the bigger part of the Middle East as part of a divided map that does not consider the region's ethnic and confessional realities.

Nonetheless, the general future of the Middle East looked promising at the time. The discovery of huge oil reserves in the Middle East came parallel to the development of major advancements in industrialization. Step by step the newly

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created countries became independent from their colonial empires. All these factors spread a general optimism in the region, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s. During this period, Arab nationalism gave an immense momentum to the idea that a united Arab world would diminish the socio-demographic differences among its populations.

But the jump from the 18th to the 20th century they were trying to accomplish was simply too much. Some countries wanted to adopt Western secular ideas, others stuck to their traditions. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of Egypt, tried to materialize the concept of pan-Arab unity as an equivalent of one big Arab Nation/State. This idea did not take up because the common denominator between Mauritania on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and Oman on the Indian Ocean was too low in order to enable this concept to overcome social, economic and regional interests.

The geostrategic importance of the region also plays a key role in our attempt to understand the Middle East. It is rich in natural commodities such as oil, gas and sun and has a strategic location, particularly due to the Suez Canal. The location and flow of raw materials were promising prospects for the region. But the problems came with the increasingly twisted distribution of wealth and the deep rift between the rich and the poor that came with it. Additionally, the totalitarian nature of the regimes did not coincide with the changes going on in the world, especially concerning the development in media and technology. The constant external involvement in the region also was an influential factor. It was more important for the Western World to secure allegiances with certain countries because of their interests there than truly wanting to introduce Western values such as secularism and democracy.

While most of the world was opening up, the Arab world was freezing up (with some exceptions). Their sectarian, tribal, religious or ethnic distinctions were overruled by their regimes, which acted as glue uniting these components. The regimes were keeping up with old traditions and old world orders. But as the world was moving forward, the gap between West and the Middle East broadened. This was one of the biggest mistakes of Arab rulers: They thought that stagnation would guarantee them their ruling seats, whereas moving forward or progress was a threat because it might inevitably endanger their own position. But this strategy led exactly to the opposite: The Arab Spring. The word progress, especially when it has to do with the media, which has turned our world into a global village, exposed people to what was "out there". People thought that they deserved no better but also no worse than their brothers and sisters in democratic countries. This led to a huge amount of frustration that exploded one day in December 2010. The spark was set by a Tunisian student who could not find a job matching up with his qualifications and had to become a vegetable seller in a local market. This student epitomized long years of frustration in the region; the reaction was huge and very spontaneous. The wave of protests could not be stopped. This wave was initiated by mostly Western-oriented liberals who wanted to transform their homelands.

Unfortunately, almost four years after the Arab Spring the situation in the region has not only not improved but become worse. The lack of knowledge and a real understanding of the basic values and rules of democracy and the lack of any democratic experiences led

to the Muslim brotherhood taking over or the outbreak of civil wars. The intellectuals who were the initiators of materializing the revolution were swallowed up either by the military or religious regimes. Europe's biggest mistake when analyzing the developments in the region at that time was to see them as a repetition of what had happened in Eastern Europe during the collapse of the Soviet bloc (the Velvet Revolution). These countries, as opposed to the Middle East, had some democratic experiences and there were agents of change present. These two very important factors are still missing in the Middle East. The collapse of the old order in key countries like Syria, Iraq, Tunisia and Libya destroyed the already fragile structure of nation-state and made old allegiances and loyalties re-surface. The Middle East is therefore less stable today and has progressed as little as ever before.

Religion plays a crucial role in this sense as we can see today: extreme religious powers are going on the offensive in countries such as Libya, Syria and Iraq, the latter being now the cradle of the terror militia IS. The common denominator of these forces is that they are Arab and Sunnite. But most importantly, they are extremists that are committed to principles of early Islam, which they want to spread and enforce in the entire world. Where they are present, people's lives are suffering a multi-century setback. They are taking advantage of the weak states in the Middle East and the indifference of the Western world by trying to materialize a utopia of a worldwide political and religious Sunnite Islamist Kingdom. Their aspirations of a new world order are not limited to a strictly geographical or political dominance. This is the reason why other parts of the world beyond the Middle East are in danger and should be on alert. This includes Europe because there are by now a large number of European citizens who are fighting in the ranks of those organizations. Most of them are European citizens with Arab and Muslim roots who have not adopted social Western values of "live and let live". Europe should be worried about these people once they come back to their homeland and serve as bridgeheads to import extreme Muslim fanatics (such as IS, Taliban, Boko Haram, Al-Qaida or Hamas) and terror. We witnessed the example of this a few months ago when a French citizen who came back from Iraq attacked a Jewish Museum in Brussels.

When it comes to Israel, the major threat that we are facing today is Hamas. Hamas – a terror organization recognized as such by the European Union, the US, Canada and Japan – states very clearly (also in its Charta) that it is committed to the destruction of the State of Israel. They reject the idea of a two-state solution for two people living side-by-side in cooperation and peace. Allegedly it is another national liberation/terror organization. This is very misleading because the destruction of Israel and the liberation of Palestine are only an excuse. Its real goal is to spread and enforce Islamic values beyond the borders of the Middle East, like other terrorist groups.

Solely Hamas provoked this recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was losing control and its grasp in the region. Egypt and Syria withdrew their support. Hamas also lost the political support of the entire Arab world and of Europe. Its economic situation worsened, meaning it needed to re-invent itself by re-positioning itself. Hamas was ready earlier this year to reconcile with the Palestinian Authority (PA), even though it never intended to fulfill its obligations within the agreed framework. Allegedly, this was all part of a bigger plan to overthrow Abbas from within. The

kidnapping of three innocent Israeli teenagers and the permanent firing of thousands of rockets from Gaza to Israel proved that Hamas never intended to live up to what it had promised.

Hamas is a highly sophisticated terror organization to the extent that it uses women and children as human shields. It knows that any civilian casualties caused by Israel will create a huge worldwide condemnation and will turn the public opinion against Israel and in favor of Hamas. Ultimately, it has the same goal and uses the same measures as the terror militia IS, for example when Hamas publicly executed various alleged collaborators of Israel.

During the last round of fighting, Israel agreed to all the eleven proposals for a ceasefire. Hamas rejected them all. No country in the world would put up with constantly being under attack for years. Israel has the right and the obligation to defend itself and to respond with precise military operations that target Hamas terrorists and their infrastructure. It is unprecedented that the Israeli army warns civilians in Gaza with phone calls, SMS or leaflets and other means in advance of the attacks. Hamas however calls upon the population to ignore these warnings from Israel and forces them to remain in the areas which are to be attacked. Hamas located its military command centers in hospitals, uses schools as weapons depots and places their rocket launchers directly in residential areas, playgrounds, in private homes and in mosques. They even dress up in women's clothes as a cover-up carrying weapons under the gowns.

In recent years Hamas has built a network of "terror tunnels" underneath residential areas in the Gaza Strip, which reach Israeli territory under the border. The Israeli army discovered more than 30 of these tunnels and was able to avoid several

attacks before terrorists could cause possible bloodbaths in Israeli villages and cities. The international community, including Europe and Germany, must ask themselves where the international aid has gone which Hamas has received over the years. Have they invested in the construction of schools and hospitals, or in the construction of tunnel systems for terrorist attacks on Israel? The answer is quite obvious.

So where do we go from here? Israel does not and will not talk to terrorists; one has to fight them. The sooner you weaken or can get rid of them the better, because they will not stop with their terror. Israel is happy to see that the world is slowly but surely dealing with the problem of the terror militia IS in Iraq accordingly. Once you do weaken or remove them, you have to try to help the current regimes to stabilize themselves and go with them step-by-step and side-by-side towards introducing them to Western values. Naturally every country in the world has its own flavor or version of democracy. And the same should apply to the Middle East. The Western World must understand that this process is different for everyone, so one must keep in mind that the pace of this process will also be different in the Middle East. It took Europe several hundred years to get to where it is now, so no one can expect a democratic change overnight from the Middle East. It will be a long way toward the absorption of progress and modern values in this region. And regarding Hamas we must make sure that it stays weakened. We must also try to reinstate the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the Gaza strip and this time around all measures must be taken in order to secure the disarmament of Hamas. For this, help of the international community is needed. Only a weakened Hamas will enable the region to move forward and negotiate an agreement to end this conflict that is going on for far too long.

Tackling the Root Causes of the Palestine/Israel Question: Towards a more Active European Role

Khouloud Daibes*

Abstract: The achievement of peace in Palestine/Israel requires an understanding of the broader context, beginning with the asymmetry between the two parties. More than twenty years of negotiations have shown that Israel, as the stronger party, which benefits from its occupation of Palestinian land, has little incentive to reach a just solution. The international community has the ability and the responsibility to provide the necessary external incentives. Europe's clear policy on the two-state solution should lead to more active support for its realization. Peace will remain elusive as long as the imbalance between the parties remains. Any lasting solution must guarantee justice, freedom and equality for all.

Keywords: Israel-Palestine conflict, negotiations, peace, Europe's role

Stichworte: Israel-Palästina-Konflikt, Verhandlungen, Frieden, Europas Rolle

1. Root Causes and Prolongation

1.1 Understanding the context: An imbalance of power and a lack of will

The original cause of the current situation in Palestine/Israel can be traced back to a single act: the creation and imposition of a foreign state on the homeland of another

people. This event, in 1948, led to the forced exile of two thirds of a population and ongoing systematic discrimination against those who managed to remain in their homes. From 1967 onwards, the occupation of the rest of Palestine resulted in the subjugation of what is now a further 4.5 million people.

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