

# Summary

December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017



## The Middle East between Disintegration and Realignment

Eine Veranstaltung im Rahmen der Kooperation mit dem Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung und Sport und mit Unterstützung der Österreichischen Orient-Gesellschaft Hammer-Purgstall.

Summary compiled by: Fabian Somnavilla

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**Panelists:**

Richard Schofield, King's College London

Petra Ramsauer, Journalist, Author

**Chair:**

Cengiz Günay, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), Vienna

**Date & Time:**

December 5, 2017, 6-8 pm

**Venue:**

Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip), Berggasse 7, 1090 Vienna

## **Abstract**

The Middle East has been in turmoil for more than a century. World War I has had a lasting effect in restructuring the Middle East. On the occasion of the centenaries of the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between Great Britain and France and the 1917 Balfour Declaration as well as the 50-year anniversary of the 6-day-war of 1967 the panel tried to make sense of the recent disintegration and realignment processes currently occurring in the Middle East. The recent independence referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan, the disintegration of the Iraqi state as well as the de-facto collapse of Syria raise questions concerning the emergence of new borders. However, it became visible that the internal borders between different spheres of influence are the ones that really make a difference in daily life, rather than the international ones that gain most of the attention. The panelists highlighted the incredible metamorphosis local communities went through in past months and made a great effort to highlight the on-the-ground effects on humans, both stemming from foreign intervention and internal conflicts. The panel also raised some very important questions concerning Shia influence in Sunni-dominated regions in post-conflict scenarios. It was argued that creative solutions and out-of-the-box thinking will be required to tackle the multifaceted problems that will lie ahead once post-conflict governments will try to pacify the region.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Der Nahe Osten blickt auf eine lange konfliktreiche Geschichte zurück. Das Österreichische Institut für Internationale Politik (oiip) nahm die Jährung drei nachhaltig bedeutsamer historischer Ereignisse zum Anlass, die rezente Desintegration und Neuordnung der Region zu thematisieren und diskutieren. Das geheime Sykes-Picot Abkommen zwischen Frankreich und Großbritannien von 1916, die Balfour-Deklaration von 1917, sowie der 6-Tage-Krieg von 1967 prägten die Region und sind Quelle so manchen Konfliktes. Das kurdische Unabhängigkeitsreferendum im Irak, die Desintegration des irakischen Staates sowie der Quasi-Zerfall staatlicher Macht in Syrien stellen die Region vor erneute Herausforderungen und werfen Fragen nach einer Neuziehung von Grenzen auf. Die Diskussion offenbarte, dass es in Wahrheit jedoch die internen Grenzen zwischen den verschiedenen Einflussphären sind, die Auswirkungen auf das tägliche Leben in der Region haben, und nicht die internationalen Grenzen die allerdings die meiste Aufmerksamkeit bekommen. Das Panel unterstrich die unglaubliche Transformation welche die lokalen Bevölkerungen in den letzten Wochen und Monaten erlebt haben und plädierte dafür stets die humanitären Auswirkungen, sei es von externen Interventionen oder internen Konflikten, nie aus den Augen zu verlieren. Das Panel warf auch wichtige Fragen rund um die Zukunft des schiitischen Einflusses in sunnitisch-dominierten Regionen in einem Post-Konflikt-Szenario auf. Es brauche kreative Lösungsansätze und mutige Ideen, fernab der gängigen Praktiken, um die multiplen und komplexen Probleme die auf die Region zukommen eines Tages eventuell lösen zu können.

## A complex region with a plurality of actors

In order to provide context for the discussion, Cengiz Günay highlighted the various anniversaries of important events occurring in 2016/17 that lastingly shaped the Middle East as we know it today. It soon became clear that the region is, in fact, truly in a process between disintegration and realignment. Richard Schofield, senior lecturer from King's College London and a renowned scholar in border and delimitation studies, then offered insights from a historical and academic perspective. Displaying a broad array of historical and modern-day maps, Mr Schofield was able to give the audience a sense of where some of the root causes of many of today's conflicts lie.



While he was very hesitant to overstress the importance of the Sykes-Picot treaty as factually only few of its provisions eventually materialised, Schofield did highlight how the interference of European powers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to, or even created a variety of the problems the



region continues to face. The fact that some lines in the sand, as Middle Eastern boundaries are commonly referred to, were often “based on merely 5 lines of treaty text by white, old Englishmen”, was a harbinger of eventual problems to arise, frequently caused by a misunderstanding of the region. Richard Schofield also reminded the audience that while historical decisions bear the blame for certain developments, the geopolitics and realpolitik by regional and global powers (Saudi-Arabia, Iran, United States, Russia) are the key factors influencing modern developments. Both panelists critiqued especially the US involvement in Iraq, in combination with their recent arming of the Kurds. The securitisation narrative that followed the US intervention and the Islamic State’s rise in the region also resulted in many new border fortifications, including spectacular ones such as the Saudi-Iraqi border, “one of the technologically most sophisticated borders with respect to surveillance measures in the world” according to Mr Schofield. He argues that the renewed interest in the region is also just a result of geopolitical dynamics. As human mobility within and especially from the region towards Europe intensified, the desire to understand and pacify the region became prominent in European discussions once again, according to Mr Schofield.

## The effect on the human

The second panelist, Austrian freelance journalist and author Petra Ramsauer could captivate the audience with up-to-date on-the-ground experience as she just returned from a research trip to Syria and Iraq a few days ago. She presented two main takeaways from the trip. On the one hand she was overwhelmed by the discrepancy between the highly theoretical discussions taking place in intergovernmental peace talks and the facts on the ground that often diverge. Arguing that the PKK-supported Kurdish forces in northern Syria are and will be a key player and power in post-conflict Syria, it would be futile to discuss any possible solutions if Turkey continues to deny them a seat at the negotiation table at the peace talks in Geneva or Astana. On the other hand Petra Ramsauer was seemingly impressed by the extreme metamorphosis different communities of the region went through in the past months. She illustrated this with a picture of a young Kurdish woman, who is the present co-mayor of Raqqa, a city that has been under the misogynist and violent rule of the so-called Islamic state only a few months ago.



“Why is nobody celebrating now that IS seems to be territorially defeated?”, Ramsauer asked. Because locals as well as international analysts know which complexities lie ahead now that other players merge into these vacant spaces, she argued. Who is going to rule the territory freed from the Islamic State? Once the US withdraws its support, the PKK-linked Kurdish PYD will not be able to hold the territory it gained, neither has the Assad regime the capacities to fill the void, Ramsauer asserted. Many Arab clans would be resistant to a long-term domination by the Kurdish PYD, she held, pointing to one of the many future problems. She also highlighted the strong presence of Hezbollah fighters and Shia militias from other countries as Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan who have played a major role in the fight against IS. Ramsauer pointed out that these Shia fighters would also consider themselves as Jihadists in their fight against the Sunni Jihadists. The question arising is what will be the long-term effects of a strong presence of Shia militias in Sunni dominated territories. Through her first-hand experience she was also able to figuratively illustrate the many internal borders that have been erected throughout the past months and years. These are not necessarily hard borders as such, but demonstrate the various spheres of influence that will also complicate any future form of statehood.

## **Creative approaches**

It is precisely this unknown future where both panelists argued for creative solutions to be contemplated. Richard Schofield bemoaned to some degree the international community's inflexibility in this regard. The UN charter and international customary law respect a country's territorial integrity, which of course manifests international boundaries that may not always be perfect. Yet, the strong leaders of the region insist on their continuity, as all governments do. This also results in little sympathy for secessionist tendencies in the region or elsewhere. Nonetheless, he argued, we need to dare to at least think about other possibilities. A map showing a possible Sunnistan, Shiitestan, Kurdistan, Alavitestan etc. should be one such thought-provoking impulse. Otherwise, we risk leaving "borderlanders" (people living in the borderlands), such as in Israel/Palestine worse off. There the settlement policy and land-grabbing continues, making the prospects of a two-state solution futile. Petra Ramsauer, agreed to great extent, but warned not to merge all Kurds in one pot as they are haunted by a fierce rivalry amongst Barzani's KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and the PKK (and its offshoots). She also feared that any newly drawn international boundary in the region would open a Pandora's box, resulting in a spiral of new conflicts. Instead she presented the model of Südtirol in Italy, where the Austria functions as a protective power of South Tyrolean communities, as one possible avenue a future Syrian or Iraqi state could take.

## **No easy solutions for an uncertain future**

Such possible scenarios for a more peaceful post-conflict scenario seemingly intrigued the audience, which is why the Q&A session was dominated by questions about possible solutions to resolving the fierce rivalries and grievances in the region. Unsurprisingly the panelists could neither present a master plan for peace nor a reliable prospect of what we can expect for the intermediate future. The panelists, however, agreed with Cengiz Günay's attempt of a conclusion of the discussion and the current developments in the region. He argued that, in fact, the disintegration and realignment of the Middle East is less a question of international boundaries being redrawn, but more importantly about how to cope with the collapse of statehood. The internal borders that are erected as a result of such developments, delimiting the various spheres of influence, will constitute a major challenge for the future. This uncertain future will need creative solutions and out-of-the-box thinking to stand a chance for peace.