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25. Mrz. 2014

von gast

in Außenpolitik, Bürgerkriege, Security Culture

Kommentare (0)

The Post-Arab Spring: the risks of opening Pandora's box and the resurgence of extremist non-state actors

von Alexander Sami Lang

The bloody rebellion in Syria has aroused hostilities between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, a religious conflict that dates back to the first Muslim civil war and the Battle of Siffin in 657 AD which took place on the banks of the Euphrates river, in what is now Ar-Raqqah, Syria. Today we see how the conflict is again spreading from Syria to the rest of the Middle East in places like Tripoli in Libanon, Falludscha in Iraq and Sad'ah in Yemen. But how did it come to this?

The political upheavals across the region in 2011 and 2012 have caused seismic shifts in the geopolitics and the internal politics of the Arab world which will probably last for decades. The outcome of its dynamics is difficult to forecast as they are so tremendously different from what we have seen before in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Despite the expectations born of the uprisings, the outlook for the region looks much more butted for the future. With civil wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the Middle East stays a fragile region and won't be less prone to conflict in the future. A linear change to the end of history is hardly conceivable. The new multitude of possible conflicts as a consequence of the new political vacuum will rise to the level of threat to international security. Will it be the greatest threat? Maybe not. The greatest challenge? Quite likely.

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Sectarian battle between Sunnis and Shias at the Battle of Siffin

Although many of the oppressive regimes in the MENA region have been overthrown, the legacy of these autocratic regimes and their neopatrimonialism will remain for years. The transition process will be long; as such transitions have rarely gone smoothly anywhere. The quintessence and novelty of the revolts is that to a certain extent domestic politics now have more influence over the future of Arab societies than the interventions of external actors. This mixed blessing has also created the conditions for rising sectarianism by undermining the institutions that once kept them in check. The accumulated tensions and challenges of Arab societies have not been resolved yet. They were repressed artificially by autocratic regimes in the search for stability and now erupt in unpredictable ways.

A counterrevolution is already in full swing as Islamists and liberals, Shiite and Sunni groups confront each other trying to fill in the power gap created by the dynamics of the Arab Spring. Extremist non-state actors play and will play a more significant role, as the rise of Islamist groups such as *Al-Nusra* or the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL) in the confrontation with the regimes of Bashar al-Assad and Nuri al-Maliki demonstrates. Those violent non-state actors also have a vital role in Yemen where the state is not able to institutionalize its monopoly of violence and has to confront *Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula* (AQAP) and the *al-Houthi movement*.

The current situation with the military deadlock in Syria reflects that the multiple crises in the region are intersected and will raise new security challenges in the future. Global implications have been worsened as the international community has missed opportunities to influence regional outcomes in a positive way. With more than one hundred thousand deaths and up to three million refugees Syria is now the regional emblem for this failure. Its struggle heightens the atmosphere of general regional concern. The initial revolt with legitimate concerns has morphed into a civil war where well equipped fundamentalist groups tend to dominate the outcome of the

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revolution. After the possible fall of Assad there will be an internal clash between the sectarian groups over the future of Syria. Other consequences will follow as surrounding states are likely to intervene, supporting their preferred groups to succeed the Assad regime and making the conflict even more deadly. The spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon (already one-fourth of Lebanon's population consists of Syrian refugees) will threaten long-term stability in the country and will further increase the probability of violence perpetrated by in-group factions.

This potential strategic nightmare for the region reflects that the ramifications of the Arab Spring not only undermine the authority of autocratic regimes but also set free a renewed conflict over Arab and Islamic identity manifested by violent extremist groups. The two wars in Syria and Iraq, despite starting as political issues, have increasingly religious overtones with reviving the old Sunni-Shi'a rift that elevates the conflicts to a transnational affair. The fears of a broader sectarian conflict in the future would seem as overblown as they were a decade ago when only Iraq was in a state of sectarian chaos.

All in all a strong argument can be made that the Sunni-Shi'a divide is well on its way to become the primary challenge that the Islamic societies of the Middle East will be facing in the foreseeable future. The Gulf regimes' already tense relations with Iran have worsened on the basis of alleged Iranian interference inflaming sectarian tensions in Bahrain and across the wider region. The intrinsic factor of these accusations is the fact that the Arab Gulf states have long feared what they perceive as Iran's expansionist ambitions in the Gulf region. Iran's nuclear program and the United States' reluctance to intervene decisively are fueling this opposition. It is most likely that for any conflicts to come, other regional states will intervene along the Sunni-Shi'a fault line (whether it is artificial or not) and use non-state actors to pursue their goals. But in financing and supporting extremist combatants in Syria, Saudi Arabia and other states should well be aware of the devastating consequences. As the example of Pakistan demonstrates, siding with terrorist groups can be a double-edged sword.

This rather grim outlook concerning the stability of the region and the growing importance of extremist non-state actors is not born out of pessimism but should rather help to anticipate tomorrow's challenges for the international community.

Alexander Sami Lang ist Masterstudent der Internationalen Beziehungen an der WWU Münster und dem IEP Lille. Sein besonderes Interesse gilt der Untersuchung von Konflikten in der MENA-Region und der ambivalenten Rolle Pakistans im Kampf gegen den Terrorismus.

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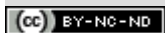- shabka.org
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