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The end of the Middle East as we know it?

Munich Security Conference 2015

Opening Remarks by Kofi Annan (source: <http://kofiannanfoundation.org/news-media/speeches>)

No region today better illustrates the central theme of this year's Munich Security Conference - the collapsing international order – than the Middle East. So it is fitting that it should be the focus of today's discussions.

I would like to briefly examine the factors - international, regional and local - that led to the current situation. I will conclude by sharing some thoughts on **how a more stable and secure Middle East can be achieved.**



I must caution, however, that there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. And there are limits to what outsiders can accomplish.

As we all know, the Middle East has been shaped as much by outside forces as internal dynamics, and I would like to briefly mention three that are often considered of primordial importance.

First, we have to acknowledge that today's problems stem in part from agreements concluded at the close of World War I, in which Britain and France carved out individual states from the debris of the Ottoman Empire.

The agreements have collectively been referred to by historian David Fromkin as "the peace to end all peace". They created artificial states, divorced from national, tribal or religious identities.

However, the modern problems of the Middle East cannot all be ascribed to the incongruity of the borders bequeathed by the victors of the First World War.

The second and much more proximate cause of the instability we are witnessing today was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I spoke against it at the time, and I am afraid my concerns have proved well-founded.

The folly of that fateful decision was compounded by post-invasion decisions. The wholesale disbandment of the security forces, among other measures poured hundreds of thousands of trained and disgruntled soldiers and policemen onto the streets.

Subsequently, the rush to create an instant democracy, as if elections sufficed in the absence of democratic tradition or sound institutions, ushered in corrupt, repressive and sectarian governance.

The country has been in the throes of insurgency ever since and the ensuing chaos has proved an ideal breeding ground for the Sunni radical groups that have now coalesced around the Islamic State label.

A third external factor that has helped to perpetuate the chaos is the inability of the Security Council to agree on a coherent strategy for Syria since 2011.

“Reluctant guardians” is indeed an apt description. The Council’s inability to craft and implement a common strategy to end the fighting is seriously undermining its role as the central pillar of the international security architecture.

Naturally, the members of the Security Council are not solely responsible for this state of affairs. As we all know, regional powers have also fuelled the conflict by providing funds, arms, training, military advisers or just free passage to one side or another.

The funding of individuals and organisations preaching religious intolerance has only worsened matters with the tacit complicity of some states in the region.

The protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has also played a deleterious role in the region. The failure of the parties to find a compromise that could lead to a two-state solution has weakened the pragmatic moderates and provided a ready rationale for the radicalisation of Muslim youth.

The continued expansion of settlements in occupied territory is making the search for durable peace ever more tenuous.

The final regional factor that needs to be mentioned is the so-called Arab Spring.

It was a turning point, but most countries in the region refused to turn. With the shining exception of Tunisia, the protest movements have been either crushed, bought off or hijacked. Governments are trying to put the genie back in the bottle.

But I don’t believe that the factors driving the Arab Spring can be indefinitely stifled.

This brings me to the domestic factors that are fundamental to understanding the region’s instability.

Ladies and gentlemen, one has only to read the UNDP’s Arab Human Development reports to understand the root cause of much instability in the region.

These remarkable documents, written by Arab scholars and policy-makers, describe a region that is beset by lack of freedom, bad governance, social and gender inequality, high population growth and large-scale youth unemployment.

Rather than tackling these problems, states in the region have for decades cracked down on their critics with the connivance of external powers anxious to preserve secure oil supplies and sell weapons. But we should not confuse repression with stability.

It was repression that led Muhammed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, to set himself alight in protest at an unjust state that deprived him not only of his livelihood, but also of his dignity.

Young people like Bouazizi, urban and connected, no longer accept the status quo. It is this demographic that provides the foot soldiers of the Islamic State and other terrorist movements in the region. When youth resentment meets radical Islamic ideology, the result is combustible.

This does not excuse, much less exonerate, the barbarous acts committed by such movements. But it does help to explain them and clarify what measures must be taken to counter them.

The Middle East has one of the oldest and richest histories in the world, which has left it with diverse populations. Today that diversity and pluralism are being extinguished by radical Islamism.

Yet the Islamic world's golden age, under the Abbasid Caliphate, was characterized by openness to new ideas, scientific inquiry and debate.

That caliphate was a far cry from the sectarian, obscurantist and violent entity that calls itself the caliphate today.

The radicals are leading the Middle East astray if they think that their ideology will restore the Muslim world's erstwhile greatness.

On the contrary, world history teaches us that closed societies decay. Open societies are the ones that prosper.

So what is to be done in this fraught situation?

It is worth recalling the settlement, known as the Peace of Westphalia, that brought to an end the 30-Years' War, which devastated much of central Europe in the seventeenth century.

In fact, the Peace of Westphalia was a series of agreements which determined not only that Protestant and Catholic could co-exist, but also resolved a number of dynastic and territorial disputes that had fuelled much of the warfare.

The moment is perhaps ripe for regional and international powers to finally realise the common danger they face and come together to stabilise the region, which is driven by sectarian, geopolitical and tribal fault-lines.

The powers must assume their responsibilities to address both the long-standing conflicts, and especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Sunni-Shia rivalry, as well as more recent threats like the rise of the so-called Islamic State and the myriad other groups operating in the region.

It is time for the international community and regional powers to stop working at cross purposes over Syria and Iraq. There was an opportunity in 2012, when the Geneva Communiqué was agreed. But at the time, individual signatories still believed they could get a better result separately.

Assad is still in power, however, and the expansion of the war has turned Syria and Iraq into a single military theatre, producing what the EC has termed “the largest humanitarian crisis the world has known since the Second World War”.

Today, it is evident that we have failed to staunch the bloodshed and stop the devastation.

As Special Joint Envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League, I had urged the creation of a core group of all concerned powers to come together to resolve this crisis. In my view, such a group is more needed than ever.

Fortunately, there has been international cooperation on other fronts in the region, such as P6+1 talks on Iran's nuclear aspirations. We should applaud their constructive and determined efforts to reach a solution and wish them all success. An agreement would be good for the region and the world at large

However, I must be clear: a military and diplomatic response to the progressive breakdown of order in the Middle East will not be enough. For lasting stability and prosperity, the countries of the region will also have to change from within.

They will have to show greater respect for, and grant greater freedoms to, their citizens, tolerate and even encourage pluralism and provide better skills and prospects to their youth.

Ladies and gentlemen, as Antonio Gramsci remarked "crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born."

I hope that the era of the autocratic security state is drawing to a close, but I fear the new order that must emerge is still being stifled.

I am convinced that the choice for the Middle East is not between the status quo and the Islamic State. I think it is between revolution of a Jihadi nature or more liberal evolution along the lines of the aspirations expressed during the Arab Spring.

In other words, for the Middle East to find genuine stability, not only will the international and regional powers need to co-operate effectively, but the states concerned will themselves have to undertake major domestic reforms to make their societies fairer, more inclusive and more open.

As I never get tired of saying, all healthy democratic societies rest on three pillars: Peace and security, Inclusive development, the rule of law and respect for human rights.



There can be no long-term security without development, and there can be no long-term development without security. And no society can long remain prosperous without the rule of law and respect for human rights.

The Middle East must adapt, change and build a future based on these three pillars. If it does so, then I believe the majority of the people of the Middle East will not be sorry to see the end of the Middle East as we have known it.