



# Expert Workshop – Europe and the Islamic World

Vienna, 6-8 June 2012

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Several important issues concerning the development of Sudan were addressed during a conference with Sudanese experts and officials as well as Austrian and European experts in May 2012 in Vienna. Firstly, the relations between the Arab World and Europe were discussed. In order to develop a mutually beneficial dialogue between the Arab World and Europe there need to be significant changes in the European approach and perceptions about the respective regions have to be questioned in order to achieve a dialogue on equal levels based on mutual respect. Secondly, the issue of the Arab Spring was addressed. A range of root causes were identified which lay at the bottom of most uprisings. Nevertheless, there is need for a more nuanced approach to the region without drawing overarching conclusions, as each country is in a unique situation and the uprisings were triggered by different events due to the country-specific social, political and economic settings. Thirdly, Sudanese issues were presented with a focus on the possibilities for cooperation between the South Sudan and the Sudan.*

In May 2012 the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (AIES) in cooperation with the Political Academy had the unique opportunity of hosting an expert conference with a large number of Sudanese experts and officials from a variety of different backgrounds – ranging from journalism and academia to administration and security studies. In several working groups issues such as the relationship between the European Union and the Arab world, the Arab Spring and also Sudanese affairs were discussed and the debate brought to light many fruitful insights.

## PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE AND THE ARAB WORLD

Against the background of the relations between the European Union and the Arab World it was asked how the existing differences between the two regions could be overcome. Firstly, the perceptions of the European Union and the picture of the Arab world need to be considered. In the Arab region there is a variety of different and very positive features which are associated with Europe – ranging from Europe being democratic and free, having a well developed economy, as well as being characterized by Christian and family values. The European political system is seen as being characterized by justice, participation as well as checks and balances. As the largest unified economy worldwide, Europe can serve as an inspiration for unity, also due to the fact that the Europeans have established a way of living together peacefully. Moreover, Europe is associated with the rule of law, with a serious approach to doing

business and with strategic thinking. But there are also less positive features identified with the European Union: There is a feeling prevalent from the Sudanese point of view that the EU has a stake in preventing the further development of the Arabic people and that the EU deals with the world from a very Eurocentric point of view which leads the European countries to believe that they can impose their will on other regions. Europe is still being associated with former colonizers and the Sudanese understand the European approach to be solely focused on modernisation as the only way forward for all other countries. Therefore, Europe focuses too much on the political side when dealing with the Arab world. Interestingly, no difference between the single European states is perceived, as they all seem to follow an overarching strategic pattern. Nevertheless, some difference can be detected between the European Union and other international actors. The United States is perceived to be more aggressive and reluctant to cooperate or involve locals in their dealings. The Chinese on the other hand are seen as being respectful and focused on business. Contrarily, in dealing with the Europeans the Sudanese detect that there is no focus on business, but that the European Union tries to use the prospect of business opportunities as incentives to improve the human rights situation in Arab countries.

From the Sudanese point of view the Arab World is characterized by significant differences between all countries, despite the fact that the people in the Arab World which are predominantly Muslims desire unity due to their shared language and



history of colonialism. Also the fact that most Arabs are Muslims is seen as an argument for greater unity among them. When asked about the perceptions of the Arab World in Europe much criticism was voiced about the distorted idea presented in international news media, which mainly focuses on bad news and on stories about violence and war. Moreover, a negative image of Muslims as terrorists was constructed after 9/11. Sudan itself is also believed to be seen as Muslim tribes killing Christians.

Despite – or rather because of – these difficulties which are due to the sometimes biased perceptions about the other region, it is crucial to address the question of how the relationship between the Arab World and Europe can be transformed into one characterized by mutual respect, equality, and fruitful debate. Firstly, it is necessary to acknowledge that both regions can gain something from the respective other. Europe could learn a lesson from Sudanese social life – specifically the centrality of family and the respect for elders. Secondly, the Europeans need to accept that people in other countries wish to determine their own future and Europe has to respect the decisions taken by those countries. Thirdly, the European support of autocrats around the world needs to stop because it undermines not only the European credibility on human rights but also because it is no viable strategy over the long haul. Fourthly, both sides need to respect each other and their differences. Finally, direct exchange of groups of students, officials or businessmen would not only decrease the level of misunderstandings but also contribute to change the perceptions among the rest of the populations which is not directly involved in the exchange. It is this opening of society to other influences which is most crucial, as humans are the most important capital a state has to offer.

## THE ARAB SPRING

Secondly, the conference provided for a unique opportunity to discuss the issue of the Arab Spring, as well as its effects on Sudan. Of central interest was the question whether the Arab Spring was over and there were strong arguments for the opposite: i.e. the Arab Spring was far from over and had only but started.

The various revolutions and uprisings in different Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, or Libya were deemed to continue until the root causes which led to said uprisings – referred to as the Arab Spring – were addressed to the satisfaction of the population. Those root causes were identified as the absence of democracy, rampant corruption, the lack of hope for better development as well as a large number of young people facing a future without opportunity, economic and political inequality, as well as a concentration of wealth among a small percentage of the population, the attempt of many autocrats to hand over power to their sons, the external support for authoritarian regimes from the United States or Europe, the suppressive security state in its entirety, and, finally, the fact that no solution for the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is in sight. Arguably, the list of grievances which led to the uprisings is extensive, but regardless it is not exhaustive, as there were many country-specific issues which led to those mass movements. More precisely, there were similar root causes which caused the uprisings but in each case some causes were more prominent than others and in each country additional causes influenced the situation.

Subsequently, each country faced very different challenges after the revolutions

or uprisings due to their specific setup. To highlight this point the situation in Egypt and Libya can be compared: While Egyptians feel a distinct sense of national pride in their country and its rich shared history, in Libya the population is very much divided along tribal and even more so geographical lines. After the revolutions Libya's national unity is challenged by separatist aspirations, but in Egypt such were far from being voiced. Another striking example is Bahrain where a Sunni minority rules over a majority of members of the Shia. The legitimate demands of the protesters were undermined by the accusation that the protest movement was sponsored by Iran and was only supported by the country's Shia population.

Not all Arab countries witnessed such widespread demonstrations as did Egypt. For example the King of Morocco, Mohammad VI, managed to prevent a full-blown revolution by introducing swift but limited reforms and by simultaneously nominating a new government. Nevertheless, during the conference it was stressed that further revolutions were still possible in all Arab countries because such limited reforms would only satiate the most urgent need for change but this, so the argument, did not change the fact that the root causes of the uprisings were left unaddressed. Thus, even countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia were not immune to the possibility of uprisings or at least wide spread demonstrations, although it needs to be mentioned that there are immense funds at the king's disposal to buy the people's consent in Saudi-Arabia.

Regardless of the emergence of future uprisings, turning back time to pre-revolution settings seems impossible because the culture of fear in those Arab countries was broken. So even if the changes in



society have not yet translated to the state system or to governmental level in some countries, the lessons learned and the experiences gained by the people involved in the uprisings cannot be undone. Nevertheless, one should not draw conclusions concerning the influence of the Arab Spring on Arab countries too soon. The developments set in motion by these events will influence the region for several decades to come.

There are also other factors that are often overlooked in current analyses. For example, the influence that the widespread uprisings had on the economies in those countries was detrimental. In Egypt the number of tourists declined significantly, in Libya the production of oil was disrupted and the strikes, which accompanied the demonstrations, also came at a heavy cost for some important industries. Regardless of the outcome of the transitions in the countries concerned, the effects on their economies further complicate any future transition or they will make it more difficult for authoritarian regimes to satiate their populations' basic needs.

Another factor which was crucial in determining the direction in which all Arab countries were likely to be heading is whether the relations between international actors and Islamic movements will be characterized by cooperation or by hostilities. Especially, the risk that the widespread fear of Islamic parties in Western countries might lead them to impose an embargo on governments led by Islamist parties – said conclusion was drawn with regard to the reactions of the United States and the European Union to the election of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian elections. Such an embargo might predetermine a failure of any government led by an Islamist party and, subsequently,

lead to more instability. On the contrary a cooperative approach might render Islamist parties more pragmatic and their opportunity to participate freely in politics could lead them to dismiss their extremist strategy to achieve higher eligibility.

Nevertheless, some lasting consequences of the Arab Spring may already be identified. One crucial difference in those countries that experienced an uprising is that their rulers would be held accountable for their actions. Arab regimes and governments would be subject to internal accountability as well as external pressure from the international community. Because people have learned how to voice their legitimate demands and due to the fact that they will be able to closely observe their governments' performances, governments will have to act more accountably in the future. External pressure was identified as having either a positive or negative effect: positive if the international community provides economic assistance but negative if the international community decides to isolate some of the newly elected governments or withdraw financial support.

#### **SUDAN**

Finally, the issue of Sudan and the question whether there was need for a Sudanese Spring was addressed. The prevalent opinion among the Sudanese officials was that a revolution had already taken place in Sudan some 20 years ago and that the beginnings of the Bashir regime represented a Sudanese Spring. Thus, today many challenges are already considered as being solved, e.g. political participation, free media and fair elections. The conflict between Sudan and South Sudan also probably stopped any possible revolutions today.

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