

Panel: Reordering the Middle East

Date/Time: Wednesday, April 29, 2015 / 10:45-12:00

Moderator: Jang Ji-Hyang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Salam Fayyad, Future for Palestine, Former Prime Minister of Palestine

Karen E. House, Pepperdine University

Kwon Hee-seog, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROK

Sinan Ulgen, Centre for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies

Session 3, titled “Reordering the Middle East”, focused on the range of issues currently undermining peace and stability in the Middle East. Panel moderator Dr. Jang Ji-Hyang, a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, began the debate by asking the speakers for their opinions on what are the most urgent or critical issues under the theme of reordering the Middle East. She then followed up with a question on the policy implications of said issues for East Asia.

The first speaker, Salam Fayyad, former Prime Minister of Palestine, admitted to being initially taken aback by the words “order” and the “Middle East” being in the same sentence. As he said: “When it comes to the Middle East, any derivative of order does not apply, for the region is in a constant state of turmoil and upheaval.” This chaotic situation is expected to continue into the future without a clear idea of an end. In response to Dr. Jang’s question, Dr. Fayyad emphasized that he could not uniformly apply certain features across the entire region. However, he was able to pinpoint two salient traits. The first was a deficit in good governance, meaning that the region was run by powerful figures within weak government structures. This lack of check and balances against executive power allowed a handful of strong men to have complete monopoly over the public space. Secondly, Dr. Fayyad brought up the deficit in opportunity. Exemplified by incredibly high rates of unemployment among youth and extreme poverty, much of this region is characterized by a lack of socioeconomic mobility.

In addition, to provide a better understanding of the context, Dr. Fayyad mentioned the deep sense of injustice and anger that is tied in with the region’s tumultuous history. Bringing up examples such as the Gulf War and the worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he stressed that many incidents or events that took place in the Middle East never received the appropriate attention or resolution; there was never an end. Consequently, one sees a rise of organizations that represent nothing but destruction and grotesque violence, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. Even worse, these groups are able to evoke pockets of sympathy and pity for they could be seen as physical manifestations of regional anger and feelings of injustice. As such, anything short of a serious resolve to address the issues at hand will not promote change.

Speaker Karen House, who is a professor at Pepperdine University, brought up the fundamental lack of interest in the Middle East as detrimental to America and the wider

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

SESSION SKETCH

Asan Plenum 2015: “Is the U.S. Back?”
www.asanplenum.org

community. This prevents the United States from engaging with the region in a productive and fruitful way and can lead to severe consequences. Using this point to voice her criticisms on Iran’s nuclear agreement, she lamented that the United States was narrowly concerned with trying to establish Iran as an unlikely partner without consideration of the ensuing consequences. In Mrs. House’s view, the Obama administration was mistaken in trying to replicate Nixon’s opening to China through diplomacy with Iran. The Iranian nuclear deal that emerged concedes too much by allowing Iran to continue its uranium enrichment programs, and its weak security dynamics empower the country’s hegemonic ambitions: “The winner of the Iran nuclear agreement is Iranian hegemony. The loser is U.S. credibility.” Consequently, she predicted that individual Middle Eastern countries will respond by more actively organizing for its own defense and influence in the region.

Speaker Kwon Hee-seog, Director-General of the African and Middle Eastern Affairs Bureau at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Korea, added to the conversation that the Middle East is undergoing a great transformation that has resulted in numerous transitional and new crises. While the nuclear deal with Iran may provide an opportunity for reordering the Middle East, for better or for worse, the outcomes are contingent on how Iran responds. On one hand, Iran can become expansionist and try to project its influence and assert its authority across the region. On the other hand, Iran could choose to act as a stabilizer and pacify the Shia belt, consolidating its leadership position in the Shiite world and balancing against Sunni powers and extremists such as ISIL and the Taliban.

Speaker Sinan Ulgen brought up the fact that the Middle East is in a deep crisis of legitimacy, which goes back for centuries. As he put it: “Countries in the Middle East were created by people drawing lines on a map.” Thus, building order to ensure lasting legitimacy is a tough task. In this vein, Dr. Ulgen explored the U.S. role in the Middle East. The first point he had to make in this regard was that the United States had to be humble and not upend a social order that can’t be built in a reasonable period of time. The United States should also reconsider the feasibility of state-building and recognize the differences from building legitimacy in Iraq; the United States can be at times blinded by these past experiences and try to apply them where they don’t fit. Moreover, Dr. Ulgen stressed that the international community can help mitigate the situation in the Middle East by relieving economic burdens and humanitarian crises. While little can be done from the outside to address the domestic turmoil from lack of authority and legitimacy, outside actors can address the spill-over effects.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.