Report of RTD on Deteriorating Middle East: Policy Options for Arab Leaders

MUSLIM Institute organized a Round Table Discussion titled "Deteriorating Middle East: Policy Options for Arab Leaders" on Thursday January 5, 2017 at National Library of Pakistan, Islamabad. Secretary General Motamar Al-Alam al-Islami & Leader of the House in Senate of Pakistan Senator Raja Zafar UlHaq chaired the session. Other speakers included Ambassador of Palestine His Excellency Mr. Walid Abu Ali, HoD Centre for Policy Studies, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Islamabad Ambassador (R) Ms. Fauzia Nasreen, Former Additional Secretary Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador (R) Ishtiaq H. Andrabi, Maj. Gen (R) Raza Muhammad, Ambassador (R) Javed Hafeez, President at International Centre for Democratic Transition Budapest, Hungary Ambassador (R) Dr. Istvan Gyarmati (via video link), Ambassador (R) Afzal Akbar Khan, Ambassador (R) Younis Khan, Former Federal Secretary, Pakistan Mr. Muhammad Faheem, Former Federal Secretary, Pakistan Mr. Javed Zafar, Former HoD, FCS, National Defence University Dr. Muhammad Khan, Professor of IR Yildirim Beyazit University, Turkey, Prof. Dr. Selcuk Colakoglu (via video link), Ambassador (R) Amir A. Shadani, Chartered Member of Institute of Logistics & Transportation, UK Dr. Hassan Yasir Malik, Correspondent of Aljazeera News A. R. Matar and Research Associate of MUSLIM Institute Mr. Usman Hasan shared their views on the occasion. Public Relations Coordinator MUSLIM Institute Mr. Tahir Mehmood moderated the proceedings of RTD.

Middle East region enjoys an eminent position in the comity of nations not only due to its geopolitical significance but also from a religious viewpoint. Major world religions have their origin in this region. It is also the home of the three holiest sites of the Muslims and inhibits more than 317 million Muslims. Middle East comprises oil-rich countries like Iran, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman, and Yemen. These countries possess 48% of the world's oil reserves and 38% of natural gas reserves. Middle East is facing contagious deterioration. Not to speak of the injustice of the colonial powers for creating artificial borders, even the Arab Leaders did not

retaliate. The region has become home to the proxy wars of world powers. Regional countries are further aggravating the situation while facilitating international players. Perpetual turmoil has resulted in a huge out flux of refugees. Apart from refugees, even the general populace prefers to migrate due to prevalent poor socioeconomic conditions and lack of opportunities. Contributing factors to the issue are extra-regional interests, Saudi Iran tensions, sectarian division in Middle East, growing ethnicity, effects of Iran-Iraq war, Arab spring, and struggle for power among Middle Eastern leaders. Non-state actors as well as international players of the conflict are fully exploiting weaknesses of Arab world.

The situation in the Middle East is indeed fast deteriorating and does not seem to have an end in near future. The region is surrounded by multiple conflicts and rivalries from the Palestinian territory to Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Each conflict is having different causes of its origin. One common dimension to these crises is that all of them have internal and external dimensions. The internal dimensions include relations between neighbouring states comprising ideological and ethnic division. In Iraq, there are the divisions between the Arabs and the Kurds as well as the ideological differences between the Sunni and the Shia. Similar divisions exist in Syria and Yemen. Every crisis in the region has to be looked upon with its own particular context. Civil war in Syria was a consequence of the Arab spring beginning with an uprising against the regime of Bashar-ul-Asad because of his failure to fulfil politico-economic promises of reforms. The problem is further compounded when each player in this war wants something different. The rebel groups supported by the US want to dislodge President Asad. While the Fatah al Sham (previously known as Al-Nusrah front) wants rule in Syria under its leadership. Russians are supporting Asad regime along with Iran and Hezbollah from Lebanon. Saudis are alarmed by the rise and success of Houthis in Yemen and believe that Houthis are being backed militarily by Iran. The Saudis have succeeded to some extent in Yemen; but in Syria Sunni militia and also Jabat al Nusrah, they have been strongly defeated by Russians and Syrians forces. ISIS has been defeated in Iraq as well as Syria. Apparently, it looks that non-state actors have been defeated but do we have a stable situation, we do not.

Middle East is passing through a very critical phase of its history. The main challenge faced by the Middle Eastern countries is essentially the inability of the Arab leaders to create unity among themselves. This is the sole impediment in the way forward. No doubt, Palestine is the core issue of the Middle East but, unfortunately, we have limited the conflict between Palestine and Israel. Palestine is the issue of the whole Arab and the whole Muslim Ummah. Only one option is available to Arab leaders that is to create unity among them. Close relations of Arab countries with Israel without resolving Palestine issue are in fact a big hurdle to resolve this issue.

Prevalent crisis is the result of internal and external problems; internal problems are the bad governance in some Arab countries and autocratic rulers, rampant corruption is also one of the reasons. International players want to exploit this region for their own geostrategic and geo-economic interests. Arab's internal weaknesses have provided them suitable environment to operate. Resultantly, they are fully exploiting the region for their vested interests. Middle East has a critical strategic location and has had so for centuries. Global geopolitical point of view emphasises that the interest of major powers have always determined the dynamics of the region. What we need to examine from a real-politic point of view is what the interests of global powers in the region are? Turbulence and instability has been a sort of the characteristic of the region because of so many competing and conflicting interests and the real-politic that has really dominated the policy of a number of countries involved in the crisis. Geographical boundaries and map of the Middle East has undergone simultaneous periodical adjustments and reshaping. It is quite evident from the policies pursued by ISIS that a movement is under process to redefine the boundaries of the region. The region had been home to old civilizations i.e. Syrian and Mesopotamian civilizations for centuries. It has also been home to major world religions. This is one of the reasons that the region has gone through intense strife and division. Location of important sea routes Suez Canal and Persian Gulf have been of great importance. Trade routes have always attracted the interest of the dominant powers. These factors continued to determine the policies of the major powers towards

the Middle East compounding intra-state dynamics and interstate relations.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the gulf between Iran and the Arab world has widened. Dramatically, it has a quite hurting dimension in terms of power struggle accentuated by sectarianism and trans-national nature of international connection and network. This trans-national nature of connection is of pivotal importance and is often overlooked. These non- state actors have connections with local politics. They wield influence on how power is being exercised by the domestic audience.

In this entire scenario with loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and deadly devastation in Middle East Arab leaders need to realize that in all these conflicts, proxy wars and civil war Arab world itself is burning and whatever will be the consequences of these battles the loser will be the Arabs. Therefore Arab leaders should realize the gravity of the situation and in best interest of whole region should come together on consensus for peaceful settlement of all these disputes and all world powers should also adhere to this unanimous settlement.

Recommendations

A list of salient recommendations extracted from discussion made in the RTD is as follows:

- It should be the prime responsibility of the Arab leaders to realise that the ultimate loser of the Middle East conflict shall be the Arab Muslims. Therefore, setting aside the ethnic and sectarian differences, a consensus should be evolved for the peaceful resolution of diverse and intertwined issues and conflicts in the Middle East.
- Domestic, regional and international aspects of the issues should be taken into account by Arab leadership for the peaceful settlement in the region and this unanimous regional solution should also be endorsed by all the international powers.
- Economic cooperation and mutual interdependence among Middle Eastern countries should be promoted by all the regional countries by putting aside the power struggle and by curtailing the drive for

ideological supremacy, so that the region can witness long term harmony, peace and stability.

- Muslim countries should go through the process of self-accountability and deep introspection in order to realize that geography, ethnicity and belief differences should not be our vulnerabilities. Instead, we should make sure that we are neither being exploited nor facilitating the exploiters. All the tools of exploitation like sectarian, ethnic and geographic differences should be addressed through mutual engagement and dialogue.
- Interaction among the Muslim Youth should be facilitated with the purpose of creating toleration, understanding, and harmony in Muslim countries and particularly in Middle East.
- Policy of non-interference in other countries, as endorsed by the UN Charter, should be strictly observed. Change of regime by external help and through violent means must be eschewed.
- Regional Muslim countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt and the other important Muslim countries like Malaysia and Indonesia should play proactive role for mediation, cooperation and support for bringing peace to the region and bridging the differences among Middle Eastern states.
- Palestine issue remains one of the core issues of the Middle East. The time has come for it to be resolved on the basis of the right of self-determination for lasting peace and stability in the region.
- The issue of millions of Muslim refugees, especially from Syria, should be dealt with collectively by the Muslim world. For this purpose a common fund should be established to support the refugees and look after their welfare.