



Report

Expert group meeting on protracted conflict and resilience in the Arab region Amman, 21-22 May 2015

Summary

The expert group meeting on protracted conflict dynamics and resilience in the Arab region was organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and held in Amman on 21 and 22 May 2015, in cooperation with the West Asia – North Africa Institute (WANA).

Participants from the academic world, the private sector, Governments, think tanks and the United Nations discussed the drivers, results of and responses to protracted conflict in the Arab region.

They concluded that there were ways of building the resilience of communities caught up in protracted fighting, resolving conflicts through negotiation and power sharing, and preparing for a more peaceful future.

The group argued for an interdisciplinary approach to programming and research and focused on the need to create employment for refugees and returnees, political power sharing, security sector reform, transitional justice and regional cooperation to address the spillover effects of conflict.

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Introduction

1. Conflict in the Arab region has resulted in severe loss of life, the displacement of thousands of families and disrupted livelihoods. Conflict, instability and occupation have a profound impact on socioeconomic development, including economic growth, health and education. At its mildest, conflict lowers quality of life, compromises the ability of people to lead their lives with dignity and undermines opportunities for sustainable development.
2. Occupation and internal conflicts in the Arab region also threaten the security and socioeconomic development of neighbouring countries.
3. Conflicts have become protracted in part by erosion of the rule of law, accountability, human rights and social justice; the failure or absence of reconciliation processes; and the propagation of an exclusivist and extreme religious discourse that cancels ‘the other’.
4. The aim of this meeting was to deepen understanding of the impact of conflict and violence in the region, and of the role of underdevelopment in amplifying its repercussions. Existing policies, theories and methodological tools used to respond to conflict were examined, as were ways of building resilience and ending protracted conflict.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The following recommendations were made at the meeting:
 - (a) A genuine reconciliation process based on universal principles must be launched if the Arab region is to emerge from the quagmire of conflict;
 - (b) Conflict-affected countries need to prepare to boost employment and training opportunities, especially for young people, when the post-war period starts;
 - (c) Conflict-affected countries should devise national development strategies, focusing on basic needs, infrastructure and construction, even as conflict is ongoing;
 - (d) Many of the drivers and results of conflict require regional strategies on water, refugees, development and trade, and violent groups like the so-called Islamic State and Al-Qaeda;
 - (e) Constitutions require reforms and mechanisms to ensure that such reforms are respected by all;
 - (f) Close attention must be paid to transitional justice and the rule-of-law, dealing simultaneously with key institutions like the judiciary, police and prison services, vetting personnel and ensuring that past violators do not remain in power, and developing broad-based reform strategies for these institutions;
 - (g) Successful peacebuilding requires the formation of power-sharing institutions among the major factions, including national unity Governments;
 - (h) Trust between citizens, Governments and regional institutions must be fostered;
 - (i) Adequate funding must match any regional commitment to tackle conflict;
 - (j) The neighbourhood effects of conflict should be seen as risk indicators for monitoring possible conflict contagion;
 - (k) Innovative solutions are required to address the refugee crisis, such as investing in mobile telephony and internet access, providing education, supporting community organizations in their efforts to

foster opportunities for economic self-reliance, and facilitating access to capital and international markets to boost the local economy;

(l) Efforts should be made in the early stages of recovery to support existing small businesses and involve them in relief activities, thereby boosting employment;

(m) The international community should help least developed countries (LDCs) to ward off potential conflict by preparing for possible external shocks such as oil price volatility, climate change and the spillover effects from neighbouring conflicts.

II. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

6. Participants in the meeting heard expert testimony on the conflict-development nexus in the Arab region and set up an expert reference group on the impact of conflict and violence. The following topics were discussed during the meeting:

(a) The developmental, environmental, social and external drivers of conflict in the Arab region;

(b) The neighbourhood effect of conflict;

(c) Global conflict patterns in middle-income countries with internationalized disputes;

(d) The global trend over time towards peace;

(e) Post-war recovery options, including power-sharing agreements and employment opportunities;

(f) The importance of starting reconciliation processes even before the cessation of hostilities;

(g) Incubating the post-war economy in neighbouring countries before conflicts have ceased;

(h) The flouting of international norms, such as those forbidding the use of chemical weapons or undermining neighbouring Governments;

(i) The relevance of the goals expressed by protesters during the Arab uprisings for regional strategies;

(j) Entrenched perceptions of victimhood, sectarianism, counterrevolution and external manipulation in the region that impede peacemaking;

(k) The situation of refugees across the region, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Yemen;

(l) Tools for 'peace advocates' using the quantification of the impact of conflict and violence on development and vice versa.

A. SESSION I

7. In session I, participants examined the causes of protracted conflict in the Arab region and how, through the neighbourhood effect, conflict patterns reinforce themselves. Spillover effects, such as refugee flows, were discussed.

8. The participants looked at the spread of narratives of vulnerability and victimization, as citizens of one country identified with the plight of co-religionists or co-ethnics in other countries, thereby increasing political tension and demands for intervention.

9. The collapse of the State in Iraq had created a vacuum in which a sectarian system had been implanted.

B. SESSION II

10. Participants discussed the impact of conflict on development and various conflict quantification methods. It was concluded that conflict and the scourge of high unemployment fuelled one another. Access to potable water deteriorated in times of war.

11. Policymakers should focus on fostering emergency employment opportunities in the post-war period. The 3x6 model of the United Nations Development Programme was discussed. Certain programmes provided for community reintegration and opening to international markets. There were opportunities for technical and ICT-based access to the international labour market.

C. SESSION III

12. LDCs afflicted by conflict in the region, especially in the Sudan and Yemen, were especially fragile. Representatives of the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Development States highlighted lessons learned from African countries making the transition from conflict to peace.

13. Factors contributing to a resolution of conflicts in Africa had included a minimum of foreign intervention in the post-conflict period; a regional initiative on conflict risk assessment, early warning and conflict prevention measures under the auspices of the African Union; and national ownership of the development process. More needed to be done globally to implement the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020.

14. Representatives from the Sudan said that the impact of fighting on socioeconomic development had been sharpened by economic sanctions imposed on the country. Representatives from Yemen said that food insecurity, instability and a failure to observe human rights in the country were major problems. The national dialogue process must be reinforced and more must be done to reach out to local communities, the living standards of which had deteriorated in spite of the dialogue. The country's woes were compounded by the failure to coordinate and properly distribute aid.

D. SESSION IV

15. Panels discussed means of building resilience and reversing the downward spiral of conflict, including national dialogue mechanisms, post-conflict justice, security sector reform, power sharing and job creation.

16. It was difficult to foster national dialogue in cases where conflict had become internationalized, as in Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. National leaders needed to be free of international pressures. Reform of the security forces was essential but exceedingly difficult to achieve, especially while conflicts continued. Successful power sharing and post-conflict justice required the kind of political will that might not currently be present in conflict-affected countries. Post-war Governments were usually weak, poorly resourced and contested.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

VENUE AND DATE

17. The meeting was held by ESCWA in Amman on 21 and 22 May 2015, in cooperation with the West Asia – North Africa Institute (WANA).

Annex*

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. ARAB STATES

A. UNIVERSITIES AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Mr. Paul Collier
Professor in Economics and Public Policy
Blavatnik School of Government
University of Oxford
Tel.: +44 (0) 1865 614361
E-mail: collierpa@bsg.ox.ac.uk

Mr. Alexander Betts
Leopold Muller associate professor in refugee and
forced migration studies
Director, Humanitarian Innovation Project,
Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford
Tel.: +44 (0) 1865 281727
Website: <http://www.alexanderbetts.com>
E-mail: alexander.betts@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Ms. Erica Harper
Executive Director, WANA Institute
Tel.: +962 6 46 44 407
Mobile: +962 79820 7045
Majlis El Hassan - Royal Palace
Amman, Jordan
E-mail: eharper@majliselhassan.org

Mr. Nader Kabbani
Director of Research and Policy
Silatech, Doha-Qatar
Office: +974 4499 4821
Mobile: +974 3349 5591
E-mail: nkabbani@silatech.com

Mr. Raghid El Solh
Independent Consultant and Writer
Tel.: +961-3-972793
Beirut, Lebanon
Tel.: +441-865-515621
Oxford, United Kingdom
E-mail: raghidelsoh@yahoo.com

Ms. Natasha Ezrow
Senior Lecturer
University of Essex
United Kingdom
Tel.: +44-07949094920
+44-1206 822057
E-mail: nmezrow@yahoo.com
nezrow@essex.ac.uk

Mr. Issandr El Amrani
North Africa Project Director
International Crisis Group
Mobile Morocco: +212-661-494-061
Mobile Egypt: +20-120-272-4030
E-mail: amrani@crisisgroup.org

Mr. Joost Hiltermann
Program Director, Middle East and North Africa
International Crisis Group
Brussels, Belgium
Tel.: +32-2-502-90-38
Mobile: +32-470-96-75-86
E-mail: jhiltermann@crisisgroup.org

Mr. Amr Abdalla
Senior Advisor on Policy Analysis & Research
Africa Peace and Security Program
Tel.: +251-1-245620
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
E-mail: a.abdalla@ipss-addis.org

Ms. Katleen Maes
Head, Gaza Sub-Office
OCHA, occupied Palestinian Territory
Tel.: +972 (0)8 288 70 77
Mobile: +972 (0) 54 331 18 26
+972 (0) 59 291 10 47
E-mail: maes@un.org

Mr. Peter Harling
Senior Adviser, Middle East
International Crisis Group
Beirut, Lebanon
Mobile: +961-78 999 407
E-mail: pharling@crisisgroup.org

* Issued as submitted.

Mr. Reinoud Leenders, Ph.D
Reader in International Politics and Middle East
Studies
King's College London
Department of War Studies
Tel.: +44-7970445986
Email: reinoud.leenders@kcl.ac.uk

Mr. Oumar Diallo
Special Assistant to the UN Under-Secretary-
General and High Representative
Office of the High Representative for the Least
Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing
Countries and Small Island Developing States
(OHRLLS) - New York, USA
Tel.: +1-212 963 1795
E-mail: dialloo@un.org

Ms. Malin Herwig
Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding
Programme Advisor for Arab States Regional Hub,
Amman
United Nations Development Programme
Mobile: +962-79-5015300
E-mail: malin.herwig@undp.org

Her Excellency Hooria Mashhour
Former Minister of Human Rights
Republic of Yemen
Mobile Yemen: +967-733214877
Mobile Lebanon: +961-76-611523
E-mail: hooriamash@yahoo.com

Mr. Ala Qasem
Project Management and Monitoring and
Evaluation Team Lead - The Executive Bureau
for the Acceleration of Aid Absorption and
Support for Policy Reforms
Republic of Yemen
Tel.: +251-944.137.257
E-mail: ala.qasem@ebyemen.org

Mr. Raja El Khalidi
Development Economist, Palestine
Research Associate
Bir Zeit University, Ramallah
E-mail: khalidirj@gmail.com

Mr. Zaid Al-Ali
Senior Adviser on Constitution Building
International Institute for Democracy and Electoral
Assistance – (International IDEA)
E-mail: zalali@idea.int

Ms. Shaden Khallaf
Senior Policy Officer - UNHCR Regional Bureau
for the Middle East and North Africa

Mr. Riad Kahwaji
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis
(INEGMA) - Dubai, UAE
Tel.: +971 4360 7244
E-mail: riadk@inegma.com

Dr. Neven Bondokji
Specialist in Peace Studies
Free lance consultant
Tel.: +61-416613404
E-mail: nevenbond@yahoo.com

Ms. Zena Ali-Ahmad
Country Director
UNDP Jordan
Tel.: +962-6-5100420
Mobile: +962-79-6764040
E-mail: zena.ali-ahmad@undp.org

Mr. Scott Gates, Ph.D
Professor of Political Science, NTNU
Director, Centre for the Study of Civil War
(CSCW)
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
Oslo, Norway
Mobile: +47 9164 8367
E-mail: scott@prio.no

Mr. Peter Salisbury
Independent Journalist, Analyst
UK Tel.: +44-7564159680
Yemen: +967-737595742
E-mail: altoflacoblanco@gmail.com
www.altoflacoblanco.com

Mr. Nidal Jurdi
Human Rights Officer, Office of the High
Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Beirut - Lebanon
Tel.: +961-1-962-547
Mobile: +961-3-599717
E-mail: njurdi@ohchr.org

Mr. Jalal Abdel-Latif
AU/NEPAD Support Team
Capacity Development Division
UN-Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Tel.: +251-11-544-3367
Mobile: +251-911-202760
E-mail: jabdel-latif@uneca.org

Mr. Karam Karam
Head of Research and Senior Researcher
Common Space Initiative
Beirut, Lebanon
Tel.: +961 1 980 284
Mobile: +961 3 066 850
Website: karam.karam@commonspaceinitiative.org
E-mail: karamkaram@yahoo.com

His Excellency Mr. Daffa-Alla Osman
Director General of bilateral and regional relations,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
The Sudan

Mr. Hussein Mohamed Eltoum Suliman
First inspector
Trade Information Centre
Ministry of Trade, Sudan
E-mail: hussny2015@gmail.com

Mr. Nart Dohjoka
Consultant, Science & Technology Diplomacy
ESCWA Technology Centre
Amman, Jordan
Tel.: +962-6-5343346
E-mail: nart.dohjoka@rss.jo

Mr. Sean D. Thomas
Research Fellow
WANA Institute – Amman, Jordan
Majlis El Hassan - Royal Palace
Tel.: +962 64649185
Mobile: +962 778433966
E-mail: sthomas@majliselhassan.org

Ms. Emily Hawley
Program Officer, Human Security
WANA Institute, Amman, Jordan
Majlis El Hassan - Royal Palace
Tel.: +962 6 464 9185
Mobile: +962 778433669
E-mail: ehawley@majliselhassan.org

B. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Mr. Abdallah Al-Dardari
Deputy Executive Secretary
Tel.: +961-1-978851
E-mail: aldardari@un.org

Mr. Tarik Alami
Director, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978616
E-mail: alamit@un.org

Mr. Adib Nehmeh
Regional Advisor, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978337
E-mail: nehmeh@un.org

Mr. Youssef Chaitani
Chief, Conflict, Occupation and Development
Section, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978619
E-mail: chaitani@un.org

Mr. Fernando Cantu-Bazaldua
First Economic Affairs Officer, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978620
E-mail: cantu@un.org

Ms. Valentina Calderon Mejia
Economic Affairs Officer, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978623
E-mail: calderonmejia@un.org

Mr. George Willcoxon
Economic Affairs Officer, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978604
E-mail: willcoxon@un.org

Ms. Sofia Palli
Associate Program Officer, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978621
E-mail: palli@un.org

Ms. Ghada J. Sinno
Administrative Assistant, ECRI
Tel.: +961-1-978823
E-mail: sinnog@un.org