The Challenge of Islamists

The goal of this working group was to give an overview over current US and EU policies towards the Muslim World and pose the questions, whether it would make sense to foster a dialogue with certain Islamist groups. Especially US, but also EU foreign policy has largely focused on Islamist groups with a global jihadist agenda and the global "war on terror". This tends to ignore the heterogeneous nature of Islamists groups as well as the complexities inherent in formulating policies towards them. To shed some light on these complexities participants agreed that the following questions should be answered:

- What are the main elements of policy debates towards the Muslim world in the US/EU (domestic factors, threat perceptions, geo-strategic interests)?
- What are the differences between Islamist groups operating (or even in government) within democracies and those active in authoritarian systems? Should this influence US/EU policies towards Islamist actors?
- Is there an "abuse" of Islam, i.e. does the religious dimension of conflicts sometimes overshadow other causes? Is there, on the other hand, a "use" of Islam for the peaceful transformation of conflicts?
- How could a shared US/EU agenda towards the Muslim World look like?

A preliminary remark. In the following report the term "Muslim World" is used to refer to a wide variety of regions and political entities. As participants pointed out, this is of course a simplification. However, the term is used here in the sense "the US" or "the West" are often used, i.e. as a convenient shortcut to describe parts of the world whose social and political set-up share certain characteristics, basically countries with a majority Muslim population.

Challenges for and Framing of Policies towards the Muslim World

The US perception of the Muslim world is still shaped by 9/11. Not only amongst so called "neo-cons" there is a desire to punish radical Islamists for the attacks on the US. However, US foreign policy towards the Muslim world is fragmented. Two reasons were cited for this apparent incoherence in US foreign policy. On the one hand, the question of Islamists radicalism intersects with important domestic debates (energy, security, integration of foreigner, spread of democracy). This leads to tensions and heated discussions. On the other, due to the fragmented character of the Muslim world and different threat perceptions there is uncertainty as to what exactly constitutes the Islamists challenge. Participants therefore identified six, sometimes conflicting, and major trends in US foreign policy towards the Muslim world. These are engagement, accommodation, negotiation, containment / isolation, confrontation and coordination. While all of US foreign policy is a balance of these elements they tend to be more unsettled in relations with the Muslim world. However, US foreign policy is definitely more complex than a simple "clash of civilizations".

As so often in foreign affairs the EU has no unified foreign policy towards the Muslim world either. However, participants noted that this could actually be an asset in this case. As the

"Muslim world" is a very heterogeneous group of state and non-state actors policies have to be continuously adapted. EU perception of the Muslim world is however flawed in seeing the religion of actors as their dominant identity trait. While this is more of a domestic problem it has clear implications for foreign policy.

EU foreign policy towards Islamists actors is mainly influenced by two factors: whether the Islamists are part of the government of the region or at least legally accepted and whether they are violent. This approach ignores the fact that a group illegal under an authoritarian regime is not necessarily wrong in its believes or methods. The EU should press for legalization of certain groups. Also, even violent actors should be spoken to as only this can bring about a change in their attitudes and methods. On the other hand, there is no clear definition of when a group is seen as violent. Since the EU is seen as less prone to clinging to double standards towards the Muslim world it should use this position to facilitate dialogue with Islamist actors. A balance has to be found between incentives and rules towards Islamist actors.

Dealing with Islamists in Muslim Democracies

Indonesia and Turkey were used as case studies for Islamist groups in Muslim democracies. Participants agreed that both countries were of special importance to the West, Indonesia primarily economically (however, the War on Terror makes the region strategically important for the US), Turkey primarily militarily. Both countries are marked by a military that traditionally acted as a balancing factor politically, but participants pointed out that in both countries the military seems to lose this function and now poses an obstacle to democratization. In Turkey the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) is in power and has moderated its religious tendencies with an eye towards EU membership. In Indonesia on the other hand, the radical Islamist movements are brutally suppressed. However, they are the only actors actively pursuing a social reform agenda and therefore enjoy wide support in the population. It seems doubtful, whether a peaceful transformation of the conflict in Indonesia is possible without some kind of dialogue with the Islamists.

Participants pointed out, that Islamist movements will only participate in democratic processes if there is a chance for actually changing something. Therefore, a containment policy towards Islamists actors will often lead to isolationism and hostility on their part, diminishing prospects for a peaceful and democratic solution. The case studies prove this as the Turkish Islamist party actually moderated its rhetoric and outlook when it was included in the political process. Indonesian Islamists on the other hand seem to continuously radicalize the more they are excluded from political participation.

Participants therefore concluded that US and EU policies should do more to include Islamist groups in the democratic processes of their regions. Also, participants pointed out that the "Islamic factor" should not be overrated. Islamist parties are perfectly willing to compromise as long as they feel there is a chance for success with their political agendas.

Political Participation of Islamists in Authoritarian Systems

Of course there are many Islamist groups active in countries where political participation is precluded simply because the respective countries are not democratic, here exemplified by Yemen. Or, as was the case in Morocco up to recently, authoritarian regimes may suppress Islamist movements. Participants discussed the relevance of Islamist actors for the peaceful transition of authoritarian systems and European and US policies towards Islamist movements and parties in authoritarian regimes.

While up to the 90s Morocco has was marked by a strategy of exclusion towards Islamists movements, since the 90s there has been a combination of different strategies and a more inclusive approach (also towards secular opposition) mainly motivated by fear of Algerian scenarios. This led to political inclusion (strongly monitored) of the smaller part of the Islamist movement. This has been answered by an appeasement strategy of those groups towards the regime. Both EU and US tend to view the regime as "democratizing" and reform oriented, and thus as a rather positive experience in the MENA. They differ in their approach towards the Islamists though. The EU ignores them, while the US increasingly treats the Islamists like any other of the oppositional actors. EU policies towards the region are dominated by France and Spain leading to a markedly anti-Islamist stance. It has however been noted, that the US often finds it easier to change its stance towards Islamists than the EU. Participants agreed that Morocco's Islamists are a realistic target for participation in an increasingly democratic regime. EU should therefore join US in support of Islamists. However, participants warned of the danger of cooptation of Islamist parties by authoritarian regimes.

Yemen is an authoritarian regime under the cover of democracy. Local Islamists are active politically and in providing social services, leading to high levels of support in the population. There is an unusually close cooperation between Islamists and secular oppositional parties in the region. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) supports moderates in the Islamist party and help foster cooperation with secular movements. Participants noted that supporting an Islamist/secular alliance is perhaps easier for EU and US than talking to the Islamists directly. Also, authoritarian regimes often operate by dividing their opposition. Alliances can therefore help to undermine such regimes. But it is often unclear, whether Islamist groups have really moderated themselves or just use the rhetoric to garner support from the West. This also led to the question, whether the goal of democratizing an authoritarian regime warrants supporting radical Islamists.

Participants agreed that there is often a lack of concrete information regarding the specific goals of Islamist movements. This not only makes it difficult to gauge whether to support them. It also prevents a clear estimate whether it would be preferable if Islamists came to power instead of the current regime. Therefore, the US and the EU should pool their resources to form a more coherent picture of the situation "on the ground".

Framing Conflicts and Policies: The Use and Abuse of Islam

Focus of this part of the workshop was the question, how Islam is "used" and "abused" either by groups in the region or by US and EU. Examples were Somalia and Sudan.

The United Islamic Courts (UIC) active in Somalia are not a unified block but are marked by different functions and perspectives. First, many of them have taken over functions that would normally be provided by an intact state. Secondly, there is a strong Islamist/nationalist current that is very political in its outlook. The idea here is to replace the fractured clan-system with a unified "umma" of believers. Finally, there are jihadist groups within the UIC, primarily active in combating the Ethiopian occupation force. In the region the UIC are seen as providing order and stability, however this comes at the cost of brutal repression in the name of an "Islamic" moral code.

EU and US stance towards Islamists in the region is marked by hostility. While the Ethiopian invasion was at first perceived as illegitimate, it is now seen as a stabilizing factor in the region. On the other hand the West supports the Transitional Government, while the population clearly does not. The population supports the UIC, which are seen as terrorist organizations by the West. This leads to an exclusion of the UIC as the Transitional Government is the only recognized partner in the region.

The problem with this approach is that the conflict is seen as political in the region but framed as religious by the EU and the US. The exclusion of the UIC and preference of the Transitional Government is perceived as illegitimate by the population and leads to a general distrust towards outside influence in the region. Perhaps the US should rather talk to the UIC instead of trying to build a functioning government with groups perceived as illegitimate in the region. However, participants noted that the clan-structure of Somalia makes it difficult to identify partners.

The conflict in Sudan is basically a conflict between center (Khartoum) and periphery. But it is framed in religious terms as membership of the ruling elite hinges on belonging to Islam. While northern Sudan claims outside interference as reason for the conflict, the south accuses the north of repression. US media portray the conflict as a religious conflict, also influencing foreign policy. Participants agreed that Islam plays almost no role in the conflict in Sudan, even though it is often cited as one of its underlying reasons. While there are Islamist groups in Somalia, religious differences are not the cause of the current conflict. Rather, they are used to mask a policy of repression by the center towards the periphery.

One interesting point mentioned was the active role China plays in the region, at least economically. While this does give China some leverage over the political elites, it has yet to use this in any way. On the other hand, participants agreed that it may be exactly this "neutral" approach that allows China to keep its influence in the region.

A final point raised was that failed states always pose the problem of identifying partners for dialogue and establishing frameworks for those dialogues. Therefore, it may be necessary to establish a forum for communication even before trying to identify who should be talked with.

A Shared US-EU Agenda towards the Muslim World?

In the final session participants drew conclusion from what had been discussed so far. Participants agreed that there should not be and indeed cannot be a single policy for addressing the variety of challenges, actors and countries that make up "the Islamists". However, it has become obvious that US and EU policies towards the Muslim World are often based on simplistic analysis of complex and overlapping conflicts, and do not make us of all policy instruments available.

While closer cooperation between the US and the EU is certainly necessary, this has to be tailored to each individual conflict. For example, democracy promotion would probably benefit more from coordination than cooperation. The EU still possesses greater credibility in the region as it was never so far involved in violent regime change. This perception could be compromised by closer EU-US cooperation. Also, the framework for cooperation has to be chosen carefully to avoid regional fears of imperialism (as, e.g., evoked by BMENA).

On the other hand closer coordination between donors is certainly a sensible approach, especially as regards information sharing and approach coordination. This is especially important as the US as well as the EU sometimes waver between democracy promotion and regime stabilization. This sends conflicting messages to region.

Instead of treating the symptoms of conflicts conflict resolution should be in the foreground when dealing with the Muslim World. State building, conflict prevention and resolution are vitally important. Especially because extremist and militant Islamists thrive on lack of governance, violent conflict and Western double standards. While closer coordination between the EU and the US may help in state and nation building, conflict resolution and stabilization call for a concerted effort including all relevant stakeholders.