

Conference Report



With the participation of the Bulgarian Foreign Minister and a number of Arab and foreign researchers, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies organised a conference in Sofia on the challenges of transformation in the countries of the Arab Spring, as well as the Balkans.

Between 13 and 15 December 2012, a number of researchers, professionals and academics specialising in the affairs of the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans met in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia and embarked on an exploration of the challenges of transformation facing the countries of the Arab Spring and the changes that had taken place in the Balkans two decades ago. Organised by the Al Jazeera Centre for Studies and New Bulgarian University, the conference was addressed on its last day by Bulgarian foreign minister Nikolay Mladenov.

The conference was opened on Wednesday, 13 December at the university headquarters and was attended by diplomats from Turkey, Palestine, Kuwait and Yemen, as well as representatives from the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. Among the attendants were a number of academics and students from other universities, as well as guests and speakers from among Turks, Bosnians, Arabs and Bulgarians. A team from Al Jazeera Balkans channel covered the event.

Day One

After the president of Sofia University, Plamen Boutckov, and the director of Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, Dr Salah Elzein, had been welcomed, discussions started off with Turkish political commentator and writer, Mustafa Akyol, presenting a paper focusing on the role of the revolutions of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Syria in refuting the arguments promoted by western researchers that the Islamic religion produces dictators and encourages subservience to them.

‘Until the beginning of the Arab Spring,’ he explained, ‘the region was teeming with dictators who had not come to power because of Islam. Most of them, such as Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, were secularists and were not inspired by Islam. Instead, the Islamist opposition were subjected to prosecution and repression.’

Akyol added, ‘With a cursory glance at the picture, we find that Islam did not produce dictators. In fact, it was the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that produced dictators,’ he said, pointing out that, ‘there is a political culture that facilitated that process and urged subservience to dictators.’

Akyol felt that the Arab Spring ‘came with a new reality’ and that the transition to democracy in Arab countries has started. But the question now is whether the new systems will take the form of liberal democracies or not.

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In the second lecture of the conference, Svetla Yaniva, lecturer at the New Bulgarian University, dealt with the theme of 'communication between the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa during the Ottoman era'. She said, 'Migratory movements within the Ottoman Empire were internal between the states that formed the empire, including the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa.' She added, 'Trade exchange between the various parts of the empire was of a higher priority trading with the outside.'

She further explained that, 'The Turkish city of Bursa was a main centre on the Silk Road and that Cairo markets were central to the North Africa region while cities like Aleppo, Beirut, Tripoli and Tunisia were located on the trade routes.' Yaniva maintained that there was a realistic possibility to reactivate the trade that existed in the Ottoman Empire between the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, especially with the diminishing role of borders in the twenty-first century and decreased tariffs between countries.

A young researcher from the New Bulgarian University, Dimitri Gujurov, presented a research paper on the beginnings of the enrolment of Bulgarian Muslim students at Al-Azhar Mosque, and confirmed that the process dated back to 1936, with nine students that were sent to the school at the expense of the Bulgarian state after coordination with the Egyptian consul in Istanbul. He said that they formed the nucleus of the religious elite of Bulgaria's Muslims.

The first day concluded with a discussion on the theme: 'The Balkans as a land of Christianity and Islam,' presented by Qani Nasimi, a lecturer at the University of Tetovo in Macedonia.

Nasimi said Balkan Muslims were a tolerated group among the people of the Balkans, and explained that the Ottoman Empire had been tolerant towards minorities that had lived within it. The Ottoman Empire was democratic, Nasimi said, adding that Albania, for example, had benefited from its existence within the Empire when the first administrative division in the history of Albania was implemented.

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Day Two

The second day saw strenuous discussions about Egypt, as the conference addressed that country's ongoing conflict on the new constitution and compared its era of transitional justice to that of the Balkans.

The first theme was posed by the founder of the Sharq Forum, Wadah Khanfar, in his opening argument. He said he had gone to Cairo in an effort to understand developments there in recent months and stressed that what was happening there was 'more of a political war than a political process'. Egypt, he argued, was highly polarised, 'because the president is backed by one trend and the other parties are challenging him in collaboration with remnants of the previous regime.' He called on Egyptian parties to end the state of division, recognise each other and 'accept a compromise'. He ruled out a deterioration into civil war.

Khanfar called attention to the fact that the region was witnessing the birth of a new elite that did not belong to the dominant blocs in Egypt and other countries of the Arab Spring, pointing out that this young elite – which uses social media – represents a new culture and talks about social justice and freedom.

In a presentation comparing transitional justice in Egypt and Bulgaria after the collapse of communism in the 1980s, Maria Petkova, a researcher at the University of Oxford, shed light on the trials of both ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Todor Zhivkov, the last communist leader in Sofia. She said analysis of the evolution of transitional justice in Egypt was necessary to evaluate the nature of the transformation that took place in the short term. She said she had chosen to compare the trial of Zhivkov to the prosecution of Mubarak because the former had subsequently been considered a failure of transitional justice. She commended the trial of Mubarak and the inclusion into it of his aides and his economic crimes.

In a paper on the role of major powers in regional conflicts, Al Jazeera journalist Karim Mejri touched on the US role in the Balkans. He noted that US intervention to end the war in Bosnia happened three years after it broke out. The Dayton Agreement, he added, was not a lasting solution to the Bosnian conflict but an attempt to 'stop the bleeding', after which a settlement strategy was to slowly be put into place. He said he had found in Bosnia and Herzegovina more ministers than anywhere else in the world, pointing out that there were ministers in the federal government, with more ministers in separate groups in the Bosnian-Croat and Serbian entities, in addition to local ministers in the ten cantons comprising Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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He scoffed at this inflated number of ministers in a state with a population of less than four million. He said the surplus ministers was historical, concluding that this was a similarity between the Middle East and the Balkans, in that solutions often come from the outside.

A researcher at the Turkish University of Galatasaray, Riyada Oimovich Akyol, presented another comparison between the delayed intervention of the international community in Bosnia and Syria. She said the situation in Syria was similar to that of Bosnia two decades ago, noting that the international community had again failed to take effective action. She also pointed to the international community's ignoring of the atrocities committed by Serbs. 'Had the United States intervened early, these atrocities would have not occurred,' she said.

Goran Milic, news and programmes director for Al Jazeera Balkans, which started from Sarajevo a year ago, spoke on the channel's performance and merits. He said it was the first real public channel that he had ever worked for throughout his journalistic career spanning four decades. He said the channel broadcast bulletins and programmes in the Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian languages and the language of Montenegro, and that fifty per cent of its programmes were regional while the other fifty per cent were of an international nature. He said the role of the channel was to focus on reconciliation between the peoples of the region.

Evaluation of Discussions

Before the conclusion of the conference, a number of participants embarked on an assessment of the problems and challenges of transition in the two regions. In a session where the experiences of transition in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa were explored, there were contributions by Bulgarian foreign minister Nikolay Mladenov, Director of the Brookings Doha Institute Salman Shaikh and Director of Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, Dr Salah Elzein.

Mladenov was of the view that to understand the similarities and differences between the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, one needed to identify the different driving forces behind the events in the various regions, as the forces in the Middle East were different to that of the Balkans. He added that the revolutions in the Arab world had broken out against corruption and were led by young people who wanted to have a say in determining the future of their countries and building a better economic future. He remarked that in the Arab world there was a desire to attain justice and reap its fruit, while in the Balkans the focus was on the problems of the economy and leadership.

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The Bulgarian minister concluded by saying that the Arab revolutions were demanding dignity, given that before their outbreak Arabs had been subservient to despotism and tyranny. It was commonly believed that Arabs could not become democratic because of their religion, similar to what was said earlier about the Bulgarian Orthodox, which has proven to be untrue.

Sheikh emphasised that the reason for the rise of Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa was because they were truly patriots. 'Attention at the end of the day should not be focused on the Islamic identity of the rulers but on whether pluralism has been achieved or not,' he said. He stressed the importance of determining how the Arab world would deal with minorities living within its boundaries, pointing out that what the displacement of Christians in Iraq was likely to be repeated with Syria's Christian population.

In his assessment of the conference, Elzein said the conference was a practical manifestation of the proposals that emerged from the Sofia Forum which was founded two years ago. He saw the conference as an opportunity for intellectuals from both regions to meet and deliberate on issues that concerned them, stressing the importance of the knowledge and conclusions drawn from the discussions.

Syrian representatives

Syrian delegates were present throughout the conference, and showed particular interest in the analysis of the experience of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995). The Syrian issue dominated the last day with different perspectives and comparative analyses were presented. There were particular comparisons made with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995).

During the discussion, the director of Brookings Doha, Salman Shaikh, asked: 'What will we have to do after the fall of Assad?' He called for the experiences of Bosnia and Kosovo to be referred to to ensure stability in Syria. He encouraged Bulgaria to play a role in Syria, given its knowledge of the Syrian people. 'This Balkan country,' he explained, 'could play a role in the transition and during the transformation and reconstruction.'

However, Bosnian ambassador Nusret Cancar issued a warning: 'Regarding the debate whether to interfere or not in the case of Syria, I am in favour of intervention, but it is important to know what kind of intervention is required.' He said, 'There exists on the ground formations whose objectives are not known. Besides that, it is not known what will happen in the next day after the fall of the Assad regime.'

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Also referring to Syria, Mladenov said, 'It is possible that regime collapse is likely to happen soon,' and called on the international community and international organisations to act, recalling that his country took the initiative at an early stage of the Syrian crisis to alert EU External Relations Commissioner Catherine Ashton of the situation. He said the reason there were only a few calls for intervention in Syria was the experiences of intervention in Iraq and Libya. The minister cautioned that there was concern over the fate of minorities in Syria, 'not because they are targeted, but because of the proliferation of arms,' and called for more assistance to areas liberated from regime control.

In a statement during a press conference held at the end of the conference, Mladenov said, 'We've entered the final stage of the regime of Assad, a stage which is more dangerous because the fall of this regime can lead to further acts of murder. The international community, including our country, should make every effort to help areas that are liberated from the control of the Assad regime and in support of the opposition coalition along with protecting ethnic minorities in several ways and by all means.'