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Panel Two:
The Middle East in a Crystal Ball: Trajectories and Predictions

- Seyed Kazim Sajjadpour, Deputy Foreign Minister & President of International Peace & Security Institute, Iran
- Maksim Maksimov, Russian Ambassador to Iraq
- Martin Huth, EU Ambassador to Iraq
- Galip Dalay, Al-Sharq Forum, Istanbul
- Tanya Gilly, Former MP, Iraqi Council of Representatives (Moderator)

In her introduction, panel chairman **Tanya Gilly** highlighted that Middle East history has long been marked by turmoil and transition. While the region is no stranger to overlapping and intractable conflicts, she emphasized that recent dynamics have introduced new complexities. Buffeted by competing regional and global entities, and littered with fragile and failing states, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has become fraught with militarization, mass population displacement, and communal fragmentation. Gilly explained that this panel would focus on recent geopolitical developments in Northern Syria, and that panelists would be pressed to consider how they might influence the next evolution of the Middle East to create an environment conducive to lasting peace.

Seyed Kazim Sajjadpour argued that strategies for remedying the situation in the Middle East include adjusting relations between key actors, building institutions, and changing the context. He noted that there is a multiplicity of actors in the Middle East at individual, local, state, regional, and global levels. United States policy, he emphasized, is a particular matter of concern due to its "chaotic" and "confused" nature under President Trump. If left unchecked, this policy may continue to "inject more instability" into the region. As an example, Sajjadpour noted that, while the United States ostensibly supports the solvency and sovereignty of the Iraqi government, its volatile responses toward situations involving Iran threaten the stability of Iraq. The "serious animosity" of the U.S. toward Iran, Sajjadpour contended, arises from the fact that Iran defends its own interests and contributes to peace and security in the region. In his view, the capacity and self-confidence of Iran disrupts an external agenda to impose feelings of inferiority and insecurity on the Middle East. He therefore argued that the Middle East needs less involvement from external actors, and more investment and capacity-building in local institutions to strengthen security throughout the region. Relations and institutions, he emphasized, must change the context. Moreover, any contextual changes must come organically from within, and not be imposed by outside entities. He discouraged the notion of "regime change" from the outside, as well as external interventions that interfere with the relationship between the state and individuals.

In order for necessary changes to be realized, Sajjadpour argued that the prevailing psychology in the region must be de-emotionalized and de-escalated. He emphasized that, while the Middle East has been "made to feel different," there is nothing essentially wrong with the region. What is needed is a "regional self-confidence" that the Middle East is capable of establishing security on its own. Sajjadpour also noted the importance of a sense of collectivity in order to achieve these objectives. "We have to live together, and we have to work together," he stated, urging all parties to collaborate on the development of a collective security environment throughout the region.

"We must work collectively toward a regional security." - Sajjadpour

When pressed on Iran's involvement within the region, as well as its alleged support of non-state actors, Sajjadpour clarified that he condemns the involvement of "extra-regional" players in the Middle East. Iranian involvement in Iraq, he explained, is at the behest of Iraqi authorities. He insisted, moreover, that Iran only works with individuals at the level of the state. Sajjadpour decried the "misconceptions" about his country; cautioned against engaging in simplification, reduction, and the blame game; and urged listeners to deconstruct the narratives that have been constructed for them. Iran is a friend to everyone

in Iraq, he stated, with no exceptions. Iran's agenda is security and prosperity not only for itself, but for all of its neighbors. He reminded listeners that Iran was first in the fight against the Islamic State (IS), and reiterated that Iranian security is linked to the security of everyone in the region. The important relationship between Iraq and Iran, therefore, must be managed to the benefit and interest of all.

Maksim Maksimov observed that future developments in the Middle East remain difficult to predict, as so much depends on whether global and regional actors act with appropriate responsibility and demonstrate sufficient interest in preserving the peace and security of this region. He highlighted the existing precedent of regional problems being addressed by interventionist decisions founded on faulty assumptions and inadequate background knowledge. He cited the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 as one example. The "irresponsible interference" of foreign players also had disastrous consequences in Libya, where the country was split in two and myriad militias emerged, and Syria, where the assistance of foreign fighters in the struggle against the regime led to the IS insurgency from 2011-2014. Maksimov condemned interventions that favor the "use of force," arguing that they spawn more conflict.

"It is important that global actors act responsibly toward the issues in the region." - Maksimov

With this in mind, Maksimov emphasized the importance of finding a peaceful solution for the conflicts in Syria. He noted that inappropriate interventions in this context could bring about serious damage to oil structures, create more refugees, disrupt ethnic and religious ties, and upset the military balance in the region. He therefore urged global actors to act responsibly. In particular, he cautioned against the involvement of those without legitimate concerns in the region. Turkey, Maksimov argued, has valid concerns over its own security due to its status as a neighboring country; the U.S., in contrast, does not have valid concerns in the region since it is several thousand kilometers away. It was the right decision for the U.S. to withdraw its forces from Syria, he contended, as foreign forces are not needed. He condemned the subsequent deployment of American troops to secure Syrian oil fields as a violation of international law. These resources should belong to the Syrian people, he argued, and the Syrian government should control all territories once it has stabilized.

When asked by the moderator to comment on the UN Syrian Constitutional Committee's exclusion of Kurdish constituents, Maksimov emphasized that Russia wants to see coexistence in the Syrian state. The rights of Syrian Kurds should be preserved, and their participation should be secured. He observed that governmental entities, political parties, and civil society organizations are included in the committee, which was designed to speed up the process of bringing peace to the region. He believes there should be no difference in how people are treated as a result of this committee's work. When asked whether Russia can play a larger role in supporting Syrian refugees, Maksimov stated that Russia has already embarked on the process of encouraging refugees to return to Syria. He added that Russia is making efforts to restore the living conditions that will incentivize return. This is not an easy process, however, as refugee numbers are quite high. He emphasized that the international community, and particularly the UN, should be contributing to these efforts.

Martin Huth began his remarks by expressing shock and dismay over the recent events in Baghdad. These protests, he explained, are evidence of Iraqis uniting over similar concerns and demands in reaction to the silence and paralysis of the Iraqi government. Iraqi young people in particular, regardless of affiliation, understand that existing problems are not inevitable but are the result of politics. Huth observed that the proverbial "onion" of Middle East politics must be peeled in order to understand the root causes of conflict. In the case of these protests, the causes are largely socioeconomic; when Iraq should be booming, protestors remain frustrated by persistent unemployment, inadequate services, and rampant corruption. The protests are emblematic of public distrust and dissatisfaction over chronic mismanagement and the deterioration of the social contract; they require non-violence and dialogue.

Huth opined that governmental and regional power brokers, not the populace, are responsible for much of the dysfunction in the Middle East. He challenged his fellow panelists from Iran and Russia, claiming that a "19th century attitude" remains alive in governments, nations, and regional states. In Huth's opinion, Iran's legacy in the Middle East is marked by opportunistic foreign policy; he noted that the U.S. withdrawal from Syria has provided one such opportunity. Russia, he explained, is also involved militarily in Syria. It is clear, therefore, where the locus of responsibility lies. He pressed his fellow panelists to detail the social, economic, and cultural contours of their respective agendas, beyond notions of power and control, and to establish the legitimacy of their foreign policy positions. He reminded listeners that power and sovereignty are not privileges, but obligations and responsibilities.

"Power and control entail responsibility. They are obligations, not just privileges." - Huth

Huth recommended that regional entities build institutions, form real political parties rather than confessional clubs, work on the notion of citizenship, work on the economy, and focus on bringing people together. Questioned on the inclusion of women in the peacebuilding process, Huth explained that "stability" in this region is often defined by a strong security focus. He criticized this conceptualization of stability as a static model, and argued that lasting stability can only be achieved through a dynamic approach, which entails constant dialogue about the common good at the political and social levels. Conversation about the common good, he emphasized, must be inclusive. Women's presence and participation is absolutely essential to this process.

Ghalip Dalay denied that the Middle East is in a "post-crisis" era. To substantiate his perspective, he mentioned the inevitable impacts of climate change and water scarcity on interstate relations. He also traced patterns of increasing militarization across the region, and noted that defense frequently receives the highest percentage of GDP spending, a trend that is deeply concerning for the future of the Middle East. In this context, he highlighted the recent proliferation of issue-based alliances, which are founded on common concerns rather than shared interests. Domestic and regional orders, he argued, lack a legitimate social contract. This not only generates tension between authorities and the people, but also sows suspicion between neighboring entities who cannot be trusted to create sustainable relations. All of this contributes to an ongoing cycle of transition, in which multiple actors seek to increase the relative weight of regional powers in order to vie for political control.

This vacillating balance of power between state and non-state actors prevents the Middle East from successfully entering the post-crisis era.

"Most powers are prisoners of their own insecurities and yesterday's struggles." – Dalay

According to Dalay, a polycentric perspective is required. Current nation-building projects present an ideological crisis, as individual states fail to advance a regional vision that can work for all. The domestic and regional levels are far more linked than people realize, and states cannot afford to lose sight of that critical nexus. Viable security within the region cannot be premised on excluding or constraining one power or another, and it is impossible to have sustainable security in the gulf without including Iran and Iraq. Therefore, the idea of inclusivity should be at the center of any regional security strategy. Until a polycentric perspective is adopted, the search for a new regional social contract will continue.

Dalay added that "stability," in the context of the Middle East, has traditionally meant the success of the state at the expense of the people. Lasting stability cannot be achieved in this manner, as it fails to secure the common good and deepens the grievances of the populace. Authoritarian suppression has been marketed to the public under the guise of stability, he observed, but this will no longer work. A new political psychology has emerged, one which recognizes that there will be no stability without transformation. Regional powers must frame a vision for the future that factors people in.

"Stagnation at the expense of transformation is an ill-conceived concept." – Dalay