

WEG Roundtable

Middle East Security Scenarios

Dec 15 2015

Held in the Council Room, King's College, London

Sponsored by Trends think-tanks of Abu Dhabi

Chaired by Lord Howell, chairman of WEG.

Points Arising:

- *Syria talks in Vienna potentially changing dynamic with figures such as Sarkozy visiting Damascus opening debate on role of Assad regime. Inclusion of Iran in talks is a significant development with growing hope of finding multi-party framework.*
- *Announcement of a pan-Arab multi-national commitment to combat ISIS is positive but not likely to lead to more boots on the ground.*
- *Missing at present at other players such as the Japanese and Chinese who have extensive middle East security concerns.*
- *Need to stabilise Syria because of risk of insecurity spreading to other countries such as Tunisia and ISIS building a power-base in other insecure countries such as Libya.*
- *On-going concern for Europe is the massive number of refugees which is causing political uncertainty over the effectiveness of the EU to protect its borders.*
- *There are equal concerns that radicalised youth may return having picked up terrorism skills as seen in Paris that is proving difficult to monitor due to numbers and growing sophistication among extremists.*
- *UN peace-keeping force may be part of eventual settlement but UN will not be able to impose peace.*
- *Religion has become politicised and is being used by groups with separate political ambitions.*
- *ISIS extremists call on an interpretation of the Koran that came hundreds of years after the Prophet. However it remains a legitimate interpretation of Islam and seen by its advocates as the only interpretation.*
- *At a time when national states are losing their power ISIS has used social media effectively to recruit across a spectrum of youthful idealists. Challenge is to counter these messages.*
- *Reformation in the Christian church led to massive loss of life and took many years to resolve and the current Sunni-Shia battle could be equally hard-fought.*
- *Iran has a siege mentality seeing neighbours and those in the West*

conspiring against it. Although seen as a religious state the country has many young who do not support the hard-line ayatollahs. Removal of sanctions depends on Iran meeting the nuclear obligations to remove bomb-making capability.

- *Expectations of a boom in investment and trade are over-optimistic. US is retaining its terrorism sanctions and this will discourage large banks from becoming involved because of their US dollar exposure.*
- *Saudi has been funding some of the more Wahhabi form of Islam. However ISIS is a threat to the House of Saud which ISIS would like to incorporate within its wider caliphate ambitions.*
- *Low energy prices are causing problems for Middle East energy producers who cannot sustain their high level of subsidies for their domestic populations. Taxation is therefore planned in the gulf and even Aramco is looking at private finance for some of its infrastructure needs.*
- *2016 likely to be even more uncertain than at present.*