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## THE FUTURE OF THE MIDDLE EAST: understanding conflict, building peace

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*"The future of the Middle East: understanding conflict, building peace" was the subject of the 23rd edition of the "War and Peace in the 21st Century" conference, held in Barcelona on April 5th, 2025. Organised by CIDOB and supported by "La Caixa" Foundation, Barcelona City Council and the rest of the CIDOB board, the conference provided expert insights to address the roots of conflict in the Middle East and its international dimension. It examined how the international community can promote dialogue and solutions for a lasting peace and which future scenarios can be envisaged for the region after the current crisis.*

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Already one of the most complex regions in the world, the Middle East has recently entered a new phase of conflict, marked by an unprecedented level of violence, sociopolitical instability and regional power shifts. A year and a half after the Hamas terrorist attacks that triggered Israel's disproportionate response, the region is coping with both a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the spillover effects of the conflict into Lebanon. Moreover, the unpredictability of US policies following Donald Trump's re-election and the challenges posed by the new sociopolitical trajectory of post-Assad Syria add further complexity to this equation. In this context, CIDOB's Annual Conference aimed not only to identify the roots of conflict in the Middle East but also to envisage possible frameworks of dialogue and post-conflict solutions. The War and Peace Conference was the most successful so far in terms of the number of participants and, for the first time in more than 20 editions, over 200 people attended the event.

In his opening address, **Jaume Collboni** (Mayor of Barcelona) emphasised that, although today's world has entered a spiral of uncertainty and conflict, forums of dialogue remain crucial tools for creating various forms of international cooperation. Recalling the spirit of the Barcelona Process for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the diplomatic initiative of Barcelona as a city that

promotes peace, the mayor also highlighted the role of city-to-city diplomacy in supplementing state efforts and overcoming historical cleavages to move towards concrete solutions.

In his first public event as recently elected President of CIDOB's Board, **Josep Borrell**, former EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, highlighted the importance of the institution as a producer of high-quality research and provider of innovative ideas for policymakers. He noted that "war and peace seem to be the hallmarks of our time", since conflicts and instability surround Europe's eastern and southern borders. Borrell also suggested that, instead of being driven by the erraticism of the Trump administration, the EU should engage more directly in the Middle East to develop sustainable peace deals and to counter its image as a player adopting double standards in its external policies.

### **The Middle East at a crossroads: understanding the roots of conflict**

The first panel, moderated by **Ángeles Espinosa** (former Middle East Correspondent for El PAÍS), aimed to connect the historical origins of (geo)political

conflicts with today's current issues and developments. Espinosa highlighted the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the danger of the conflict spreading to Lebanon and Syria, asking why peace in the region is so difficult and whether the two-state solution is still possible.

The panel was opened by **Avi Gil** (Director General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2001-2002), who underlined how the October 7<sup>th</sup> events represent a "national trauma" for Israel, in a way that even those factions traditionally more inclined to support peace processes lost their hold and confidence. Despite recognising the differences between the more cooperative atmosphere at the time of the Oslo Accords, when both sides had leaderships willing to take risks to achieve peace and change came "from within", he listed several factors that make it difficult to establish a framework for negotiation nowadays, such as internal divisions on both sides or the lack of strong leadership. Gil also emphasised that, from the Israeli side, the dynamics of the nature of the conflict have shifted from a perception of the conflict as conventional to an existential one. He concluded by once again highlighting the need for a commitment from external actors such as the EU in the pursuit of peace and creating new forms of cooperation throughout the whole region.

but subjects of a dictatorial regime". Kawakibi also stressed that although the fall of the Assad regime in Syria was a surprise for Europeans, it was not so for Syrians, who had witnessed the regime's decline since 2018. Regarding recent developments, although accounting for the imperfections of the new constitution, he stressed the importance of respecting "the people's will" and supporting Al-Sharaa's government to prevent radical factions from gaining more influence and called on the government to establish a true national dialogue. Kawakibi also suggested that to avoid reinforcing sectarian divisions external actors should support active citizenship practices rather than framing developments as issues dependent on "minority issues". Reflecting on the EU's priorities in the country over the years, which were stability, counter-terrorism policies and immigration control, with no attention to human rights and democracy, he said that the same has happened in Gaza. Finally, he highlighted the two main threats to Syria's immediate future: the radical factions within Ahmed Al-Sharaa's government and the attacks from Israel that have destroyed the Syrian army and made the country weak.

**Mirette F. Mabrouk** (Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute) remarked on the lack of understanding about the complexities guiding Egypt's regional policies. In her view, its current moves are determined both by the post-

## The tendency to segregate conflicts in the Middle East prevents a real understanding of regional conflicts, making it imperative to develop a broad multilateral discussion

From the Palestinian side, **Omar Shaban** (Founder and Director of PalThink for Strategic Studies) went beyond the roots of the conflict and highlighted two main points: enforcement of the law to make Israel comply with its humanitarian obligations towards Gaza; and the importance of addressing the need for a leadership change to represent Palestinians' rights and voice. He denounced that the war in Gaza is not against Hamas but against the Palestinian national project. Shaban said that it is a matter of the utmost urgency to stop the war and allow humanitarian aid to reach the area so that the Strip can be rebuilt and elections can be held; the Palestinian people can then freely decide their future, recalling that the last elections in Gaza were in 2006. Finally, he stated that, although the Palestinians have lost faith in the international community, they still trust in the role of the European Union to help end the conflict.

Broadening the focus on the region, **Salam Kawakibi** (Director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies) elaborated on the pillars for a stable sociopolitical transition in Syria. Recalling the 55 years of the Assad dynasty, he said that "Syrians have not been free citizens

1979 peace realities and its national security interests, which are evident in its attempts at normalisation with Israel and the fact that its support and empathy for Palestinian rights do not translate into support of Hamas. Regarding the issue of Palestinian refugees, she emphasised that it is not only a political issue but also a security matter. Concerning the Gaza Strip reconstruction plan proposed by Egypt, she criticised the lack of plans for the disarmament of Hamas, which means it will never be accepted by Israel and the United States. Finally, she warned of the risk of doing nothing to end the conflict, recalling other episodes from the 20<sup>th</sup> century where similar inaction led to disastrous consequences.

The subsequent discussion between the speakers concentrated on the extent to which it is necessary to disentangle the rights of Palestinians from Hamas's actions and objectives. While for some Hamas should transform into a political party through the support of actors like Turkey, others advocated for cutting any funds to Hamas and paving the way for the creation of a "third party" that could broadly and genuinely represent Palestinians. In that regard the need to update

the regulation of political parties in Palestine to establish a framework where different movements and factions can defend their interests through politics was also highlighted. Finally, other voices called for respect for international law and championed Palestine's right to control its resources.

### **The international dimension and its contribution to lasting peace**

The second panel, moderated by **Natalia Sancha** (Journalist and Political Analyst), expanded the debate to the international actors' roles and goals, as well as their possible contribution to a sustainable peace in the region. In that regard Sancha decried the lack of credibility that the EU has today in the eyes of the Global South due to the double standards shown in the conflicts of Ukraine and Gaza. Sancha also emphasised the need to focus the analysis not solely on the role of governmental elites, but also to talk about the citizens, the true heroes of past mass demonstrations such as the Arab Spring. Additionally, Sancha highlighted the need to include other actors in the region, such as Iran, in the analysis.

its own influence in the south of the country. Moreover, describing the current Lebanese government as "perfect within an imperfect situation", he depicted a situation in which the US might think to transfer funds to stabilise the country from internal actors such as the Lebanese National Army to external ones like Saudi Arabia. Hage Ali also focused on Lebanon's delicate economic situation and the urgent reconstruction of the country, for which external economic aid is necessary. In that regard he pointed out that external donors demand fiscal and banking sector reforms, as well as the disarmament of Hezbollah.

**Sanam Vakil** (Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House) urged looking at the region through the lenses of "challenges and opportunities" rather than as one of "winners and losers". She stressed that the current regional order is shaped by regional competition and a multi-alignment strategy that increases the level of uncertainty. The tendency to segregate conflicts in the Middle East prevents a real understanding of regional conflicts, making it imperative to develop a broad multilateral discussion. Vakil also highlighted that the security approach in the region should be based on an inclusive regional order rather than an exclusive one, as the

## **Greater EU involvement in the region is desirable, taking advantage of the void left by the US, as is the importance of developing initiatives from both political actors and civil society to advance dialogue and negotiation**

In the first contribution to the panel, **Merissa Khurma** (Non-Resident Fellow at Baker Institute, Rice University) noted that despite the October 7<sup>th</sup> events leading the US to partially re-engage more directly with the Middle East after years of diplomatic disengagement, its policies remain primarily driven by a "crisis mood", in which the focus is security rather than "the absence of violence". Indeed, of the United States' policy centred on the three Ds – Defence, Diplomacy and Development – only Defence remains prominent today, primarily manifested as the projection of American power through its military apparatus. Moreover, there is no clearly defined strategic peace plan from the US, nor any mention of the two-state solution. She also highlighted how Iran still retains significant influence over Washington's strategic actions, but also how the new Trump administration operates through a risky and transactional approach based on the principle of "peace through strength". Finally, Khurma mentioned that Europe and other actors can take advantage of the lack of US support for civil society in the region.

latter has proven ineffective in the past. Finally, regarding Iran, she pointed to the imminent nuclear negotiation as a major challenge, whose success or failure could have a significant impact on the region's security. However, compared to previous watershed periods she sees the opportunity for regional powers to lead the establishment of a new order, which could work only if security imperatives and governance models do not exclude any player a priori because of ideological or historical divergences.

**Gérard Araud** (Distinguished Fellow with the Europe Center, Atlantic Council) highlighted that any plan for peace and stability should consider the realities of the "war on the ground". On the one hand, he noted that Israel's ultimate goals in the region remain unclear and that this increases the likelihood of dangerous escalations, as in the case of its growing competition with Turkey in Syria. Regarding external influence in the region, he lamented the lack of a unified EU position on the Middle East, which weakens it and renders it uninfluential. As for the US, its short-term interest seems to be to expand the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia. Faced with the US's hectic behaviour, he stressed the importance of Europe engaging in Middle Eastern affairs more decisively, through both its own diplomatic and political support and eventual cooperation with regional actors.

**Mohanad Hage Ali** (Deputy Director for Research at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center) delved into the highly unstable situation in Lebanon. He stressed that Israel's decision to widen the scope of the conflict is linked to its main goals of curbing Hezbollah and expanding

However, the reality today is that there are no external forces capable of forcing a short-term negotiation, he said. He concluded by saying that the conflict is entrenched because Palestine is divided and Israel, immersed in what he described as a “political earthquake”, does not want to negotiate, adding that the only possible change may come from the capacity of Israeli democracy to bring about a new political scenario.

The final discussion between the speakers covered five main topics. First, the participants agreed on the need to avoid previous mistakes made in deals like the Abraham Accords, which were not only driven by a short-term vision but also excluded the Palestinian issue from the negotiations. Second, a more visible inclusion of public opinion in the decision-making process was deemed extremely important in preventing and reducing issues of ideological divisions, sectarian partisanship and radicalisation. Third, beyond mere high-level politics, many of the speakers recalled the importance of relying on and boosting people-to-people connections to build a sustainable and durable peace. Fourth, concern was expressed about the radicalisation in the area, fuelled by the cruelty of the conflict. Lastly, the possibility of greater EU involvement in the region was emphasised, taking advantage of the void left by the US, as was the importance of developing initiatives from both political actors and civil society to advance dialogue and negotiation.

During the discussion with the audience, the following issues were raised: the importance of respecting international public law; Egypt’s ability to withstand US pressure in the conflict; the significant role of civil society throughout the region, noting that the EU can influence and help its development, especially at a time when the West is losing the battle for public opinion, particularly in the Global South; the idea that civil society initiatives must translate into real political action; and the disarmament of violent groups, stressing the importance of accompanying these processes with their transition into the political arena.

In his concluding remarks, **Pol Morillas** (Director of CIDOB) elucidated the dichotomies characterising the current Middle Eastern order and the approaches of several regional and international actors. For instance, he highlighted the need to think about politics after conflict and to view strong political leaders and civil society as complementary forces. Considering the case of Europe’s stance amidst war and peace dilemmas and acknowledging that Europe’s influence has diminished in recent years, he also stressed the importance of questioning the internal and external legitimisation of those actors involved in conflicts and whether their resolution should be “particular and specific” or based on building a new regional architecture. Furthermore, reflecting on possible solutions, he asked whether they should be based on tactical victories or on longer-term strategic objectives. Finally, he also addressed the challenge of how the current fragmentation – both regionally and globally – can coexist

with the effort to build a new regional order in the Middle East. With all these questions on the table, Morillas concluded by warning that “the more we understand the conflict, the harder it becomes to envision peace”.

The conference was concluded by **Jaume Duch** (Minister for European Union and Foreign Action of the Government of Catalonia), who said that spaces for dialogue are more necessary than ever in the current international context, characterised by conflicts, instability and an unwillingness to find peaceful solutions. Specifically, finding avenues for dialogue and negotiation requires a deep understanding of conflicts to provide tools that help governments make well-informed decisions. He said that foreign policies should be based on evidence, thorough knowledge and a willingness to listen to all parties involved. Finally, he stressed that in the current international context it is essential to strengthen the European Union and develop prosperity policies based on inclusive strategies.