



NACIRI: “THE FUTURE OF THE REGION DEPENDS ON THE ANSWERS GIVEN BY LOCAL CONSTITUENTS TO CHANGING STATUS QUO”

An Interview with H.E. Ambassador Mohamed El Fatah
NACIRI, Arab League’s Representative in Turkey



H.E. Ambassador Mohamed El Fatah NACIRI has been serving as Head of Mission of the League of Arab States to Ankara since February 2010. In 1968 he has acquired a Bachelor of Political Sciences at Cairo University and has obtained his M.B.A. at Arab Academy for Science and Technology. Before Turkey, he was head of the Mission of the League of Arab States to Spain. He has occupied several posts as Assistant Director of the European Department and the Department of the Americas, Director of Asia and Eastern Europe, Director of the International Organizations and responsible of the disarmament desk at the General Secretariat of The League of Arab States.

He has started his career as financial analyst and observer member of the Central Credit Committee for the Banque Central Populaire of Casablanca, Morocco. In addition to his mother language Arabic, Ambassador Mohamed El Fatah Naciri is speaking fluent English and French and moderate Spanish. He is married with two children.

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ORSAM: We would like to first thank you for accepting us. We would like to talk about the security dynamics in the Middle East and how the region's security structure is being reshaped, as a result of different developments in recent months, but also especially after the so called Arab Spring process. To start with, how do you see the direction of the regional environment, the security environment in the Middle East and what are the main trends or the main forces in the region that effect the overall diplomatic and security relations?

Mohamed El Fatah Naciri: After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, we have seen a new Middle East in the making. One of the most important elements of this new Middle East was the re-emergence of Turkey as an active member of the Middle East; with a lot

of soft power, and the desire to re-integrate its region and to have better relations, especially with Muslim and Arab countries. Turkey has been part of the Western group in the international organizations and the only Muslim state member of NATO. But reintegrating with its region does not contradict its desire to become a member of the European Union. A debate over Turkish foreign policy has been reheated. We have seen how Turkey reviewed its policy and strongly supported the Palestinian cause, and the establishment of a zone free from nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

This involvement has created a new momentum with the League of Arab States. Both parties have felt the necessity to institutionalize their relationships. A Framework Agreement establishing an Arab Turkish Cooperation Forum was signed by the two sides in No-



vember 2007. Then came the Arab Spring and the cards have been reshuffled. It has caused some negative effects and impacts on the relations between the constituents of the region. While Syria was a very high priority relationship for Turkey, we have seen how Assad has reacted to the awakening and to the peaceful demonstrations of his people and this was criticized by Turkey and the Arab League and its members. The effects of this Arab Spring have also created a fluid security environment in the region. We have seen the extremist forces rising and hijacking the popular revolutions. The *status quo* is changing and the future of this region will depend upon how the constituents of the region will react. They should come together and think collectively. The problem of this region is that the international community is not any more in the mood to get engaged on the ground to solve the problems of the region. With these emerging terrorist organizations and non-state actors and what we have seen lately in Iraq, the region needs to rethink the re-configuration of its security structure. We have already thought of this together. It was discussed between the Arab League and Turkey. We had even organized a workshop on that. I think that we need to get back to this security scheme for the region.

So we are in a sense observing what they call in literature “state

collapse” or “state failure”? Do you agree with this argument?

Yes. But everything is relative, you know. There are degrees of failing. When you have a destabilized situation, this is failing to fulfill the functions of a state. But to what extent depends on how strong the institutions are. It will differ from one country to another, but the destabilization will have ramifications and cause changes, for we are in a transitional period where the *status quo* itself is disturbed. There is even a talk of new designs and new borders. If we just talk about such scenarios, collective actions of the constituents of the region to solve the actual problems will face a lot of challenges.

You also mentioned one point to which I would like to go back, i.e., the commitment of the western or international community, especially the United States. We hear also the arguments about the American reengagement towards Asia, reorienting away from the Middle East and Europe. Do you agree with the assessment that America’s commitment to the Middle Eastern issues is on the decline and this is one of the reasons why we are in a more chaotic situation in terms of security and governance?

I would refer here to an article written at the end of the year 2006 by the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, which is one of the most important think tanks in

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the United States, named Richard Haass, about the New Middle East. He predicted in that article that the US will disengage from the region and that local radical forces will fill the vacuum. And we have seen this now. When the Syrian regime used the chemical weapons we saw how the American president reacted to this. The exit strategy from what was supposed to be a red line consisted of joining the Russians to get rid of the chemical weapons of Syria. This is for the interest of Israel in the first place and Israel is the winner number one from the ramifications of the Arab Spring. Getting rid of the chemical weapons is not getting rid of the violence that has killed hundreds of thousands of Syrian people. Nearly half of the population of Syria has been displaced, apart from the people in prisons. This is despite the fact that there is a resolution on the Responsibility to Protect "R2P" adopted by the UN Summit held in 2005.

This R2P principle enshrined in the United Nations Charter means that no ruler and no government has the right to kill its people and that the international community should come and protect this people. This was applied in the Balkans but was not applied in Africa and was not applied in Syria recently. The international order is not working properly. The interests of the P5 are colliding and the Security Council is blocked and we are paying the price because we are not ready to take our responsibility and to face the problems that we really have to resolve ourselves.

You also made that point earlier, the need for a regional local mechanism to solve the regional security problems. You also referred to the previous initiatives between Turkey and the Arab league in that regard...

It was President Abdullah Gül's initiative. We have discussed this.

We have to revive our interest to come together and solve the problems of the region. It has been proven that outside forces will not get engaged enough to solve our problems. And our people are dying every day. Our people are dying every day in Iraq and Syria; and nobody really took any step to stop this bloodshed. This disengagement by the international community to solve our problems is sure, but we as the constituents of this region should not disengage ourselves from coming together to solve our problems. Because here lies the core problem. The core problem is that we need to cooperate and to exert our utmost efforts to solve these problems and not to be eternally the periphery.

And you referred to one principle of this regional mechanism. Inclusive organization as you said. But what are the challenges before achieving such an inclusive and of course effective mechanism to solve our problems and the case of the Syrian crisis? We saw the Arab League come up with an initiative but it somehow wasn't able to deliver a solution, and we had to develop a combined initiative between the Arab League and the UN. So there are obviously some reasons or forces that kept us from developing an effective mechanism. What are the obstacles?

We must not overestimate multilateral diplomacy. Multilateral

diplomacy has failed. The international system needs to be reconfigured to meet the emerging new world. The United Nations is blocked. When the Arab League took the initiative with regard to the Syrian crisis, the regime in Syria signed agreements with the Arab League on how to solve the problem, accepted to receive observers, but all of this failed later on. So the Arab League went to the UN Security Council. But The United Nations Security Council, which is the most important political organ in the actual international security scheme, was blocked because of the veto that was exercised by the Russians and followed by the Chinese. Also, we have seen the core group and the friends of Syria holding many meetings, and issuing communiqués that were never implemented. We have seen Geneva I and Geneva II, not working and two UN and Arab League envoys leaving unable to fulfill their assignments. Any solution for the Syrian or Iraqi problem needs to first be tackled in an inclusive manner. You cannot exclude any active party engaged in these two countries or in the region from being part of the solution, because if you do so you will have spoilers. This is the first thing. So are we ready for that? Our domestic problems should not affect our regional and international relations. We should distinguish between what is domestic and what is regional or international, and we should not intervene in everything

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concerning these domestic problems and we must work together. We need to put on priorities and tackle what is urgent. Priority number one is the stability and security of our peoples and of our region. So how do we get there? We should, the countries of the region, exert our utmost efforts to come to that.

And again, on the same topic of the problematic relations between the Arab people in the region and the Iranians. Sometimes the position of Iran in the Middle Eastern system or the actions of Iran are seen as one of the divisive elements in the region. Do you think that the foreign policy objectives of Iran could be one of the limitations, or one of the constraints, before developing a regional mechanism? What are the ways to engage with Iran? What are the ways to make Iran a part of such an inclusive regional arrangement? And as I remember before, there was some dialogue starting between Iran and the Arab League.

No that was never started. There was an OIC meeting held under the auspices of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Mecca during the holy month of Ramadan. They were considering establishing a quartet comprising Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. But unfortunately this also did not work.

Now in the case of the P5+1 we see some problems. While the issue mainly concerns Iran which is part

of the region (and its nuclear file), we did not see these powers thinking of including any party from this concerned region. Here we should recall the initiative taken by Turkey and Brazil and how the P5+1 have responded to it. Whether you agree with them or disagree with them, or whatever, there should normally be an inclusive dialogue. For the nuclear issue, who is going to be more affected if there is a threat? Of course, it is the Gulf States, the Arab League, and Turkey. So we are concerned with our neighbors and our regions more than these international powers. But we are not part of what is going on. The Arab League has launched the initiative of the establishment of a zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. The NPT 1995 review and extension conference has adopted this initiative. In the latest NPT review conference held 2010 it was agreed that an international conference on this issue should be convened. But Israel has complicated the process and the international community was not enthusiastic. So the meeting did not take place. So how can we solve a problem which is equally regional and international, and where the international community is not up to its promises and to its engagements? There was a process, there were agreed upon steps that were not fulfilled by the international community. The international community has failed the Middle East region

for the Palestinian cause and a lot of other issues. So what should we do? We need to come together. We have to do something else. That is what I think.

So, coming to the Arab League then, are there efforts in the Arab League to also review the developments and assess the need for need for reform? This is a challenge obviously, as you said. What is the internal thinking of the Arab League in getting over the challenges?

The Arab League is the organization of all Arab countries, and you know the situation of each country, each Arab country has a problem. What I have been saying is that multilateral diplomacy is not fulfilling its responsibility, including the United Nations and the Arab League. If the components of the regional system or the international system are not functioning properly, you cannot succeed. The Arab League has tried its best for Syria, but it couldn't deliver. It went to the UN and the UN was blocked, while we are facing a war. Individually we have problems; collectively we have problems, so we have to rethink how we can approach this together. But leaving our destiny to external powers, whoever they are, will not help. So we have this dilemma now. And to face this dilemma we have to rethink the way we are approaching the problems. The Arab League alone, Turkey alone, Iran alone, or

the international community alone will not solve the problems.

Then let's go back to the Syrian crisis now, which has evolved into a civil war. What is the way out, what is the exit from here based on what you have suggested with the regional actors and international community working together? What could be the way forward?

The way forward is to come together and be inclusive, in order to find in good faith the convenient political solution. There is no military solution to our problems. And we have to recognize that we have been mistaken in handling these problems. Are we ready to recognize this? If we recognize that we have been mistaken, that we did not solve our problems properly, only then can we face these challenges. Otherwise we will not succeed.

But we know that the political solution option has been tried, i.e., Geneva I and Geneva II, but they also failed. What were the mistakes or the shortcomings?

It was not inclusive

It was not inclusive in the sense of...

It was not inclusive because not all the actors were included. And the dialogue between the interested parties was not properly conducted. This is what I think. Because, the approach, the way we approached the problem from the beginning up

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to now, would have succeeded, if it was a good approach. We have to recognize that our approach was not good and we have to reconsider. Now the problem of what they call Jihadists would not have been that strong, if there was a consensus among our people and if there was good governance. Lacking good governance and lacking consensus has helped these extremists to flourish and has caused us more problems.

Yes let's continue with this radicalization.

Radicalization. The cause of Radicalization is the lack of good governance and lack of justice.

And we see that they are gaining ground not only in Syria, but now in Iraq as well, and especially with the recent advances of ISIS. This development is putting them on the agenda again.

The despaired of part of the society of our people would lead to accommodate radicalism to oppose those who did not listen to their demands.

But then there is another angle to this problem in the region, which is the proxy war dimension. Where are those radical groups, coming from? Okay, they can represent the local resentment or reaction, but at the same time they can also be used by outside powers, outside regional powers, as part of a proxy war on the ground. So how do you think we can tackle this problem in terms of the socioeconomic measures in the home country or society, but also addressing this proxy war angle?

The magic word is to be inclusive. Now, when the Americans recently liberated one of their soldiers in exchange for two Taliban, this was a deal, right! They were criticized very heavily by the American people and by the Congress. But they were obliged to deal with an organization that they consider a terrorist organization. If you want to solve your problems you have to deal with everybody. That's it.

And then how do you see the situation in Iraq evolving,

All pundits and observers are asserting, if it continues like this there will be an open sectarian war and Iraq would be divided definitely into three parts: the south Shiite, the middle Sunni, and the north Kurdish. And this is what we heard 3 or 4 years ago about the remapping of the Middle East. The map of the Middle East was designed by the British and the French

“Sykes-Picot,” and this is not a secret. And it was published by the Russians after their revolution, and we are aware of that. We the people of the region do not really discuss between us these problems. If all the people engaged in politics in Iraq come together, Kurds, Turcoman, Arab Shiite or Arab Sunni, this is the solution. And this is how you can vanquish this radicalism. Radicalism will flourish when the politicians are fighting against each other and everyone has his militia.

How about the North African part of the region, what are the main threats there?

Now the focal point of arms smuggling is in Libya that has not stabilized yet. These arms have reached as far as Mali and Western Africa. Somalia is not yet back to regularity and the extremist organizations are now extending from that country to West Africa. The Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb is still continuing to be an eminent threat. I think the North African countries are well aware of these threats. Their competent authorities are doing their best to resolve these problems properly.

And how about the more successful case of the political transformation process of Tunisia with the democratic experiment? Also we see partial reforms in Jordan. In the region we also see some positive progress toward better forms of governance in terms in

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delivering reforms in different areas. Could you also address the success of these cases?

Tunisia has made a lot of progress. The Tunisian people are very educated. Women are very emancipated. Bourguiba has established, after the independence, sort of a modern Tunisia. This background has helped in forming new institutions and drafting a new constitution etc. There is not just one force. The degree of institutionalization in Tunisia is high. It is a small country, but it has escaped the bad problems that we are seeing in Libya. In Libya, there was Gaddafi only, there was no army, no institutions, nothing. They are trying to start from scratch, and this is very difficult. Morocco is a monarchy and the dynasty that is ruling now has been ruling for over three and half centuries and the legitimacy of the king are not questioned. The king has taken the initiative to amend the constitution and make reforms. Algeria has suffered from Islamic radicalism years ago and they are not in the mood to make any other changes to the *status quo*, as they have working institutions. So it differs from one country to another. Egypt is the master peace in the Arab World. It is building now its third republic according to a new constitution. Old institutions are in place, but facing a lot of challenges of all sorts.

In general, these awakenings that we have seen will take some time to settle down. Democratiza-

tion of countries that have suffered from dictatorships or authoritarianism for a long time will not be achieved in a day or two. You will see all the seasons before you come to a stable situation. But the most important thing is that our elites should be aware that things will not go the way they have been before. The winds of change have blown and nothing will stop this trend. Our people and our elites should work together to alleviate poverty, ignorance, and backwardness peacefully. We have seen how Japanese political elites with the help of their people have made their country a global advanced country while not having enough resources and all that without revolution, without killing, and without violence.

What about the relationship of Turkey with the region, with the North African countries, the Middle East, with Levant, and overall?

Bilaterally, it is different from one country to another. But what happened with this Arab Spring has of course affected the relations between Turkey and the Arab world. But this is, I would call it a "storm in a cup of coffee." Turkey is a pivotal country. The Arab countries need Turkey and Turkey needs them. Turkey is indispensable in the architecture of the region. Turkey came back to the Middle East. Turkey has rediscovered the Middle East. This was the title of an article published by the Foreign Af-

fairs magazine in 2007. Turkey has rediscovered the Middle East and it has rediscovered itself. We have the same culture. We are neighbors. We are concerned with our security schemes. We have to come together. We have to work together. We are obliged to work together. The people of the region want more integration and more engagement for the prosperity of the Middle East, which will not be achieved without Turkey or without the Arab world. So Turkey needs the Arabs, the Arabs need Turkey, and if we don't come together we cannot achieve anything. The US is a big country, so it's like a region, a continent. Europe has 28 countries and there is the Asia-Pacific. We are the only region that has lots of small countries but each has its agenda, no one country can impose its policy or views on the others. We need to have some consensus, a security scheme and to deepen our economic integration, between our countries. Then we can succeed.

We again come back to the cooperation between Turkey and the region at bilateral and multilateral level. As the Arab League, what are the specific projects that you are working to develop relations with Turkey on in different fields?

We have a framework agreement that was signed in 2007 as I mentioned before. It includes all fields: political, security, economic, social, cultural, and alliance

of civilizations. So, we have a strategic plan from 2012 to 2015 and we have achieved a lot so far. Five meetings between our Foreign Ministers were convened, four rounds of Arab Turkish Parliamentary Dialogue were held, two Ministerial meetings between the Ministers of industry, the Ministers of Economy, Trade and Investment held their first meeting in Mersin September last year and we are preparing now for the second meeting that is due to be hosted by the State of Kuwait the first quarter of the next year. We have held a workshop on security in the Middle East, and we have held other workshops in many other fields. We of course have a plan for many other workshops on education, economic habitat, and other fields. The trade between our countries and Turkey was amounting to USD 7 billion in 2002; last year it reached USD 57 billion. Turkish entrepreneurs are everywhere in the Arab World. They have invested billions of dollars there and also Arabs have invested billions of dollars here. The league of Arab states has never established a mission in Turkey, this is the first time it has established such a mission. This mission will continue to play its role in deepening and enhancing multilateral relations in all fields with Turkey.

Are there points that you would like to add?

I would like to thank your esteemed think-tank. Since I arrived

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here I have seen a lot of new think tanks emerging in Turkey and this is a good sign. I respect the Turkish intellectuals. I appreciate what this government has achieved here in Turkey; I have to say that. And I hope that Turkey will have a smooth process for more democ-

ratization, more modernization and development. And finally I hope our cooperation "Arabs and Turks" will materialize the dreams of the peoples of the region for stability and prosperity.

Thank you.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

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