BUILDING PLURALISTIC AND INCLUSIVE STATES POST-ARAB SPRING

CONFERENCE REPORT

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Introduction

Now in its seventh year, the political and social upheaval ignited by the Arab uprisings shows little sign of abating. U.S. and international policymakers continue to struggle with their response to the turmoil, which includes state collapse and the rise of radical jihadism in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; the fragmentation of political authority in Libya; faltering transitions in Egypt and Tunisia; and the longer-term economic and political challenges facing oil-rich Arab Gulf states.

Political, socio-religious, and economic exclusion remain among the most significant catalysts of instability. The grievances that initially triggered the uprisings remain unaddressed, youth are further disenchanted and marginalized, and minority voices remain unheard as Arab states face a rising tide of radicalism and severe economic crises.

On February 1-2, 2018, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, the American University of Beirut’s Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York organized a two-day conference in Beirut with leading Middle East and North Africa experts to examine critical challenges and effective and sustainable policy options for fostering more inclusive and pluralistic systems in the region. Various panels at the conference discussed pluralism in Lebanon, conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, and the economic, political, and socio-religious dimensions of pluralism and inclusion in the Middle East and North Africa region. This report summarizes some of the discussion and proposals made during the conference. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of every participant or the event’s sponsors.

A consistent theme of the conference was that the challenges facing the region—which relate mainly to pluralism and inclusion—are long-standing, pre-dating the Arab Spring. What the past seven years do represent, in ways both positive and negative, is that the contours of the region are changing. The roles of the state, as well as citizens’ expectations of the state, are evolving. As a result, the very nature of the states and state systems is changing in ways that are political, economic, and socio-religious. While there are great obstacles, there will be opportunities—small and large, proactive and reactive—to promote more inclusive states.

Economic Inclusion

One of the major challenges facing regional states is economic restructuring. Such restructuring involves both citizens and the state, is complicated, and has wide-ranging implications. Economic models across the region have proven unsustainable, but the need for reform is particularly strong in the Arab Gulf, where countries face unique challenges in transitioning from rentier economies (based on the distribution of wealth by the state) toward more sustainable and inclusive systems.

Historically, pressure for reform has been driven by low energy prices squeezing the budgets of Gulf governments. This has been the case over the past four years, but as prices rise there are other important considerations. There is a political need to reform in ways that include more people in the economic production of the state. Measures to do so include reforming the state’s entrenchment in the economy, creating jobs, minimizing and stabilizing political risk to the economy, and confronting the lack of a consistent and clear system in the Gulf economies. While current government spending (often fueled by debt) drives growth, a focus on human capital—the belief that citizens and noncitizens have the ability to create growth—must be central to these reforms.
One popular policy for furthering these aims is through mechanisms that advance entrepreneurship and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the private sector. A number of efforts have been made to expand the resources available to entrepreneurs and to develop ecosystems (education, financing, human resources, infrastructure, business development, and legal and accounting services, among others) that support SMEs. However, these efforts have seen limited success. In Qatar, for example, the government has led the development of an entrepreneurship ecosystem that has grown considerably, but has become expensive and convoluted—involving government, corporations, universities, and a host of other actors. To date, despite heavy investment, SMEs contribute only a small share to the Qatari economy. State-led growth in entrepreneurship has demonstrated limitations and has not resulted in matching improvements in other important areas of the business sector (ease of doing business, protecting investors, etc.)—demonstrating the state’s strengths in initiating and investing in focused efforts, but weakness in driving broad-scale improvements that take longer to develop.

Another method through which Gulf states have invested in SMEs is through large funds that invest specifically in small and medium enterprises and startups. Kuwait’s “National Fund for SME Development,” an example of these efforts, is part of a series of economic reform measures that took place in Kuwait after the Arab uprisings. The fund grew out of a previous similar effort, which had struggled with transparency, to invest in high-potential businesses, incentivize loan repayment, create jobs, and track and evaluate spending. The fund, launched in 2013, had a large base of capital to provide access to funding, support education, reform legal codes, and change mindsets about entrepreneurship. The fund’s rules required that funding be targeted specifically to small businesses that would employ Kuwaiti nationals.

In practice, the fund was slow in granting loans and, once operational, granted loans to far fewer businesses than expected. It was criticized as expensive and largely public relations-oriented. It has seen some success, however, in simplifying business licensing processes and in creating programs to encourage government employees to enter the private sector. However, the management of the fund was reportedly unable to meet the needs of the fund and its clients, and related areas of the Kuwaiti business climate (business training and growth opportunities) continued to be restrictive. Many have come to question the government’s actual commitment to reform and its effectiveness in leading private sector growth, particularly given the conflicts of interest that exist between actors in both government and the private sector.

Yemen, mired in conflict and lacking governance and resources, is a polar outlier on the Arabian Peninsula. The country now, and almost certainly in the future, relies heavily on donors in the Arabian Gulf. Gulf donors, however, take a different approach to development aid, one that is heavily individualized and based on personal relationships. Aid originating in the Gulf is poorly tracked and generally lacks a long-term philanthropic strategy or goal. This differs greatly from giving by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which relies on long-standing development theories and goals, and has developed extensive monitoring and evaluation tools. Yemen therefore represents a case study in this changing development landscape.

Following the Arab uprisings in 2011, the Western aid community went to Gulf states to support mega-projects in Yemen, particularly infrastructure. Despite the size of these major projects, giving toward them continued on an informal, individualized basis and excluded important nongovernmental organizations and government actors. If OECD development aid becomes more tenuous and Gulf-based aid increases, these different paradigms have important implications for foreign aid processes, the development of states, and for regional politics.
If aid is a tool of soft power, to what end is it being deployed, and how effective will it be in the Yemeni and regional contexts? In a failed state such as Yemen, individualized, uncoordinated aid may, indeed, magnify the fractured nature of the state.

Pluralism and Inclusion in Lebanon

The Lebanese model is frequently cited as both a successful and failed example of a pluralistic state, one that is seeking to ensure stability through formalizing the role of religious identity into the institutions of government.

The consociational power-sharing model, which exists in nations such as in Lebanon, has been raised as a potential solution for states recovering from the Arab Spring. In this model, power is shared and divided among constituent groups that often possess different religious or ethnic identities. In states where religion or identity has become central to politics, such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon, failure to reach negotiated power-sharing between groups has created and prolonged conflict.

However, it is important to recognize the trade-offs involved in consociational democracy and to differentiate between power-sharing and inclusivity. Power-sharing agreements, such as Lebanon’s, tend to oversimplify the interests of religious constituents while disregarding shared policy issues unassociated with religious identity. As a result, issue-based politics becomes difficult and inclusivity limited. And while power-sharing agreements can represent a quick solution to conflicts—particularly ones that have devolved into sectarian violence—consociational power-sharing agreements have a tendency to calcify and institutionalize, leading to trade-offs between good governance and the maintenance of stability; the strengthening of elites at the expense of transparency, accountability, and public participation; and interference from outside actors.

In Lebanon’s case, political deadlock has become a central element of the system. Issues shared by all citizens (such as public services) have become difficult to address, as political actors tie them to identity-based issues. Actors do, however, mostly have a shared interest in maintaining stability on issues related to security. Particularly since 2011, the result has been relative success in maintaining political stability, but failure in advancing socioeconomic issues. In sum, the consociational electoral system—while certainly pluralistic—does not effectively incentivize policymakers to deliver results to constituents.

Thus, in Lebanon, parallel systems have developed: a formal, consociational democracy model and an informal, norms-based elite bargaining model. Of the two, it is the latter in which decisions are made, which are then legitimized to the public by means of the former. These models have changed very little in decades and have driven much of Lebanon’s political deadlock, as they are at once pluralistic and exclusive. Some proposed solutions, such as a senate, have sought to separate public service issues from issues with a consociational dimension.

Importantly, the Lebanese model, with all of its complexity, treats identity as static, which is a key weakness of consociational power-sharing agreements. The expectation that Lebanese citizens will act politically in line with their religious identity, foregoing other interests or opinions, reverses the state-citizen relationship to the benefit of political elites. The system
fails in recognizing sociological diversity and is mostly exclusive of any diversity of identity or thought outside the “included” identities, which themselves are often viewed as monolithic, despite heterogeneity within each sect.

In sum, political transitions across the region have had notable impacts on the development of Islamist actors over the past seven years. While they are part of the political environment of these states, they have not effectively developed strong agendas. Ennahdha’s case in Tunisia is a good example. This shortcoming, in turn, affects long-term policymaking and strategizing during negotiations with established elements of the elite, and potentially weakens the governance institutions they have become a part of—and that has important potential impacts on long-term pluralism and inclusion.

Socio-religious Inclusion

The Arab Spring has spurred new debates about the role of religion in the state and in society. Long-standing structures and ideas about the relationship between government and religion are changing.

In many ways, governments in the Middle East have assumed a role in shaping religious structures and discourse. A state in which religion has always been a central element of governance is Saudi Arabia, where Islam was central to the formation of the state—both its structures and institutions. The Saudi experience was different in that it did not draw heavily upon Ottoman constructs or imperialism, as was the case in Egypt. Rather, in Saudi Arabia, Islamic law became a powerful and enduring part of the state—the default connection point between citizens and the state—an opposite experience to states that had been under Ottoman rule.

As a result, the Islamic legal bureaucracy developed far differently in Saudi Arabia than elsewhere in the region. It exists as a central element of governance but lacks codification and the state-control mechanisms and hierarchy found elsewhere. This resulted in religious actors—with independent interests and constituencies—heavily influencing the state, but operating with a unique autonomy from the state. As a result, religious publics in Saudi Arabia work within the state apparatus. This is different from most of the other states in the region, where Islamism has been an outside entity.

Post-Arab Spring, there has been an effort in Saudi Arabia to limit some of the autonomy of religious actors within the bureaucratic wing of the state, particularly in the fields of law and policing. Bringing religious bodies more formally under the state bureaucracy may have important effects on Saudi politics and stability in the years to come; some will see these reforms as positive while others will feel injured or excluded as the independence of Saudi Wahhabi institutions declines.

Relatedly, as state-religion relationships change along with reforms to the accompanying legal structures, the inclusion of women in state-religious institutions has become an important issue. Historically, women have been mostly excluded from roles of religious authority, but several states have begun to lower legal and educational barriers so that women are included, and trained to play a more prominent role in the interpretation and teaching of religious doctrine.
In Morocco, UAE, Turkey, and Iran, a number of state-led initiatives have increased opportunities for women to train as religious authorities. Although such programs have financial and social costs, it is thought that the motivation behind them is to reinforce the legitimacy of state and religious bodies in the eyes of the public—an important consideration given state oversight of religious institutions across the region. Relatedly, the initiatives may be an attempt to increase responsiveness, trust, and connections between state-sanctioned religious bodies and the public. In addition, in states where Islamist movements are a concern, female inclusion initiatives may also be an attempt to regulate trends and expand the number, and extend the reach, of state-trained religious authorities. In sum, while women are still far from parity with men with respect to opportunities to become a source of religious authority, there may be a growing recognition of the need for, and value of, offering access and opportunity—with all of the structural changes that accompany such recognition.

Finally, Islamist parties and movements have, in many cases, become a more powerful force in regional politics. These parties remain diverse, and include legal and formalized parties, as well as Islamist civil society actors outside of electoral processes.

Analysis focused only on electoral issues related to Islamist parties misses a number of critical points about the context in which new political parties—Islamist or secular—operate. In states with increasing electoral inclusion, there are important challenges in reference to: 1) communicating intentions related to politics, governing, and policy; 2) organizing party structures; and 3) determining ideologies and platforms to connect with constituencies.

How Islamist parties attempting to work within state mechanisms have adapted to post-Arab Spring environments is important. In many cases, Islamist parties co-opted revolutionary rhetoric without advancing the goals, public support, and creativity that revolutions offered. Also critical has been party-building: while Islamist parties saw electoral success immediately following the new political space that opened in 2011, transforming their base into long-term political agents who are active, and mobilize and vote on the party’s behalf, is another issue.

Non-programmatic actors—those who are not seeking to work through electoral mechanisms or to develop a clear public-facing agenda—have sought to avoid public distrust and political apathy by avoiding party politics or mass mobilization.

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Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

A number of states in the region face civil war and violence. Finding pluralistic and inclusive solutions to these conflicts is critical to sustainable, long-term peace in the region. In states under reconstruction, especially at present, a default option has been to pursue stability through polarization and identity politics. While aiding in immediate-term stability and reconstruction, in the long-term these choices close the space for debate, negotiation, and
dissent, and potentially solidify identity-based politics for the long-term. Reducing conflict and spurring reconstruction is not a purely military matter but rather, must keep in mind long-term sustainability.

In the Libyan context, a primary catalyst of violence has been the tribal patronage system relied upon by the Qaddafi regime—the disintegration of which destabilized a delicate security system after the fall of the Libyan regime. In the months after Qaddafi’s fall, inter-tribal maneuvering for security control was never adequately addressed and resulted in long-term instability. Economic, security, and social grievances were exploited to mobilize groups to fill security vacuums.

In easing these challenges, there are three major themes reconstruction must address in Libya: day-to-day failures (i.e., state services, infrastructure); society building (rebuilding communities); and state-building (reconnecting the state and people under a shared national project). Above all, the various tenets of reconstruction will require a continual demonstration of legitimacy between governing and governed.

Iraq’s state-building project began in 2003, and the weakness of the central government has undermined attempts to build functioning and inclusive political processes. Over the past 15 years, debates about Iraq have included themes now discussed in the context of the Arab Spring: inclusivity, state-building, and reconciliation. But it is important to recognize the realities on the ground in building inclusive states. Not unlike the Lebanese model, the Iraqi government adopted a consociational structure, with state institutions divided among leaders of major ethnic and religious groups such as Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. But this model has serious limitations and repercussions for effectiveness and stability.

After 2003, the removal of Iraq’s strongest institutions led politicians, particularly diaspora leaders, to fall back on ethnic and religious identities to build constituencies. Identity politics in Iraq in many ways led to a weak state that, by design, sought to federalize and decentralize the Iraqi state. This weak central government has meant that power is poorly distributed via elections; instead, unofficial methods such as compromise or ad-hoc decisions often become critical to the diffusion of power within the country. Importantly, in Iraq reconciliation must remove identity as the major political force and prioritize issues of state-building over other issue areas. The hope is that this will remove the impetus for top-down identity politics and strengthen the central state.

As in Libya, a major challenge to strengthening the Iraqi central government concerns mechanisms for the state’s monopoly over violence, particularly regarding the Hashd al-Shabbi–Shia militia groups operating under a loose mandate from the government. These groups operate between state and non-state actors, are often closely linked to Iran, and can undermine the central government’s control over security, and in the long-term, prospects for inclusive reconciliation under a central state. Economically, Iraq’s informal economy, largely through smuggling networks, blurs the line between formal and informal, undermining the power and legitimacy of the central government. These two issues represent important spoilers in Iraq’s move toward issue-based politics.

In Syria, U.S. donor involvement, particularly as it related to working with local opposition councils, included the liberal state model, which has demonstrated severe limitations in the past. In an effort to utilize service delivery as a means of building legitimacy, other components of the process—such as the perception of justice, the redress of grievances, and inclusion—were
undervalued. Relatedly, the assumption that the local governance role played by the councils was as, if not more, important than security concerns was flawed. In practice, wartime orders required compromise and pragmatism to build workable security arrangements, which often went against the intention of the donors. Further, capacity-building efforts—largely through training for preferred Syrian actors—lacked a real understanding or connection to the Syrian context; efforts to legitimize external donors and bodies were very difficult, and coordination among donors and agencies was poor.

In Syria, issues of refugee return, transitional justice, and accountability will be central, but also critical will be how the state can be involved in the rebuilding process, given the lack of legitimacy it holds in the eyes of domestic and international actors. Going forward, the role of the Assad regime, and its interests in rebuilding the country against a backdrop of Syrian and regional opponents, will be critically important.

Reconstruction in most regional states in conflict represents a deep, long-term challenge toward an end that is unknown and contested. The shape of the model 21st century state remains unknown, as the concept of the state appears to be changing around the world. Moreover, in thinking about transitions, it is important to note that institutions are difficult to leave behind. States seen as success stories, such as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), operated in a much different historical and institutional context than Syria, Libya, and the like. Lebanon’s attempts to reform its institutions illustrate these deep challenges in this regard.

### Political Inclusion

Central to inclusive reform efforts must be women, who make up 50 percent of the population yet remain underrepresented in elected offices across the region. Gender quotas—the reservation of a certain number of legislative seats for women—have been used to address this issue. Post-Arab Spring, quotas have increased and been implemented at the municipal and local levels. Women have usually accessed government through political parties and gender quotas. However, an increasing number of women are entering politics as independent candidates, in large part due to a greater diversity of democratic systems in the region. On average, women running as independents are often more affluent, highly educated, run in smaller districts and, interestingly, often have a connection to the education sector, which offers benefits in networking. As this trend develops across the region, there is a need for broader thinking and effort surrounding how women (and all citizens) find ways to access politics, the tools for doing so, and the connection between how candidates seek office and how that process affects their policymaking agenda.

It is also important to understand women’s political choices once elected—the agendas set by female MPs affect how they relate to their constituents and vice versa. In Egypt, where women constituted 16 percent of MPs in 2015, women face challenging social attitudes and political environments. Female MPs generally encounter pressure to align with their party, represent their districts, align with the regime, and represent women’s issues. In a study of female MPs’ overall participation in the parliament, women were most active on issues related to women and civil rights. Within issues such as the government budget, female MPs spoke frequently on issues related to women, health care, and education, and were less likely than male counterparts to support the government. On issues related to national security, interestingly, there was no significant difference in positions between female and male MPs.
Finally, it is important to note that neither these challenges to, nor possible solutions for, political inclusiveness in the region operate in a vacuum. Debating and implementing political reforms requires a series of negotiations between the state and citizens, and brings with it complicated social dynamics. A case study is Morocco where, in 2011, sustained public mobilization in favor of liberal reform failed to deliver more inclusive outcomes. While this “February 20th Movement” did not call for the fall of the monarchy, it did share many aspects with revolutionary movements across the region. As a result of the movement, King Mohammad VI announced a series of popular constitutional reforms. However, on delivery months later, many of the reforms were substantially weakened.

The rollback may be attributed to Moroccan attitudes toward revolution and, as a result, the lack of seriousness with which the government took calls for reform. Polling suggests that while Moroccan protestors wanted political reform and social justice, they did not want to see the government collapse, and saw no real alternatives to the current system. Poll participants proved to be highly risk-averse toward outcomes they could not predict. Further, participants indicated hesitation about reforms related to social issues such as gender and family norms. As a result, reforms promised by the king could be scaled back with minimal penalty. While certainly contested, and varied among societies, political reform may be difficult when social attitudes lag behind the reforms proposed.

Across the Middle East, political actors, institutions, and traditions often limit inclusion and participation. This has been a major driver of instability over the past seven years. As a result of the Arab Spring, the notion of the Arab nation-state faces major challenges. In some cases, globalization may be to blame; as the state lost control over central economic, security, and cultural functions, there was a loss of legitimacy, which led to new local and transnational actors competing for roles once played by the state. If it is the case that current governments are incapable of regaining their traditional governance roles and legitimacy among their people, a new concept of the state is needed that finds new ways to meet the political, economic, security, and cultural aspects of a legitimate state. Exclusionary (drawn around identity groups) and consociational (power-sharing) models both have benefits, but also important challenges and limitations.