



BUILDING PLURALISTIC AND INCLUSIVE STATES POST-ARAB SPRING

CAPSTONE CONFERENCE REPORT

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“Capstone Conference Report: Building Pluralistic and Inclusive States Post-Arab Spring”

Introduction

On September 13, 2018, Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy and George Washington University's Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) co-hosted a conference on pluralism in the Arab world. The conference, "Building Inclusive and Pluralistic States Post-Arab Spring," was the culmination of a two-year project funded by the Carnegie Corporation and showcased research by leading scholars of the Middle East on questions that are becoming ever more important in this region. Panel discussions were divided topically, focusing on political, economic, and socio-religious inclusion in Arab states since 2011, interspersed with keynote addresses by prominent diplomatic and policymaking figures.

Beyond providing a thorough assessment of how post-Arab Spring societies are dealing with questions of social, economic, and political integration, the conference also supplied a sobering take on certain popular assumptions surrounding the tumultuous events of 2011. In particular, the scholars underscored that, despite glimmers of hope for democratic transition in the Arab world, this region still must undergo a more significant transformation before thriving, inclusive states can emerge. This report addresses some of the conference's key conclusions, documenting and analyzing the range of viewpoints and perspectives presented by participants.

Different Levels of Inclusion

A key takeaway from the conference panels was that pluralism in post-Arab Spring societies is multifaceted and must be measured across different metrics. On a basic level, "political inclusion" seeks to measure the extent to which various societal groups are able to achieve representation for their interests within their respective governments. One panelist noted, for instance, that while Egyptian women have traditionally made up approximately 2 percent of Egypt's parliament, this percentage has been rising in recent years, reflecting at least a slight trend of greater gender representation even in the midst of turbulent political transitions in the country.

Despite such trends, other facets of present-day Arab states suggest that political inclusion remains bleak for most groups. Panelists pointed to the difficulties members of civil society face in having their specific interests amplified and protected by ruling regimes. In certain Gulf monarchies, for instance, labor unions still face not only bureaucratic obstacles in organizing and encouraging political change, but also are frequently confronted with skepticism by ruling elites. Further, the struggles women, civil society collectives, and other groups encounter in seeking adequate political inclusion are often underpinned by economic disparities as well.

In discussing the prospects for "economic inclusion" in modern-day Arab states, panelists covered a wide array of topics, ranging from strategies for foreign aid allocation to challenges in integrating labor markets. One scholar noted that countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have implemented systems of foreign aid donation that, while they may provide short-term measures of development, rest on informal patronage connections that are not always conducive to stability and continuity. Such weakness in foreign aid is clearly displayed in the lack of sustainable GCC investments in construction projects in Yemen, now battered by a brutal civil war. In addition, donors' lack of tangible connection to their target regions is a significant factor contributing to economic disparities that must be allayed by more than just incremental allocations of aid money.

However, panelists also stressed that economic inclusion in the post-Arab Spring climate must not simply examine development and employment for the Arab citizens of such states; the economic prospects of foreign workers must also be analyzed. Arab nations, particularly wealthy Gulf countries, often place restrictions on the residency rights of foreign workers, creating a sharp delineation between said workers and citizens. Early signs that these rules may be easing are evident in some countries. Bahrain, for instance, has loosened restrictions on long-term visas for its foreign workers. Nonetheless, various policies such as the “commercial agency structure,” through which foreigners must conduct business with a citizen partner in order to operate a franchise, suggest that numerous legal barriers remain that limit non-citizens’ ability to forge more autonomous economic pursuits in many Arab nations. In reality, such legal hurdles suggest a deeper suspicion of the value of foreign nationals in the eyes of many Arab governments and highlight the challenges Arab leaders face in determining how to sustain economies that work for all of their residents—citizens and non-citizens alike.

This question of the perceived value of foreign nationals closely relates to the final form of pluralism examined at this conference—namely, socio-religious pluralism. Just as workers from other regions encounter numerous challenges to inclusion on an economic level, minority ethno-religious groups in the post-Arab Spring world are still confronted with social discrimination on a variety of levels. A recent public opinion survey conducted by the Baker Institute in the Middle East supplied myriad signs that post-Arab Spring societies still bear the burden of societal discord across ethno-religious lines. The survey found that while religious groups such as Salafists are often viewed as deserving of citizenship rights in Arab nations, approval levels among groups such as Jews, Shiites, and atheists for granting these rights remain quite low across all nations studied. Indeed, this discrimination mirrors the grievances expressed by Arabs in regions such as Iraqi Kurdistan, where Arab residents allege inequity in government spending in their region due to a larger anti-Kurdish sentiment in Baghdad’s central government.

Further, variations exist across nations, with countries such as Iraq bearing historically more secular inclinations and displaying higher levels of tolerance toward religious minorities. At the same time, the survey results as a whole revealed that the 2011 protests and riots calling for more democratic governance across the Arab world by no means translated into a boon for embracing pluralistic social arrangements. Even in societies such as Tunisia, for instance, where the Arab Spring’s hopes of democratization seemed to bloom most brightly, deeply traditional attitudes on socio-religious inclusion remain and pose challenges for reformers who strive not merely for political inclusion, but also for more harmonious interpersonal relations across all segments of society.

Pluralism, Inclusion, and Geopolitics

Another crucial perspective presented at the conference was that matters of pluralism and inclusion are not always merely confined to individual nations where inequalities are present. In reality, questions of political, economic, and socio-religious inclusion are often conditioned by larger geopolitical realities in the Middle East. Scholars urged participants to consider, for instance, how political representation can be inhibited across Gulf nations precisely due to the plentiful nature of hydrocarbons, which gives rise to the rentier state model. Oil-rich states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar have institutionalized a model of governance in which citizens are provided with ample social benefits from oil wealth yet are afforded little political decision-making power. Such a political structure can ultimately prove to be a hindrance to engendering more transparent and democratic institutions in these states.

On the issue of economic inclusion, rentier state models can in fact perpetuate economic inequity. Several panelists noted that oil-rich Arab states are often suspicious of allowing foreign workers to establish their own private enterprises. Such reluctance to include foreigners in the national economy could ultimately lead to an unsustainable labor market model, particularly in states such as the UAE where foreign workers vastly outnumber Emirati citizens. Moreover, participants argued that Gulf states dependent on oil wealth have often displayed a reluctance to diversify their economies toward other sectors. One scholar indicated that Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030, a strategic plan that includes the goal of broadening the Saudi economy to include other sectors beyond oil, has at times lacked coherent planning as to how such a significant financial transition would occur. Essentially, conference participants stressed that oil is a geopolitical conundrum that can induce too much rigidity in Gulf economies, leading to the long-term exclusion of both foreign workers and national citizens alike who could benefit from more privatized, durable economies.

Ultimately, hydrocarbon wealth and subtle-to-overt discrimination against migrant workers are two glaring economic and political factors that threaten prospects for inclusion in the Middle East. Nonetheless, socio-religious inclusion can also be viewed as a geopolitical concern that transcends national borders. To understand this, one need look no further than how Gulf monarchies initially responded to the disruptive Arab Spring protests. Specifically, the rise of President Mohamed Morsi following the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was not only a harbinger for Gulf states that their monarchical political models might be challenged, but also raised concerns that the Muslim Brotherhood could become a destabilizing entity across the Middle East. One scholar noted that following the Arab Spring, affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood in many Gulf states was not merely a religious designation, but was laden with perhaps more political significance than ever before.

The cross-border, politicized nature of this conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist ideologues and Wahhabi monarchies is only one sign of the geopolitical significance of socio-religious discord. Results of the Baker Institute's survey revealed that Sunni-Shia relations appeared to deteriorate to even lower levels after the Arab Spring. Though it remains unclear what exactly this souring of intra-Islamic relations portends for the future of the Middle East, one may speculate that further exclusion or persecution of minority religious factions in Arab states could foment grievances that will make religion an even greater source of political discord.

Policy Recommendations and a Way Forward

Conference participants were primarily concerned with diagnosing the sources of societal discord in the contemporary Arab world. At the same time, these analyses of deficiencies within the institutions and social arrangements of Arab states were also supplied with the goal of prescribing pragmatic policy solutions to such problems. As the conference hosted a range of voices from American academic and diplomatic institutions, such policy recommendations were often directed toward U.S. policymakers concerned with the future stability of the Middle East. General heuristics and best practices issued for such U.S. policymakers include: 1) adopting a longer time horizon and perspective for policy implementation; 2) promoting federalist models in which communities govern themselves; 3) allowing more room for private economic actors in national economies; and 4) maintaining a healthy skepticism of what appear to be promising democratic or reformative processes in Arab states.

Regarding the first recommendation, scholars stated that solutions focused on short-term alleviation of various forms of exclusion in Arab states are ultimately insufficient in fundamentally transforming states. In reality, policy solutions must seek to build institutions that are self-sustainable and can incorporate enduring models of inclusion. For example, one panelist asserted that Washington's policy toward redressing a lack of political inclusion within Iraqi Kurdistan has been too shortsighted, and instead must address, in a long-term manner, the weaknesses of political institutions in the region that have been perpetuated by an imperfect federal framework and resource-sharing model with Baghdad.

On this note, other scholars proposed that in order to address the deteriorating nature of socio-religious inclusion in Arab states, policymakers must be open to federalist models that increase autonomy on a group-based level. Dubbed "communitocracy," such arrangements would differ from traditional concepts of democracy in that they would be based more on rule by ethno-religious communities than by individual citizens. Lebanon's model of consociationalism, wherein different religious groups are allotted specific political positions, is an example of how a communitocratic state could be configured. While this model on its face may appear to be antithetical to social cohesion, its strength lies in that it ideally promotes consensus across various communities—something that may be unattainable in democratic systems that overlook the importance of preexisting communal ties.

Likewise, U.S. policymakers were encouraged to create more space for the private sector in Arab states, precisely because more diversified economies could incentivize more active economic participation from citizens and migrant workers. This recommendation was not an outright condemnation of nationalized enterprises, but rather a plea for states whose economies largely rest on state-owned companies to apply long-term strategic thinking and consider how such monolithic economic regimes can widen economic inequality and lead to sociopolitical grievances amongst their populaces.

Lastly, scholars agreed that policymakers concerned with the future of the Middle East must not be too quick to endorse policy changes that seem to be democratic, or at the very least reforming, at face value. Even democratic phenomena such as the institution of elections can act as facades for authoritarian leadership to continue undemocratic, politically exclusive trends. Moreover, placing too much faith in one single leader or faction to bring about a positive sea change in the Arab region was also dissuaded.

In sum, the Arab Spring protests of 2011 sparked a hope that Arab states would be transformed into more inclusive societies, a hope that public opinion data and current geopolitical trends demonstrate has largely been unrequited. Despite this lackluster assessment, the conference's leading Middle East experts concluded that all three major forms of pluralism and inclusion can be improved upon if policymakers carefully weigh solutions that will create long-term, self-sustaining institutions in Arab nations, thus allowing inhabitants of the Arab world to be the ultimate masters of their societal destinies.

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