Political Pluralism in the Middle East and North Africa

Dialogue Snapshot Report
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the Hollings Center
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Dialogue Summary

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The political landscape of the Middle East and North Africa in 2018 is a terrain deeply hostile to nurturing the seeds of democracy planted so spectacularly just seven years prior during the momentous events of the Arab Uprisings. The region today seems characterized above all by violence, instability, social tension, renewed authoritarianism, and humanitarian crisis. Civic space has been all but shut down in a number of key states; elsewhere the social fabric of religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity has been frayed to the point of destruction; and key external actors who earlier welcomed the dawning of a new era of people power in the region have today once again aligned themselves with authoritarianism and geopolitical polarization in an uncertain search for security. Proxy wars between regional powers further fan the flames of social conflict. The Middle East, thus, provides little context to discuss – much less aspire to – greater political pluralism.

The voices of civil society advocating for democracy, pluralism, and a rights-based politics have largely been silenced. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that they are still very much alive, if not always quite kicking. A generation of young, publicly-engaged Arab citizens whose social and political consciousness was shaped first and foremost by the events of 2011 are striving to make space for civic engagement. This is not a naïve effort imagining an imminent return to the period of post-revolutionary hope, but rather a firm conviction that, despite the current dismal state of the region, something fundamental changed in 2011 that means things will never fully return to the pre-Arab Uprisings status quo. For this up-and-coming generation, the task today is not one of conventional mobilization or competing for a place at the political table—goals they realize would, in any case, be pointless to pursue at the present time. Political pluralism is not the formal or procedural trappings of democracy, but the challenge of making slow but consistent progress on rebuilding the social, cultural, and communicative infrastructures that foster a meaningful self-conception of citizenship.

To better understand how the next generation in the Middle East and North Africa are thinking about and engaging questions around political pluralism, the Hollings Center for International Dialogue brought together a group of civil society leaders, activists, politicians, and journalists from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United States to discuss and share their perspectives on a number of key challenges facing Arab societies today. The participants:

- examined fundamental questions surrounding the appropriate categories, identities, and vocabulary with which to discuss Middle East politics at the present time;

- reflected on the current state of relations between groups of varying ideological orientation, particularly secularists and Islamists;

- explored emerging and informal spaces of civic engagement while identifying the characteristics that simultaneously define new forms of authoritarianism;

- discussed the role of external actors and the international community, with a particular focus on the United States; and,

- collectively generated a number of specific recommendations relating to concrete and tangible actions to be undertaken by local, regional, and international actors that can contribute constructively to building and supporting the "deep context" of pluralism in the face of significant democratic backsliding.[1]

This report is informed by those discussions and seeks to convey perspectives, insights, analysis, and recommendations from the next generation of Middle Eastern and North African leaders to their colleagues at home and abroad, and to governmental and multilateral audiences seeking to better understand how to make positive forward progress in this fraught and fragile region.

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1 Freedom House's flagship global index of democracy, Freedom in the World, has indicated a clear downward trend in the quality of political rights and civil liberties in the Middle East since 2013. For its most recent report, "Democracy in Crisis," see https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018

Political Pluralism in the Middle East and North Africa
Perspectives from the Next Generation

Categories, identities, and divisions in contemporary Arab politics

Amidst renewed authoritarianism in the Arab world today, what categories and identities are relevant in political life? Does a political spectrum conceived in terms of right and left hold any relevance today? Do actors and activists define and think of themselves in relation to conventional ideological reference points such as secularism, nationalism, and Islamism? In the relatively level playing field of immediate post-revolutionary politics in 2011, different groups and ideological players competed openly and intensely to gain advantages over each other. This was an environment that seemed to incentivize sharp self-definitions and differences between political actors. In the present environment, however, where political competition in countries such as Egypt is practically

Election posters in Tunisia during the 2014 parliamentary elections. Photo: Malek Khadraoui

nonexistent, there seems little reason to embrace a strong and distinctive position or ideology. One Egyptian participant reported the emergence of something like a new ideology of "non-politics" among those young people who were too young to have participated in the revolutions and who therefore have no recollection of social mobilization and political activism as meaningful or effective pathways for change. Looking at the state of their country today—where incumbent Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi seems on course to emerge as the sole candidate in Egypt's upcoming presidential election—young Egyptians see little reason to think of civic engagement, much less politics, as an effective avenue for achieving social change. "This is a lost generation," the participant explained, "and they are trying to form themselves."

The idea of ideological incoherence and unpredictability was a recurrent theme across several countries, with some participants explaining that average Arab citizens today have great difficulty making sense of much of the political rhetoric they hear. "You have communists defending highly conservative positions and Islamists advocating for secular policies," one Moroccan civil society leader explained, "so these ideological labels don't seem to tell us much about what people actually stand for."

For some, the basic structure of Arab politics today is even more stark and comes down to a question of one's orientation towards what happened in 2011. "Maybe the real issue today," a participant suggested, "is between those who are pro-revolution and those who are anti-revolution." A struggle, in other words, between diverse social forces committed to the need for fundamental change and, on the other side, those looking to reassert the political and economic order that defined the region before the Arab Uprisings.

Non-ideological formation of identities and divisions have become prevalent across multiple settings in the region. An Iraqi analyst reported that in the highly sectarian political environment found in his country today, it makes little sense to operate outside the confines of religion: "What value is there [to embrace] a secular identity if there is no political vehicle to allow that identity to

have an impact on policy?" In addition to religion, social class and majority/minority dynamics play a prominent role. Several participants viewed the differences between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in society as far more relevant than questions of ideology. Others saw this as something closely linked to an upsurge in Arab populist nationalism resembling trends clearly discernible in Europe and North America today. In the contemporary Middle East, this populism builds on pre-existing exclusionary politics towards minorities, further destroying social cohesion and narrowing the definition of citizenship.

Throughout our discussions, multiple participants observed that high levels of identity politics—as exemplified by the prevalence in media and public discourse of strongly defined 'enemy images,' often in the form of ethnic and religious minorities—help autocrats to shore up their power. These kinds of societal divisions enable authoritarian leaders to portray themselves as guarantors of a particular vision of the nation and to perpetuate exclusivist conceptions of belonging and national identity, distracting from their failure to address substantive socioeconomic or political challenges. "The elites thrive on polarization," one Moroccan journalist remarked, "and they have to be perceived as the optimizing force in society." He went on to make a case for the crucial role of traditional media and journalistic standards as a means of counterbalancing both the parochial narratives of identity politics and claims by authoritarian regimes to act as a stabilizing force in the face of social polarization they have actively facilitated themselves.

The "dark side of consensus"

> "The interesting cases are Morocco and Tunisia, where I would argue there is an imposition of an artificial inclusion. There is a dark side of consensus or inclusionary politics. This means that there is an avoidance to discuss real issues."
>
> - American Conference Participant

Another recurrent theme in the discussion was the idea of a distinct absence of politics in the Arab world today—understood here to mean the effective erasure from public life of groups offering distinctive and competing solutions for addressing societal challenges. Under conditions of heightened autocracy, there arises a tendency for formerly rivalrous political groups to de-accentuate their differences in the face of a common enemy. In other settings, this condition breeds a false sense of inclusivity in which political actors self-censor or domesticate themselves in order to avoid offending the local hegemon, be it a monarch, an autocratic republic, or a military-led regime. One participant, a leading analyst of the Middle East based in Washington DC, cautioned against what he termed "the dark side of consensus." His concern was that renewed authoritarianism in the region might be generating a false sense of unity between political groups that papered over the fact that there continue to be real, and in some cases quite stark, differences between them. "Have these cleavages gone away?" he asked, "or have they just been tabled for five, ten, twenty years? Will we one day see a return of these religious or ideological identities?" Ultimately, he seemed to be suggesting, there is a risk that the failure of these groups to directly confront and work through the issues that divide them may make it difficult to achieve progress in solving deeply entrenched societal challenges if and when circumstances permit their return to politics.

The limits of engagement

The question of whether and how civil society should engage with the state under conditions of heightened repression proved to be a point of some contention. A Washington DC-based Middle East expert asked whether international actors should be encouraging and facilitating local civil

societal engagement with the state for fear of legitimizing their authority. In response, an Egyptian human rights activist explained that the question of whether or not to engage with the authorities is a very delicate and constantly evolving calculus. She did not agree with a categorical policy of non-contact:

> "We need to engage with the regime in terms of local politics because we want to make conditions better for our community. Engaging a municipal council around, for example, a local environmental issue is very different from accepting international assistance to promote democracy at the national level. At the same time, however, I need to be very vigilant because I'm aware that any time I sit with a government official I potentially give him the ability to say he met with a human rights organization. So each meeting decision is a very careful calculation about whether the upsides outweigh the risks."

She went on to recognize that under the present conditions, the effectiveness of any civic engagement is questionable—particularly in the face of highly repressive NGO laws, a heightened security regime, and the absence of meaningful mechanisms of accountability at all levels. This means that civil society organizations cannot engage in meaningful planning or operate in a strategic manner. Contact with government officials is usually issue-based and highly ad-hoc. The participant characterized the situation as one of being forced out of necessity to directly lobby individual officials and policymakers in the hope of making incremental progress on everyday quality of life issues. "The current state of engagement," she explained, "is like a medicine we take as a last resort."

Defining the Islamist/non-Islamist divide

Perhaps the single most important axis of social and political contention hidden by the "dark side of consensus" is the ongoing divide between Islamist and non-Islamist groups in the region. Over the course of our discussions, several issues that seem to lie at the heart of this rift presented themselves:

(1)   A basic lack of trust. In Egypt, during the Morsi presidency, Islamists were perceived to be running the country in a manner that maximized their self-interest rather than trying to make space for a broad-based democratic transition. On the flip side, Islamists have difficulty trusting many liberals today since the latter were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the government's violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In

Protests against former Egyptian President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, June 2013. Photo: Mohamed Elsayyed

Tunisia, Islamists feel that any kind of religious affiliation leads many secular groups to categorically rule out dialogue and engagement while, conversely, liberal groups committed to democratization suspect En-Nahda of cooperating (out of self-interest) with efforts to bring back elements of the pre-revolutionary regime. Several secularists also mentioned feeling uneasy about what they perceived as a fuzzy line separating *da'wa* (proselytization) from policymaking. "When I meet with an Islamist leader," one liberal civil society leader asked, "am I talking to a shaykh or a politician?" One regional analyst based in the Middle East outlined the nervousness on the part of many secularists in the Arab region, pointing out examples of how religiously-aligned parties have strayed toward authoritarianism. "Look at how authoritarianism has reared its head there more recently. How can we be sure there isn't an [authoritarian] figure lurking

within, say, En-Nahda?" One participant pointed out that this issue cuts both ways since some of the region's most notorious autocrats have been secularists.

**(2)	Competing visions of the role of Islam in society**, and the position of the state vis-à-vis religion. Secularists continue to argue that religion should be a purely personal matter and that any recourse to Islam with respect to matters of, for example, personal status law should be voluntary. While most Islamists have abandoned a focus on implementing *shari'a* law (with, we should note, some secularists continuing to see this shift as little more than tactical convenience), they continue to explore various ways of establishing some sort of relationship between religion and legislation. The question of the role of the state, its relationship to religious institutions, and its role as an arbiter of Islamic normativity continue to be major sources of contention. Ultimately, this particular debate also goes to a more fundamental divide between the two groups concerning their ultimate end goals. Islamists worry that secularists want to progressively remove religion entirely from public life, whereas secularists worry that—despite the lack of current emphasis on religious law in Islamist discourse—the other side wants to gradually insert religion into more and more facets of society and daily life.

**(3)	Different understandings of the rights of women and minorities**. While both groups will speak frequently and easily about the idea of marginalized groups having rights that need to be protected, secularists in particular worry that many Islamists have in mind something other than a liberal conception of full and equal rights for women and minorities. They worry that, with respect to ethnic and religious minorities, Islamist conceptions of rights continue to be informed by the traditional jurisprudence of the *dhimmi* (protected minority), which they worry translates into second-class citizenship. Likewise, with respect to women, secularists worry that the Islamist conception of women's rights is, at best, a sense of "separate but equal" and in many cases may also involve a more circumscribed set of rights limited by scripture and religious law.

While it was not a major point of discussion, at least one political analyst based in the region pointed out that social forces aligned with Islamists have turned to violence in recent years, especially in Egypt, and that this is an issue that needs to be confronted.

One participant pointed out there is a tectonically important issue on which he would like to see *more* debate between Islamists and non-Islamists—more specifically, how to tackle the enormous economic challenges facing the region. Speaking about Egypt he pointed out that between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Mohammed Morsi, and Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, the economic policies have not differed. "It's all IMF and austerity measures. I'd like to see more meaningful debate on this issue."

What does it mean to be an Islamist?

One trend at work in the region that may bear on how the politics of the Islamist/non-Islamist divide plays out relates to shifts that seem to be underway within Islamism itself. No one would deny that one of the most remarkable developments to arise from the Arab Uprisings was the phenomenal political success enjoyed by Islamist parties—particularly En-Nahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, both of which won early elections and oversaw processes to craft new constitutions. In recent years, however, both groups have seen significant downturns in their political fortunes. This has occurred most dramatically and intensively in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood lost the presidency in 2013 with the removal of Mohammed Morsi in the face of widespread popular protests and, ultimately, a military coup. This was followed by a comprehensive crackdown on the Brotherhood (now branded as a terrorist group), including the killing by state security forces of around one thousand of its followers in August 2013, the criminalization of its activities, and its virtual eradication as an organizational force in Egyptian society. While En-Nahda in Tunisia was never at risk of the same fate as their co-ideologues in

Egypt, they may have salvaged at least minimal goodwill within that country's electorate by voluntarily resigning from power in early 2014. They failed to regain control at the subsequent election but continued to work with the coalition government headed by Beji Caid Essebsi of the secular Nidaa Tounes party. For some, En-Nahda has been, if anything, too willing to work with a ruling party widely perceived as tracking the country back towards the pre-revolutionary status quo.

The dramatic rise and equally precipitous fall of the Islamists, has given rise to a common narrative of Islamism's demise as a meaningful and significant political force in the region. However, this view is belied by the current status and standing of Islamist movements and parties around the Middle East. In Morocco, the ruling Islamist Party of Justice and Development seems entrenched as that country's dominant political force; in Jordan, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood currently holds the largest bloc of opposition seats in parliament; and Kuwait's most recent parliamentary elections saw gains by Islamist-oriented candidates. According to the Pew Research Center, even the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was viewed favorably by some 38% of that country's population at the height of the state's crackdown on the movement in 2014.[2] It would therefore seem that the current state of Islamism in the region may be more complex than a simple decline narrative might suggest.

> **"Regarding terms like secularists, Islamists, etc... they are no more helpful in understanding the current political landscape. The political scene has become very blurred and it is difficult for the public to distinguish things."**
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> **- Moroccan Conference Participant**

Part of this complexity arises, no doubt, from the fact that the nature and definition of Islamism seems highly ambiguous today. Even Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi of En-Nahda, widely recognized as one of the leading contemporary Islamist thinkers globally and someone who once proudly called himself an Islamist, recently declared that the label 'Islamism' has exhausted its utility. At En-Nahda's 2016 party conference, Ghannouchi announced a new preference for 'Muslim Democrats' as a way to describe followers of his movement. Like Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan before him, Ghannouchi seemed to be trying to align public perceptions of his party with the Christian Democratic tradition in Europe. In other words, an approach to Islam in politics in which religion provides broad moral principles for politics and legislation rather than dictating specific content for policies and laws. This trend seems to be in keeping with the analysis of France's leading political sociologist of Islamism, Olivier Roy, who pointed to a trend already discernible in the 1990s whereby Islamist parties began to lose their ideological specificity as they adopted positions and policies designed to appeal to the mass electorate—thereby leading us into the age of "post-Islamism."[3]

Reflecting on the question of what it means to be an Islamist at the present time, many participants agreed that it is difficult at the present time to define the specific contours of Islamist ideology, or to identify specifically Islamist policy agendas. An Egyptian participant, himself previously a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, explained that many young people are drawn to Islamism today not out of religious conviction or in order to support any religiously-defined political agenda. "Actually," he pointed out, "some of the most religiously conservative people

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[2] Pew Research Center, "One Year After Morsi's Ouster, Divides Persist on El-Sisi, Muslim Brotherhood," http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/05/22/one-year-after-morsis-ouster-divides-persist-on-el-sisi-muslim-brotherhood/egypt-report-13/

[3] Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Moroccan Parliament, 2008. **Photo: Wikimedia Commons**

strongly support the Sisi regime." Instead, he suggested, Islamism's appeal lies in how it serves as a symbol of a different, although as yet undefined, kind of politics. In other words, it represents the opposite of the prevailing status quo and functions as a general proxy for opposition sentiment. As one Tunisian civil society leader told us, "much of the time religious identity is the only thing left youth can be attracted to since there are no alternatives." Her narrative is consistent with the account of Islamism offered by Avi Spiegel in his book *Young Islam*, a study of Islamist youth in Morocco. Spiegel argues that young Moroccans drawn to the Adl w'al-Ihsan movement—one of that country's two main Islamist currents—view it as a space defined by the possibility of creating a different kind of society even if they do not necessarily embrace all of the movement's doctrinal tenants.[4]

The role of international actors

While the majority of the dialogue focused on the internal situations within specific countries and in the region as a whole, participants discussed the role of international actors with particular focus on the role of the United States. It became clear from the onset that international actors' attention toward the promotion of democracy has declined, and this has coincided with a decreased ability to influence regional domestic realities. Particularly for Western actors, the supposed paradox between wanting to promote pluralistic institutions and risking further regional insecurity have created counterproductive results. But as one participant hinted, these quandaries and priorities are not mutually exclusive and should be considered linked. "On democracy and security, it is a joint responsibility of the local actors and international actors… because they are both responsible."

Reasons for the shifts in priority and policy vary depending on the international actor. In the case of the United States, slow, prolonged disengagement from civic promotion in the region began in the previous administration as the country shifted to domestic political priorities. Tactical security priorities took precedence in America's approach to the region as the reach of extremist groups became more alarming. Participants generally agreed that recent statements from the current administration indicate a continuation of this status quo. Likewise, European Union members (particularly France) deprioritized institution building in the MENA region, instead dealing with domestic political unrest within bloc members as well as existential threats to the union itself. Like the US, European attention toward the region turned to security issues, particularly the refugee crisis. Participants generally agreed that these shifts negatively affected the popular perceptions of the West in the region. This in turn has created an opening for influence by other actors like China or Russia and exposed some countries to fissures caused by other regional actors. As one participant stated, "We have a situation with regional powers who undermine pluralism in many countries in the region." The participant noted how competing

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4 Avi Spiegel, Young Islam: The New Politics of Religion in Morocco and the Arab World, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

influences caused by the Saudi-Iranian and Emirati-Qatari divisions fostered potential for larger conflict. The participant further warned, "International interference can be good, but at the expense of other groups, it can cause problems." With all of the competing factors in play, problems have mounted.

Many participants agreed that within many of these regional states, a problematic climate for the international promotion of democracy and pluralism exists. Regional perceptions about international action aside, internal factors such as restrictive regulations, entrenched elites from previous regimes, and slow or underdeveloped bureaucracies have dampened the impact and image of democratic norms that some international actors hope to promote. A Tunisian participant highlighted concerns about how this can affect nascent democracies. "After all the money spent in the past seven years, the youth do not trust politicians, they don't trust democracy and they don't want to vote. It is challenging after spending all this money to still have this." One Jordanian participant noted that the gap of popular preference between security and democracy has widened, with some populations now favoring security and stability more strongly. An Iraqi participant citing restrictive NGO laws in Egypt noted how domestic regulations can quickly reverse international efforts and domestic gains. The abrupt end to critical work conducted by many organizations has left many desiring international support and assistance at risk and with few options.

International action and assistance will require careful balancing between active and passive support, and should carefully consider its intended and unintended consequences. Participants suggested possible new strategies for international actors to support political pluralism and civic discourse in these countries. An American participant noted, "It is still possible for U.S. and international developmental and financial actors to work to promote certain forms [of assistance] that will look like primarily technical and regulatory types of reform." Both a Lebanese and Tunisian participant echoed this sentiment, calling for sustained civic engagement, utilizing international NGOs and foundations to increase contact with local citizens and receive better information on regional domestic realities and find open space for reform. An Iraqi participant suggested that future American assistance should focus less on minority or political identity and more on citizenship—being a part of a collective national polity with certain rights and responsibilities. Regardless of the strategies adopted or their potential impacts, several participants called for more sustained international engagement and initiatives.

Recommendations

In light of the issues and challenges discussed, participants suggested a number of specific recommendations of relevance to the local civil society sector as well as to international actors and donors:

(1)   In the present context, programs and projects designed to foster political pluralism should focus less on the procedural and institutional dimensions of democracy (e.g. elections, voter training, political party capacity) and more on **support for the "deep context" of pluralism**. This means greater emphasis on inclusive education, research and evidence-based policy-making, and ensuring the presence of a functioning media ecosystem. Enabling spaces of engagement and debate should be the priority;

(2)   The concept of **citizenship**, with an emphasis on the full and equal rights of all individuals and groups in society, should be the organizing principle of the activities referenced above;

(3)   International donors should:

   A. Incorporate mechanisms to incentivize coordination and collaboration between different groups working on similar locally-define issues in order to maximize impact and minimize duplication.
   B. **Adopt programmatic geographies that are truly national in scope**—incorporating rural and marginalized areas—rather than working primarily in cities. This will help to avoid reinforcing pre-existing senses of exclusion and inequality.
   C. Develop **new rapid-response funding mechanisms** that can quickly disburse small amounts of money on an as-needed basis (vs. on six month or annual cycles) in order to be more responsive to the fluid and fast pace of developments on the ground in many countries.

(4)   In the face of growing incentives to emphasize difference and exclusion, efforts should be made to **identify and promote "dialogue entrepreneurs"** willing to create spaces explicitly designed to foster engagement, debate, and dialogue across political, social, and communal divides;

(5)   Widen the aperture for defining civil societal actors. Given the constraints around formally-registered non-governmental organizations, it is important to **recognize the role of informal spaces and mechanisms of civic engagement**, including local issues-based networks and the communities of interest created by the sharing economy;

(6)   In order to avoid dependence on the part of civil society in the region on foreign funding as well as a potential collapse of the civil society sector if international donors withdraw, efforts should be made locally and internationally to **cultivate indigenous and sustainable sources of support for civil society**.

(7)   International assistance flowing through official bilateral channels should explore how a **focus on less politically sensitive kinds of reform** (economic, technical, regulatory) might help to lay the groundwork for more substantive political reform in the future.

Conclusion

While prospects for greater political pluralism seem particularly bleak in the present regional environment, participants were steadfast in their conviction that ongoing work in this area is vitally important. There was a broad-based recognition that strategies, modalities, and priorities need to change under the present circumstances, and—as reflected in the recommendations offered above—the group identified numerous concrete ideas for moving forward.

Another crucial point, and one worth ending on, relates to a widespread recognition that efforts to promote pluralism and preserve civic space are not solely in the interest of regional civil society or human rights activists. This work also needs to be seen as imperative in the eyes of regional governments and any external actors that care about security and stability in the region. As one Jordanian analyst put it:

> "Any country that does not have a democratic system is going to hit the wall in the coming years no matter how much money you have to lubricate the system. At the end of the day there will be demands by the population that will not be met, and in return the public will have to take matters into their own hands."

For More Information

Reports

Workable Solutions to Radicalization
Numerous studies and efforts seek to understand the conditions in which Da'esh ideology and message spreads, in other words the "root causes" of extremism. Despite these efforts, there is room for more dialogue regarding how communities, civil society, and state apparatuses deal with these root causes. Looking at community-based, local solutions to radicalization as well as civil society counter-extremism initiatives through a comparative perspective will yield a list of best practices that can inform future efforts and policy. The Hollings Center convened a dialogue in October 2016 to seek answers.

Foreign Policy and Competing Mediation in the Middle East and Central Asia
The Middle East and Central Asia are comparable in many ways, yet experts studying these regions rarely have the opportunity to engage in strategic dialogue. Participants including research institute directors, university professors, journalists, civil society professionals, think-tank researchers and international organization officers from Afghanistan, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Russia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States came together at a Hollings Center conference to discuss the role and foreign policy tools of outside actors in both regions.

The Economies of the Arab Spring
Observers of the Arab Spring have largely focused on issues of political transition, while economic issues have received less attention. To this end, the Hollings Center convened in October 2011 a select group of economists, private-sector professionals, development officials, academics, journalists and foreign policy experts from Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and the United States to discuss the economic outlook in the wake of regime change. Discussions also addressed the issue of models and international aid.

Videos

Promoting Political Pluralism in the Middle East
On March 14, 2018 The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with three regional civil society figures visiting the country under the auspices of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue: Aboubakr Jamai, a Moroccan journalist and dean at IAU College; Lobna Jeribi, founder of the think tank Solidar Tunisia; and Oussama Sghaier, a member of Tunisia's Ennahda Party. They were joined by Bilal Wahab, the Institute's Wagner Fellow.

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:
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