

The Middle East and Arab Spring: Prospects for Sustainable Peace

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More than a year and a half following the self-immolation of a street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, Arab nations are grappling with the transition toward sustainable peace. The impact of the Arab Spring movement poses challenges for peaceful elections and establishing stable forms of democratic institutions. In the second in the three-part Conflict Prevention & Resolution Forum series on Democracy & Conflict, the distinguished panel provided insights on the future of sustainable democracy and peace in the wake of the Arab Spring. The discussion reflected on the current situation in the MENA region and delved into Islamic religious values that support democratic pluralism, gender, ethnic and religious minority dignity and rights.

The Arab Spring and the Civil-State

Following the revolutions that stretch across the Middle East and North Africa, a coherent vision of the future is being debated for the wellbeing and needs of communities. With all the previous challenges of the state still intact, such as economic development, a redesigning of the state has begun as a result of liberation.

The Arab world experienced two broad changes, either to seek political change through regime change (e.g. Tunisia and Egypt) or political change without regime change (e.g. Morocco and Jordan). These changes are being debated around the obscure term *dawla madaniyya* or civil-state, appealing to all members in this new state being constructed. The term *dawla madaniyya* grants any faction, Islamist, secular, or liberal democrat, to be involved in the discourse surround the forming of their state. The language surrounding the civil-state allows Islamist to talk about an Islamic state and liberal democrats to talk about a democracy to their constituents while still functioning within the same framework of a civil-state. With *dawla madaniyya* framing the conversation, it has created a common ground for all faction to come together and talk about their vision for the state.

The notion of citizenship has traditionally been given by the state. However, in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, people are wanting citizenship before the full development of their state. What is interesting for the cause of peace and common ground is that the term citizenship being used in the Arab world is dictating that whatever faction of the society one comes from, they are equal as a citizen in their state. While this may look like putting the cart in front of the horse, everyone is participating and showing that they want equality. For examples, Islamists are put in the position of having to assert the compatibility between Islam and democratic citizenship.

Challenges for Democracy

As one panelist put it, the act of change in Islam is *gradual*. Despite the discourse around the civil-state and equality, the language on certain issues is already being challenged. For instance, in Tunisia women are mentioned in the constitution, but in a subservient manner where women are complimentary to men. Groups demanding that women are a key indicator in political and regime change in North Africa are resisting this constitutional position.

It was noted that there is also a problem in North Africa within the women's rights movement. You have extreme secularist demanding women's rights and you have groups who simply wish to be treated fairly. This challenge is parallel to the integration of Islam and democracy, where revolutions cannot simply replace Islamic law with Western values in one moment. The change toward better fairness and rights for women is gradual, just as it may be for democracy in the region. The Arab Spring liberations have not yet progressed human rights, transparency, or anti-corruption.

In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, they have attempted to move toward the political center, however they are then challenged by the more conservative parts of its constituencies and is forced to move back toward right-wing ideology. From a political perspective, the Muslim Brotherhood will take centrist or moderate position and in long run, they will be dependent on economic democracy.

Another challenge brought to attention for Muslim societies affected by the Arab Spring is modernity, especially in the areas of governance and the economy. A disconnect was drawn between the core Islamic values of human rights and actions in the Muslim world. Suggestions to address such issues included two approaches. First, to monitor the emergence of specific actors on the ground, political thinkers, politicians, civil-society actors, and how values are debated and shaping perceptions. The second approach concerns the political culture that relies on a Patriarchal system, including dependency and “following”. Regarding this concern, both civil-society and youth need to be strengthened, which is also a modernizing movement. This would involve the articulation of a new vision on how to move forward, particularly by youth, which can provide more chances for modernization.

The US Government Perspective and Reaction

The debate between the US government and Islamist groups often seemed to follow the rise and fall of individuals or groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In the past, the US did meet with representatives from Islamist groups. The position changed and the US government was not to have just a policy for Islamist or other groups, but rather a policy toward the country’s government. Furthermore, the United States stopped relations with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, as a strategic policy move, because Egypt’s government requested the US to halt. The results from the Arab Spring have created issues for the US and its foreign policy, particularly when legally designated terrorist groups win elections. The US also continues to frame policy with Israel’s security in consideration. The Arab Spring has shown an increase of pluralization of political space in the MENA region and the United States has had to account for the complexity of many groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and their newly gained legitimacy through elections.