



Conference Report on Wilton Park Conference 779

Building Participatory Governance and Representative Institutions in the Broader Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

1. Arab countries differ significantly in size, population, and levels of economic and social development. Arab societies are complex, with religious, tribal, and ethnic affiliations often exerting more influence on people's thinking and actions than the concept of nationality. Such diversity poses unique challenges when promoting good governance. Imbalances in power and influence – political, economic, religious or military – have contributed to the development of extremism, the denial of human rights, and civil conflict. International terrorism, and some governments' attempts to counter it, has adversely affected democratic freedoms; the fight against terror has been used by some as a pretext to slow political reform.

2. How can Arab institutions and political systems become more transparent and accountable and better ensure that the needs, aspirations and rights of all their people are adequately met? Does the current generation of Arab leaders have the means and motivation to effect such changes? How can broader civil society and the international community also contribute to the process? Who are the drivers for change in the Arab world, and what are the obstacles?

Constitutional, Electoral and Parliamentary Reform

3. Some Arabs are wary of democracy, seeing it as an alien western construct designed to give the West greater economic and political dominion. Others argue that democracy is ill-adapted to the cultural and social mores of Arab society; it will lead to

the breakdown of social cohesion and order. Critics of these views note they are often associated with autocratic regimes which are reluctant to share power. Reformers call for an Arab 'way forward' which is outward looking and embraces ideas from the wider world.

4. In some Arab countries checks and balances between the executive and legislature are lacking or ill-defined; parliaments exist largely to implement decisions taken by the ruling elite, and have little power to investigate or challenge decisions. Some argue that this is difficult to change because undemocratic governments are tolerated, and supported, by the West because they provide a stability that suits western political and economic interests.

5. Holding elections in a country is not an adequate measure of healthy democracy. They may be rubber-stamp exercises that give a spurious legitimacy. What is needed to enable electors to make an informed choice between candidates who will be accountable for their actions?

Political Reform and the Role of Civil Society in Arab States

6. The development of a broad spectrum of policy-based political parties and strong civil society organisations is crucial to democratisation. The development of secular political parties, open to all irrespective of religion, is desirable. Many argue that women's political participation should be encouraged by special transitional measures such as quotas for women's representation. However, a complete separation of politics and religion is unlikely and some question whether it is desirable. Islam is a central element in education, the law and in people's everyday lives. It will remain influential in politics and may play a positive role if it does not generate intolerance. The strong constituency for 'political Islam' deserves a political voice; most people reject its more extreme manifestations. Their views need to be promoted within the democratisation process and the ideas of extremists need to be confronted and rejected. Greater efforts are needed – by government and non-governmental actors alike – to engage moderate Islamists in a reform dialogue. Governments should not hide behind the 'Islamist threat'

and must accept that all their citizens have a right to participate when committed to peaceful procedures.

7. Civil society, particularly when it is effectively organised and adequately resourced, may be a powerful engine for change in any country. The development and influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and pressure groups is uneven in the Arab world. They may be suppressed by authoritarian governments; or run by the governments themselves. External funding from foreign governments can call into question their independence.

8. This said, civil society organisations (CSOs) and movements have taken root and are increasingly influential, in many Arab societies; for example regarding human rights, the promotion of women's interests, and the defence of media freedom. Arab governments need to develop positive relations with civil society and to see it as a genuine partner to achieve common objectives and contribute to policy. While such a partnership risks leading to the co-option of NGOs/CSOs by strong governments, some element of partnership and dialogue is necessary for the successful promotion of reform. CSOs need to broaden their membership and resource bases, develop regional networks for the exchange of good practice and engage openly and constructively with the governments of the countries in which they operate. Building capacity in NGOs/CSOs should be a major focus in promoting reform.

Media

9. The Arab media is vibrant and diverse despite severe restrictions placed on it in certain countries, where Ministries of Information exert effective censorship. Arab Governments should be encouraged to improve laws protecting freedom of speech. The advent of the internet and satellite TV has eased and broadened uncensored access to information and analysis is for those who can afford the prerequisite technologies. Promoting an expansion of the private media market could facilitate reform by providing consumers with more choice and better quality.

10. While some journalists are content to be mouthpieces of the government, a younger generation is emerging which is more independent and 'professional'. They need to be supported and encouraged, and foreign assistance with training can help in this effort.

11. The media has a crucial role to play in reporting the progress of reform, and by instigating debate, promoting reform and educating people about its consequences. This role needs to be developed alongside the requirement to entertain. Some argue that the media must be self-regulating, for example by adopting a code of ethics concerning output and journalistic integrity. Journalists must not be jailed, or media outlets shut down if there are errors in reporting. Arab governments need to encourage an independent, responsible media.

Role of Education and Information Technology

12. Education is fundamental for participatory governance. Once people have a certain degree of education, they are better equipped to: learn and understand how their society works and is governed, make informed political and economic decisions; articulate their needs. Education must be available to all and at all ages.

13. Education must be high priority for Arab governments given their youthful populations. Tertiary education has often received support; much more must be given for primary or secondary education, to ensure access to education for the less well off. Illiteracy rates (among the highest in the world) particularly amongst women and girls must decline. Social and, in some cases, religious 'obstacles' to formal education and the best use of women in the work force must be overcome. 'Learning' must extend beyond the ability to memorise and repeat 'facts' and involve analysis and critical enquiry. Arab Governments should review both religious and non-religious educational curricula to inject more innovative thinking. Resources must be improved for teacher training, including in-service, curriculum development and appropriate modern text books,

14. There are strong internal pressures for wholesale reform of education systems, not least because of the need for Arab countries to keep up with a rapidly globalising world. Technical assistance on decentralising Arab education systems is needed, as well as expanding English-language instruction and establishing lifelong learning through adult education. More regional cooperation in the education sphere is needed, particularly regarding curriculum development and textbook design (which need to be sensitive to Arab culture and values but adapted to the 'realities' of the modern world). Reforms need clearly-focussed professional management and educators must not be isolated from other parts of society; educational reform requires greater participation from those outside Ministries of Education and government.

15. Some argue that religion has too central a role in Arab education systems; this has slowed the development of broader-based curricula and, some argue, it conditions young minds to be intolerant of different people(s) and ideas. They argue teaching and teaching materials should recognise and celebrate religious and cultural diversity. The introduction of civic education in the formal curriculum (which is occurring in some countries of the region) is needed to encourage greater tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Critically, more money needs to be spent on education.

Economic Activity and the Private Sector

16. The high concentration of economic and political power, the high dependence of states economies on oil and gas revenues and low levels of popular taxation have underpinned authoritarian and autocratic government in much of the Arab world.

17. Globalisation, and the need to be competitive, has prompted some Arab business to diversify its activity and to press governments to generate conditions for the private sector to flourish and attract investment. Key to a healthy investment environment is transparency, the rule of law, and a diminution of bureaucracy and corruption. The economic underpinning of these arguments can be more persuasive than political calls for reform. The reform agenda championed by business must be encouraged and developed further, while the private sector should be engaged in advocacy of political reform too. Civil society, government and the private sector need

to recognise that they have a mutuality of interests and to begin to develop constructive partnerships. CSOs may find younger entrepreneurs constitute a receptive constituency to work with, as they are unlikely to have longstanding business relations with government which may constrain their older counterparts in pressing for reform.

Role of the external actors

18. Some argue that the US presence in the Middle East (notably Iraq) and the Arab-Israel conflict have prevented reform, not least because they generate extremism. However, others argue that the process of democratic reform is too important to be delayed or sidelined until these issues are settled. Yet robust US engagement to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute would, many believe, much ameliorate Arab mistrust of US intentions in the region and gain the US greater credibility as an advocate of democracy.

19. The United States Government has committed itself to promoting democracy in the Arab world and to remove the conditions that encourage extremism and terrorism. While some question US motives, doubts are also voiced about the consistency of this policy and its durability. Does the US raise with all countries in the region principles of human rights, political representation, tolerance, the rule of law, women's rights and transparency in decision-making? Or only with those where the process is easier? Will promoting reform be a long-term sustainable policy in a process governed by four-year election cycles? Iraq is a major test for US policy. The establishment of security and of a properly functioning democracy in that country will constitute significant success. The assumption that Iraq may set off a democratic ripple effect has, however, been strained by current realities in Iraq.

20. The US Government works through bilateral and multilateral governmental initiatives and provides assistance through such initiatives as the G8's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative and the bilateral Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The G8's Forum for the Future is considered to have made a promising start,

but needs to be developed into a meeting point where governments, the private sector and NGOs are involved on an equal footing.

21. There is widespread agreement that reform cannot be imposed on the Middle East but has to be generated by the governments and people of the region. External actors can endeavour to assist. To do so, there is a need to develop a country-by-country strategy, contextually sensitive, and broaden contact with actors in the region beyond a relatively narrow constituency of liberal and secular circles. Reviving US educational and cultural exchanges would contribute towards this.

22. Arab countries and the European Union (EU) have strong economic and trade relations as well as geographical proximity and cultural affinity. Some question whether the EU has sufficiently used its assets to promote political reform, despite its longstanding funding of NGOs in the region. Recent policy initiatives are intended to remedy this by providing benchmarks and incentives. Consistency is required in implementing this new approach.

23. Reform-minded individuals and organisations that choose to work with and receive funding from western governments face a challenge in retaining their credibility on the 'Arab street'. This reality must be addressed by external actors, who should 'listen and learn' in their efforts to support reform.

Conclusion and Action for the Future

21. Despite county-specific differences, the conditions required for reform to succeed are:

- concerted popular demand for change: citizens should know their rights and be able to pursue them, which requires respect for fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and assembly;

- strong, stable, internally-democratic and visionary institutions that will help guide society through the process of change, even if it is slow and painful. (This could include for example charismatic leaders, democratically elected parliaments, the judiciary, civil society organisations, religious leaders, professional or labour groups, and a responsible and professional media). The role of women and youth in promoting reform should also be given special attention.
- external help in the form of support for reformers, including financial and other development assistance to help mitigate the negative effects of change, and to train, for example, security and defence forces in their role as guarantors of democracy and security.
- developing true partnerships and promoting reconciliation. Far more can be achieved once all actors in society resolve animosities and tensions and accept that they share common objectives and interests. In the international arena, there has to be more transparency and inclusiveness. Western governments must be prepared to listen to the views of all representative groups, not just those that tell them what they want to hear. Assistance programmes must be owned by the countries to which they are directed and not designed in western capitals to further their own political or economic agendas.
- shaping a new political vision; a group of confident democratic and economically vibrant countries, enriched by and respecting their own unique cultural and religious values.

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