
Engage
A New American Plan for Competitive Soft Power in Arab Lands
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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. IT IS TIME TO ENGAGE ARAB LIBERALS

American discussions of policy toward Arab countries have historically revolved around two big questions: one asks whether and how much to intervene militarily in the region; the other, whether to coddle Arab autocrats for the sake of stability or abet their opponents in the name of democracy.[1] Americans have weighed these choices amid the bitter aftermath of the Iraq War and the chaos, civil strife, and resurgent authoritarianism that followed the Arab Spring. They tend to foresee an Arab future similar to the recent past — in which armed groups perpetuate sectarian conflict, dictators and Islamists compete for dominance, Iran pursues power by exploiting local divisions, and hopes for liberalizing reform remain dim. This picture has understandably led a war-weary American public to prefer whatever policies lessen the country's entanglement in Arab affairs.[2] It has also cast the legacy of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as a warning against new calls to transform the Middle East.[3]

But how accurate is the picture? A more granular view of the region does not challenge the assessment that further turmoil lies

ahead. It nonetheless reveals the seeds of a potentially brighter future. Arab programming and projects at a range of international development organizations provide ample evidence of civic actors in nearly every Arab country who are striving against tough odds to rebuild or reform their institutions and societies. These include educators who are crafting new curricula to teach tolerance to youth; broadcasters who message the virtue of peacemaking to their audiences; labor and rights activists struggling for human dignity, gender equality, and opportunity; and entrepreneurs who seek to grow job-creating businesses. Some reform-minded figures even work within the halls of authoritarian government: liberally-minded officials struggling uphill to stem corruption, instill rule of law principles, and otherwise vest the population in the survival of the state.[4]

Viewed in the aggregate, these exceptional men and women do not offer an immediate answer to the extremism, political violence, and state failure that the United States and other countries have sacrificed blood and treasure to confront. But, in the long run, their success will make or break the larger campaign to defeat the same pathologies. As the region remains a fulcrum of international security and the global economy, the question of how to strengthen local Arab efforts for positive change should become a long-term focus of American policy — especially for those who prioritize a reduction in military commitments overseas.

Study and encounter the region's indigenous liberal reformists and one finds a recurring theme: they want outside assistance. Some seek financial support, while others crave strategic partnership with foreign peers in their respective fields — from media and education to the private sector and organized labor — including and especially from Americans. Many also feel that the U.S. government enjoys special leverage to provide assistance through the power of diplomacy, particularly in U.S.-allied Arab states whose governments rely on Washington for

aid.[5] What these actors seek, in other words, is not the "hard power" of military intervention but rather a competitive form of soft power: the concerted deployment of civic, diplomatic, economic, and political tools to strengthen their hand.[6]

Arab liberal reformists who share this desire understand that international engagement is a mixed blessing. Reactionary forces in the region seek to tar all who disagree with them as stooges of an outside power, and therefore seize upon evidence that their opponents have actually found international partners. But such reviling is, in the judgment of many liberals, an acceptable price to pay: they routinely endure the accusations anyway, and would rather have the benefit of the assistance than suffer the onslaught alone. To some degree, moreover, the accusations play into liberals' hands: branded as players in a powerful global network, they win a measure of protection from local antagonists who fear the outside world — as well as new followers who want to join a winning team.

So the case for supporting Arab liberal reformists merits greater attention than it receives in present-day American policy debates on the Middle East. Consider the gaps in the two central questions noted above: whether and how much to withdraw from the region militarily, and whether to back autocrats or their domestic opponents. The first question essentially reduces the notion of "intervention" to one of hard power alone. The second implies a binary choice between regimes and their enemies, pitting Arabs of conscience against a monolithic authoritarian establishment. This reductionist portrayal diminishes the possibility of empowering reformists *within* the establishment, or bringing state and society together in a partnership for change.

To be sure, the role of "soft power" is not altogether absent from the mainstream American discussion. Some voices use the term to signal the power of diplomacy to end costly wars.[7] For others, soft power refers to the power of the American example: rather than proactively engage Arab affairs, they argue, Ameri-

cans should focus on modeling an enlightened society to the world.[8] But these conceptions of soft power offer little practical help to local reformists in Arab lands. The envisioned war-ending diplomacy — itself concerned primarily with influencing military outcomes — does not address the granularities of civil reform in the region. As to the hope that Arabs will spontaneously emulate the American example — or that of other developed democracies — it provides neither assistance nor insight regarding the many stages of social, economic, and political development that would lead to that outcome. Without such help, democratic models can be a dream, but not a guidepost.

A richer discussion of the potentialities of American soft power in the region would therefore begin with new questions. For example, who are the local actors now pressing for liberal reform in Arab societies? In what professional sectors do they operate? What are their visions and strategies to bring change, and what are their prospects for success? What are their strengths and weaknesses, and what specific forms of assistance do they need to gain ground? As no directory exists with comprehensive answers to these questions, a separate line of inquiry would be necessary to help create one: how can Americans identify liberal reformists in the region systematically? Amid ongoing political and social upheaval, how does one keep abreast of the shifting competitive landscape and adjust one's plans to support reform accordingly? A third set of questions relates to the gap in language, culture, and mutual awareness between Arab liberal reformists in a range of fields and their counterparts in the United States. The U.S. government, after all, does not necessarily offer the expertise in liberal education reform, media messaging, business development, or other crucial realms in which assistance is needed. What would it take to develop a mechanism to connect American nongovernment specialists in these fields to their peers in North Africa and the Middle East?

How would one structure and implement such partnerships given the range of differences and barriers?

This complex discussion thickens, in turn, because the region is so diverse and fractured as to challenge the wisdom of even thinking about it as a contiguous whole. It is not news, for starters, that the landmass commonly labeled the "Arab Muslim world" remains ethnically and religiously variegated, even as minorities flee its purges and wars at an accelerating pace. Furthermore, each country's unique political and security circumstances differentiate the local field of opportunity for liberals in particular. On the one hand, for example, labor organizing and political party building are banned in Saudi Arabia and three of the five Gulf states, whereas both forms of activity manifest robustly across the Maghreb.[9] On the other, some of the most unfriendly environments for organized labor or overt political action nonetheless offer more subtle opportunities. Witness countries in which the government itself has adopted the strategic practice of promoting tolerance, such as the UAE: governmental and semi-governmental organizations mandated to do so provide a framework for liberals to pursue some, albeit not all, of their goals with establishment support.[10] As to the most chaotic territories in the region — war-torn Yemen and Libya, for example — they tend to feature massive public demand, born of great suffering, for the kind of national reconciliation and institution-building efforts that liberals are well suited to wage.[11] At the same time, amid the chaos of these territories, even staunch government support for liberals can do little to protect them: feuding armed militias, united only in their opposition to any semblance of liberal order, severely constrain civic action. How American civilians can play a supporting role on such terrain is yet another tough question.

All of which is to say that in conjuring a plan to assist Arab liberals from North Africa to the Gulf, a new rubric may be

necessary to break down the territory according to its differing opportunities and challenges.

## 2. AMERICA'S HISTORY OF COMPETITIVE ENGAGEMENT OFFERS INSPIRATION

Although the idea of deploying competitive soft power wins little attention in current Mideast policy deliberations, Americans historically were not green to the practice. Shortly after the Second World War, the United States developed a range of tools to compete with Soviet expansionism on foreign soil. In the seminal campaign of post-war reconstruction known as the Marshall Plan, the U.S., together with its NATO allies, provided Western Europe not only military protection and economic support, but also the benefits of on-the-ground political action. A generation of American operatives accrued the language skills and area knowledge necessary to engage the local landscape. While Stalin sought to impose his own rules of governance by overriding the will of the majority, Americans provided financial and logistical support to help European liberal democrats counter their pro-Soviet rivals. These American operatives enjoyed a mandate from Washington to act and react according to rapidly shifting circumstances on the ground.[12]

Cold War-era soft power techniques saw successes as well as failures, and entered periods of remission only to see new revivals. Where they did succeed, they were often crucially enriched by innovative Americans working in a civilian capacity — sometimes in consort with the government and other times on their own.[13] For example, American intellectuals supported the development of student groups, publications, and other platforms to empower liberal intellectual opponents of Soviet communism behind the Iron Curtain. Some of America's leading journalists applied their talent to transmit honest reporting into the countries where Soviet propaganda otherwise monopolized the info-

sphere: Radio Free Europe for the Russian-occupied East, and Radio Liberty for listeners inside the Soviet Union.

The American labor movement, for its part, had been active in fighting totalitarianism overseas since the 1930s. Motivated by the principle of solidarity for all workers, unions had raised their own money to assist victims of Nazi and Soviet oppression, and during the Second World War, put their international networks at the disposal of the U.S. government to help gather intelligence and sabotage Nazi installations. After the war, the government went on to supplement unions financially so they could help protect the machinery of the Marshall Plan from Communist attacks. The American Federation of Labor, for example, partnered with anti-Stalinist European union leaders to prevent the Soviets from blocking docks, railroads, and barges in France, Italy, and Germany that were used to unload cargo vital for reconstruction from American ships.[14] Decades later, one of the final blows to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe would be struck by the first-ever independent trade union in the Soviet bloc — co-founded and steered by Lech Walesa, an ally of the United States.

The story of how these remarkable capacities fell out of use speaks to the obstacles the United States will meet in any attempt to resurrect them, as well as the challenge of re-imagining them to suit present-day realities in Arab countries. At the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama's landmark essay "The End of History?" argued that the absence of an alternative ideology to compete with liberal democracy meant that worldwide progress toward the latter was inevitable, and nothing needed to be done to promote or defend it.[15] This view, then widely embraced, became a kind of implicit doctrine with respect to American civil engagement in transitioning societies around the world: since liberal democracy faced no competition and required no advocacy, the United States needed only to facilitate the inevitable march toward it. A hallmark of this shift was the closure of the

United States Information Agency in 1999 — long a powerful advocate for liberal universalist principles and American interests around the world.[16]

Other U.S. government-supported initiatives, adopting the same "End of History" mindset, offered mainly to share the tools and techniques used to govern the United States, but largely ceased to build support for the underpinning values and ideals. For example, at overseas branch offices of the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute, a local candidate for political office could learn how to write a press release, deliver a speech, or organize an electoral campaign. A president or prime minister could receive free advice on how to run his staff, or free computers and database software to manage the flow of legislation among branches of government. The organizations adopted a position of neutrality on the political orientation of locals who participated, welcoming a spectrum of ideological leanings.[17]

Such projects provided a valuable service for transitioning, post-Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe that were already united in the aspiration to become liberal democracies as well as culturally and politically oriented to pursue it. But the premise that "history had ended" did not apply in authoritarian Arab states — home to layers of political, ideological, and sectarian tension — where the same American NGOs also deployed. As indicated earlier, tensions simmered between Arab regimes and Islamist movements, the latter having gained ground thanks to sustained backing from Sunni Gulf states and Shi'i Islamist Iran.[18] Islamists consolidated their hold on mosques and seminaries, and then, with the rise of regional satellite television, built broadcast networks to indoctrinate an even larger audience. Arab liberals tried to compete, but lacked support or a public space in which to function: regimes blocked the emergence of independent civil institutions through which alternative political voices could make their case. Some liberal activists, fighting against the

tide, looked to the United States for assistance, but Washington did little for them.

The potential threat posed by Islamist movements did not escape notice in Washington, to be sure. In 1992, an Islamist party in Algeria captured international attention by showing it could win an election by espousing a maximalist, anti-Western ideology. (The election was aborted by the military government, triggering a civil war.) Washington policymakers also observed that Arab jihadist veterans of the U.S.-backed Afghan war against the Soviets were returning to their home countries, buoyed by Islamist propaganda, to wage low-intensity warfare against U.S.-allied Arab governments.[19]

But Americans who raised alarms about these developments were typically dismissed as alarmists, or aging Cold Warriors in search of a new enemy. In a repudiation of their warnings, the 1993 "Meridian House Doctrine" declared, "The Cold War is not being replaced with a new competition between Islam and the West. Islamic fundamentalism is not the next 'ism.'" Calling on Americans to partner with the "Muslim world," the "Doctrine" effectively conflated Islam with a subset of Islamist movements that claimed authority in the name of Islam.[20] The Doctrine's proponents generally derided concerns about Islamism as hostility toward the religion itself. A school of Islamist champions emerged, moreover, that viewed the same movements as America's natural partners in democratization — "reformists in an Islamist hue."[21] These voices also alleged that policymakers who portrayed Islamists as adversaries were merely trumping up a new Middle Eastern threat in order to shore up the case for the American-Israeli alliance. The first World Trade Center bombing, perpetrated in 1993 by Sunni Islamists under the leadership of a Brooklyn-based Egyptian cleric, did not substantively affect this discussion.

In retrospect, the Meridian House Doctrine and its proponents lent support to Islamist parties that have since wreaked

havoc in the region and beyond. At the same time, in calling for a deeper relationship with Muslim peoples, the "Meridians" also offered a fresh perspective. American political engagement with Arab allies during the Cold War had generally been paper-thin, limited to government-to-government cooperation at senior levels. And indeed, the preponderant American focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict had straitjacketed the larger discussion of Arab societies: pro-Israel voices in Washington, while legitimately worried about Islamism, showed little commitment to addressing the domestic plight of those populations in which Islamism was flourishing. Israel's American critics, for their part, tended to internalize Arab political elites' assertion that the conflict with Israel was the root cause of the region's woes — rather than expose this claim as a tool of demagoguery to obscure the repression, injustice, and nepotism by which they ruled.

The experience of fighting the Cold War could in any case provide only limited guidance for any American attempt to engage this fraught landscape. The struggle over reform in Arab countries involved the interplay of ancient cultures and religions, modern ideologies, and loose, ever-shifting coalitions of state and non-state actors of which most policymakers had insufficient knowledge. Nor could a single binary analogue to the overarching conflict between Soviet communism and liberal democracy serve to define the new mission. Furthermore, because Islamist movements used religious proof texts to advance their political agenda, an attempt to counter them would inevitably entail a contest over the meaning of those texts and the broader role of Islam in public life. The notion of doing so faced resistance throughout the West — in particular, from the large community of American and European elites who had come to regard cultural engagement on foreign soil as "cultural imperialism." Proponents of this view included the lion's share of scholars in Arabic and Islamic studies upon whom Washington would have to rely if it sought to develop a competitive strategy. The related

principle of "cultural relativism," moreover, served to discourage Westerners from passing judgment on any ideology deemed to be "indigenous" — and view Arab liberals, who happen to share liberal universalist principles with many Westerners, as somehow inauthentic.[22]

As to the field of political contest in North Africa and the Middle East, though the United States maintained alliances with some Arab governments on regional and geopolitical security, it did not for the most part enjoy the latitude to act politically on their territory. As indicated earlier, under the Marshall Plan, Western European governments had enabled Americans to engage local political parties, labor movements, intellectuals, and students — assured of the Americans' focus on an enemy they shared, and out of deference to Washington for the aid and protection it provided. By comparison, Arab states — particularly those hewn out of a struggle against Western imperialism — have always been suspicious of American intentions. Might it have been possible to overcome these suspicions, establish trust, and negotiate an arrangement for civil engagement on the basis of mutual concerns? It would have been extremely difficult — but Americans neither developed the expertise, nor used their formidable leverage, to even try.

## 3. A GENERATION OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES HAS PASSED

These limitations came into stark relief over the decade following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Under the George W. Bush administration, mainstream conceptions of the "war on terror" called for a "battle for hearts and minds" to accompany the military struggle against jihadists. But the strategy to win the "battle" did not prioritize the empowerment of Arab liberals. Instead, it revolved around the narrow question of why the United States was so unpopular in the Middle East — commonly posed as,

"Why do they hate us?" The answer that won the day was that anti-Americanism stems from a false perception of the American people and their way of life, willfully promoted by hardline clerics, hostile regimes, and satellite networks like Al-Jazeera. To address the problem, the U.S. government invested heavily in public diplomacy campaigns to correct misunderstandings about America.[23] These amounted to a treatment of the symptoms but not the disease, in the sense that no substantial political challenge to the forces that *propagated* anti-Americanism — or the suffering in which it festered — was attempted.

Some Americans favoring a more expansive soft power campaign initially hoped that the U.S.-led military presence in Iraq would evolve into a Middle Eastern analogue to the Marshall Plan, whereby military and economic assistance would go hand in hand with cultural and political engagement in support of local liberals. Iraqis sharing liberal universalist principles proved more than willing to forge such partnerships. These included members of a moderate political current in Iraq's labor movement who wanted to serve as a bulwark against Islamist groups. They conveyed a desire to partner with the United States in post-war reconstruction, and asked the Coalition Provisional Authority to recognize and empower them[24] — in part by simply proclaiming that unions should "have an influential voice in safeguarding the working man from exploitation and abuse," as Douglas MacArthur said after taking control of Japan in 1945.[25] Some Iraqi intellectuals, for their part, had been drawing up plans for education reform, aiming to instill a new understanding of what it means to be Iraqi that would encourage reconciliation among identities and sects.[26] They petitioned American authorities for the opportunity to bring these ideas to the education ministry, which at the time remained largely in the hands of members of Saddam's Baath party. Moderate clerics sought authority over the mosques. Iraqi judges and lawyers wanted help reforming the legal system. Businesspeople running small- and medium-sized

enterprises tried to interest American investors. Iraqis and Iraqi Americans came together to propose creating a museum of national memory to foster reconciliation. Many locals, in a general expression of support for these endeavors, memorably shooed away foreign jihadists. They rejected jihadists' call to attack American soldiers with the retort, "We don't want you here. America is going to make a new Japan out of us."[27]

But rather than seize these opportunities, the Bush Administration placed post-war reconstruction in the hands of military officers who lacked training for such endeavors or the linguistic and area knowledge necessary to navigate the civil landscape. The Coalition Provisional Authority snubbed unions and moderate clerics, avoided the complex internal politics of the education ministry, and left the private sector to U.S. government contractors, some of whom exploited their privilege and modeled corrupt practices. Meanwhile, a soft power army backed by Iran penetrated local media, mosques, schools, bureaucracy, and the emerging political system. Gulf donors bankrolled the revival of Sunni Islamist parties that Saddam had suppressed for decades. The U.S. made no particular effort to block these activities, adopting instead the "end of history" posture of neutrality in the country's internal politics. Citing the objective of a "level playing field," it facilitated elections without supporting candidates. A skewed political environment ensued: Liberals, lacking a sponsor, never had a fair chance to challenge their firmly backed opponents. Jihadists, for their part, gushed through the country's thinly guarded borders and recruited local fighters from the former Iraqi army, which might itself have assisted in reconstruction had the Coalition Provisional Authority not dissolved it.

Further opportunities to substantially engage the region's liberals came after the Arab Spring revolutions, when post-dictatorship power vacuums spawned a brief political free-for-all. Now Americans had the chance to forge civil partnerships without the baggage of doubling as an occupying force. One of

the more auspicious environments for such action — initially, at least — was post-Qadhafi Libya. A U.S.-led air campaign had proved crucial in ousting the late strongman, to the cheers of millions of Libyans. A Gallup poll in spring 2012 found Libyans' approval of the United States to be among the highest ever recorded in the Middle East and North Africa. Washington, the poll reported, had "an excellent opportunity to build a mutually beneficial, productive relationship with Libya for the first time in decades and could potentially find itself with a new, democratic ally in North Africa."[28] In July 2012, Libyans voted — and defied the trend of Islamist victories in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere: the winner, a Pittsburgh University-educated political scientist, cruised to victory on an agenda of liberal reform and cooperation with the United States.

The country needed soft power assistance in meeting cultural, educational, economic, and political challenges similar to those that had faced Iraq a decade earlier. Also as in the Iraqi case, Libya needed help establishing the requisite domestic security for soft power projects to develop. Hundreds of private militias were carving enclaves across the country, including portions of all the major cities, and refusing to accept the authority of any central government. The situation had all the hallmarks of a descent into warlordism.[29]

Aspects of these challenges were explored by an American policy researcher who spent extensive time in the country. He envisioned a program to address the proliferation of private armies: Through "demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration," militias would receive political and financial incentives to properly integrate into the government's security sector, while jobs in other sectors opened up to lure fighters away from armed life altogether. The Libyan government made urgent pleas to the United States for the financial support, equipment, and expertise that would be necessary to implement such a plan on a sufficiently large scale.[30] The civilian population resoundingly

approved — with some agitating for it publicly at considerable risk to themselves.

Four young men in Tripoli, for example, launched an Internet radio program called "Rough Talk" (Kalam Wa'r), which called out the militias by name and appealed to their soldiers to desert. It also called on fighters and civilians alike to shed loyalties and ideologies that would fracture the country — and develop a constructive, alternative vision based on egalitarianism, tolerance, and the rule of law.[31] At a time when Libyans were hungry for new media and new voices, "Rough Talk" spread virally online, then won a weekly slot on a government-controlled radio network. They went on to appear on several Libyan television channels. Through their popularity, they achieved the capacity to foment civil protest against the militias — and began to do so.[32]

But the fate of the "Rough Talk team" epitomized the arrested development of civil society in Libya. In the summer of 2012, as private brigades began to attack the state, the government put the boys in jail — the only option it had to appease enraged militia leaders while also protecting the broadcasters from retribution. Upon their release, they fled to Malta and kept their heads down for awhile, then came home and ceased all broadcasting.

In the heady weeks before the final episode of "Rough Talk," the venture had demonstrated that liberal actors aspired to bring change through the power of their words. The broadcasters understood the urgency of disbanding the militias, as well as the need to instill an alternative set of cultural values that could transcend the country's divisions. But the United States neither provided support for a concerted "demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration" campaign, nor assisted voices such as the "Rough Talk" team or their thought partners in politics and civil society.

From Baghdad to Tripoli, these missed opportunities for engagement show that while the U.S. has expended substantial military might in Arab countries, it has been strikingly passive

with regard to ideological struggles on the same terrain. Rather than help Arab liberals fight and win, the U.S. effectively ceded the political sphere to other powers. In doing so, it allowed its adversaries to shape political outcomes, thereby setting the stage for future conflict.

## 4. A NEW OPPORTUNITY HAS ARRIVED

A break with this tragic history, as suggested previously, would see the U.S. government at last prioritize strengthening the hand of Arab liberals. It would do so through a sustained campaign of competitive soft power in which the government is aided by American citizens working in consort with Arab liberals in their respective fields. The difficulty of waging such an effort, however, lies not only in Arab countries but also at home. To restate, many of the practices of competitive soft power that the U.S. government used effectively during the Cold War have fallen into disuse. The impediments to reviving these practices have meanwhile grown: in addition to the fact that America's cultural elites no longer instill the virtues of such work in young people, some intellectuals stigmatize it as a purported form of "cultural imperialism."

To alter this reality will require imagination and enormous effort. Where to begin? As a means to liberate the imagination, let us briefly escape the hyper-partisanship of the United States today and think back to a time when the domestic political barriers to waging a competitive soft power revival were much lower: the rare period of national unity following the September 11, 2001 attacks. Amid a surge of patriotism, the American public had given Washington an overwhelming mandate to challenge extremist ideologies in Arab countries.[33] In addition to a spike in military enlistment by Americans of fighting age, Americans of all ages were looking to their elected leadership for guidance as to what they could do personally to support the "war on terror."[34]

U.S.-allied Arab autocrats meanwhile faced massive global pressure to halt the corruption and abuse that had driven so many Arab Muslims into the arms of extremists, and to stop inciting against the U.S. and its democratic partners.

In sum, three key conditions for any effort to resuscitate American competitive soft power and deploy it in the Middle East and North Africa were in place: the U.S. government enjoyed popular support for unconventional measures, American citizens shared the desire to play a role, and Arab states showed willingness to engage foreign partners in fostering their own domestic reforms. It would have been no stretch, under these circumstances, for the President to designate support for liberal universalist principles and the Arabs who champion them as an American strategic priority. Nor would he face an enthusiasm gap among American citizens in asking them to lend their own capacities to further the cause of liberalism in Arab lands. Nor would Congress disappoint him if asked to implant the new agenda in all the overseas development institutions it funds, including USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the newly formed Middle East Partnership Initiative. As the President in turn strove to deploy these principles and assets on the soil of U.S.-allied Arab states, he would find a cooperative mindset among Arab autocrats, and, as described previously, an Arab liberal social current keen to partner with the United States.

Before exploring how to compensate for the absence of these auspicious political circumstances today, it remains to describe a further, crucial challenge in waging a competitive soft power revival in Arab lands, then as now. It is to build, train, and equip a new cadre of personnel responsible for leading soft power campaigns within the region. A term used in government parlance that suits them is "expeditionary diplomats." These bilingual, bicultural actors would deploy to Arab countries in order to seek out liberals, befriend them, probe their potential, ambitions, and challenges, and innovate ways to help them. Expe-

ditionary diplomats are network builders who identify an opportunity to promote positive change, foster a plan to do so, and bring together its component parts — only to move on to a new opportunity and a new set of local actors.[35] In Arab societies atomized by government-induced paranoia and civil unrest, they can bring disparate local elements together that might not otherwise engage one another. They can meanwhile connect these Arab partners, typically isolated from the outside world as well, to resources and professional networks across the United States and beyond, forging transnational teams and organizing them for action.

To build a cadre of expeditionary diplomats for this purpose, the government must not only train them but also create a career path for them. That is, it must offer them continuity of mission, space and resources in each of the region's embassies, and opportunities for promotion alongside peers who practice the more common forms of diplomacy. It must also expend substantial political capital with America's Arab allies to negotiate security and freedom of operation, both for expeditionary diplomats and the local teams they build in Arab countries. At the same time, the practice of expeditionary diplomacy need not and should not be the government's exclusive domain: foundations and NGOs committed to political, social, and economic development in the region should prepare and equip their own teams of "expeditionary social entrepreneurs" to similarly scout out and develop opportunities for civil action. This cadre, too, requires its own career structure and incentives to grow and flourish.

The combined efforts of all these players, in turn, stand to be strengthened by a central coordinating body. It would debrief expeditionary diplomats and their civilian equivalents continually and assess the impact of their projects, the synergies among them, and the potential for replication of a given success. Combining this aggregate knowledge with intelligence from other sources, the cadre would also trace the larger competitive

landscape — including the activity of hostile movements and powers with soft power capacities of their own. What would emerge is a living map of the field of contest. It would provide a sky view for expeditionary diplomats on the ground, a detailed understanding of how American civil society can be helpful, and a razor-sharp diplomatic agenda for senior officials to pursue with Arab leaders.

Returning to the present political moment, all of these measures seem like a distant dream, as none of the three conditions described above remains in place. Washington manifests little interest in advancing a policy to assist Arab liberals, let alone the capacity to muster bipartisan support for one. To the contrary, a rare point of consensus across the aisle, noted earlier, is the desire to withdraw from the Middle East and North Africa, as Obama, Trump, and Biden administration policies have all shown.[36] Nor does this attitude distinguish meaningfully between military withdrawal and human disengagement: recent years have seen cutbacks in State Department funding and staffing, as well as reduced support for USAID, NED, MEPI, and other major endowments.[37] Many American citizens, for their part, have turned inward, registering much less interest in foreign affairs in general and Arab affairs in particular.[38] U.S.-allied Arab capitals, meanwhile, have seen a post-Arab Spring retrenchment of authoritarianism. While the policies of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have featured some liberal social reforms, they have also asserted new heights of control over the management of reform — and punished liberals who tried to act independently.[39] When in 2012 Egyptian authorities shut down the offices of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and Freedom House, seizing files and arresting dozens, they exhibited yet again their profound distrust of these institutions.[40] Thus it remains as challenging as ever — if not more so — to negotiate a space for Americans to engage Arab civic actors in country.

Yet the failure to address these problems and engage competitively only defeats the goal, shared by so many Americans, of reducing military commitments overseas. As section one of this introduction argued and section three demonstrated, time and again the United States sent soldiers into harm's way yet ceded the post-war political sphere to hostile powers. In doing so, it allowed its adversaries to shape political outcomes, setting the stage for future conflict. Add to this clear and simple case for reviving American competitive soft power the fact that doing so costs pennies on the dollar compared to war and incurs a far lower toll in human life. It stands to reason that if opinion leaders make such a case compellingly to Americans on a sufficiently large scale, the widespread yearning to bring troops home will prompt its own demand for this nonviolent means of promoting change.

With this mindset firmly in place, bipartisan consensus becomes possible, and the power of American creativity and grit can overcome the various obstacles described above. For example, the fact that the virtues of competitive soft power have been ignored by some cultural elites and stigmatized by others can inspire a reformist intellectual wave on American campuses to change this climate: new educational curricula to rekindle the expeditionary spirit; new polemics to break the false "cultural imperialist" taboo. The fact that it will take years to nurture a new cadre of expeditionary diplomats and social entrepreneurs can inspire an interim strategy while young recruits develop the requisite skills: build on the unprecedented number of mid-career professionals who already possess some of them. After all, the United States now harbors considerably more bilingual and bicultural Arab Americans in a range of fields than it did a generation ago. Furthermore, since the advent of the Abraham Accords, more Jewish Americans are spending time in Arab countries, studying the language and cultures, and building their own bonds of friendship and trust.

As to the fact that U.S.-allied Arab autocracies remain as resistant as ever to American political action on their territory, they are also more concerned than ever about the staying power of America's commitment to the region.[41] Through shrewd diplomacy, the United States can leverage foreign aid and other wanted forms of assistance to negotiate a space for Americans to partner with local actors in these countries. The same kind of resistance does not exist, meanwhile, in those portions of the region where the state is weak or failing. America's Arab allies even welcome efforts by outside powers to promote stable governance and civil peace within these territories. Nor in any part of the region can an autocrat or militia fully block alternative forms of civil engagement that happen online: a generation after the September 11 attacks, the potential of information and communications technologies to serve as cross-border tools for coordination and partnership has vastly expanded, and remains underutilized.

These remarks began by observing that American discussions of Mideast policy reflect a gloss on the region that is both overly militarized and falsely dichotomized. The case for reviving and deploying America's competitive capacities in Arab lands is as much a case for breaking out of this narrow gloss, and exploring Arab societies in fully human, three-dimensional terms. Americans must and will surely continue to probe the region for the threats it poses and the need to neutralize them. They must also explore the region for the opportunities it poses and the means to nurture them.

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# INTERFAITH INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE RECONCILIATION AND TOLERANCE

*Hundreds of interreligious dialogue initiatives have formed in Arab countries — including in wartorn lands, where sectarian fissures are the most in need of mending.*

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Islamist movements, claiming authority in the name of Islam, have spread contempt for other religions and rival sects through mosques and seminaries for over a century — at times with support or acquiescence from certain Arab states, at times in all-out opposition to them. The mindset they molded helped jihadists win recruits for violent campaigns in Arab lands and beyond.[1] The ideology and its fighters remain a potent force. At the same time, the region also features religious reformists who strive against difficult odds to roll back their legacy. The remedies these reformists prescribe include a proactive policy of inter-religious engagement. That is, they seek to build friendship and cooperation across the barriers of sect and faith in order to humanize each side to the other (or others), thereby insulating the society as a whole from extremist overtures. They believe that in

doing so, they are helping to make viable states out of torn societies.

One such venture formed in Iraq in November 2010, after ISIS slaughtered 58 priests, worshippers, bystanders, and police at an Assyrian church in Baghdad. Saad Salloum — a Sunni Muslim liberal activist and professor of political science at nearby Mustansiriya University — had studied and befriended numerous Muslim clerics as well as leaders of Iraq's dwindling religious minority communities. "Even as religious extremism has gathered force," he wrote,

> major strands of Iraq's diverse religious life remain firmly rooted in moderation and even quietism. Viewing the situation with a measure of optimism, one might say that Iraq has less a religious problem in need of a political solution than a political problem which moderate religious leaders can help solve.[2]

In the wake of the massacre, while members of the ruling party paid lip service to Christian mourners, Salloum scrambled a dozen peers, including friends from the local Dominican Fathers Monastery, to form the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue. Their founding statement pledged to restore traditions of tolerance that had marked the finer periods of Iraq's multi-denominational past.[3] With a modest grant from the Imam Al-Khoei Foundation — a moderate Shi'ite Islamic trust — the ad hoc coalition evolved into the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, an umbrella group welcoming Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Sabeans, Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, Kaka'i, and Bahai alongside Sunnis and Shi'ites. While focused on the Iraqi interior, the group also welcomed Iraqi diaspora communities of all the same faiths to play a role.[4]

Thirteen years later, the organization still stands. In consort with a liberal communications NGO which Salloum also

founded, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, the group has published book-length studies of all Iraq's constituent identities. It has lobbied the government to recognize non-monotheistic faiths and convened public vigils in defiance of terrorism. It has sought to instill habits of tolerance in Iraqi citizens through staged encounters and workshops, both in the capital and most of the provinces.[5] Fieldwork and opinion surveys by Masarat indicate that young people are more receptive to its message than older generations. Before-and-after queries of workshop participants, moreover, suggest that their experience actually fosters a more tolerant outlook.[6]

For its efforts, Masarat and the Iraqi Council have won European recognition and a small amount of Western philanthropic assistance. In 2018, Salloum received Norway's Stefanus Prize for outstanding contributions to defending freedom of religion.[7] International trusts including the British Council have supported some of the Masarat workshops. Though the group remains strapped for cash and relies overwhelmingly on volunteer work, these gains have helped it operate in the face of hostility and pressure from state and non-state actors in Iraq. Among recent problems, during an Iraqi government crackdown on protests in 2019, Masarat faced bogus bureaucratic challenges to its legal status.[8] When earlier that year some members of the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue sought to act on their commitment to engage Iraqi diaspora Jews, they faced warnings to withdraw — both from fellow clerics and militia groups — which forced the delay of such engagement. These types of pressure impose a severe constraint on the group's potential to develop. It will take more than the grit of Salloum's team and their modicum of international support to alter the imbalance.

Arab countries now harbor hundreds of inter-religious ventures sharing the stated goal to advance tolerance and acceptance of the other. They vary in size, viability, and perhaps

genuineness. Some arose from the grass roots while others were created by states. They adopt differing approaches to Islamist movements, ranging from confrontation to attempts at cooption. Some ventures have deep pockets, a large international network, or both, whereas others — including promising ones — toil in isolation and subsist on volunteerism. An appraisal of this field of activity is warranted, along with a strategy to strengthen its most capable actors.

## FROM SECTARIAN POLEMICS TO DIALOGUE FOR COEXISTENCE

Trace the region's long history of inter-religious dialogue and most of what one finds, as in premodern Europe, are not encounters for the sake of bridge-building but rather debates over which belief system is right, held for the sake of winning converts.[9] A different kind of interfaith discussion developed in Western countries over the twentieth century. Initially focused on Jewish-Christian rapprochement, it aimed to correct misunderstandings of the other, redress the historic demonization of Jews, and negotiate habits of coexistence, thereby advancing egalitarianism and civil peace. This approach flourished after the Second World War, in the years surrounding the advent of Vatican II. Such dialogue generally adopted the premise that no discussant should attempt to proselytize another.[10]

When in the 1990s such ventures began to incorporate Muslims as well, Arab Islamist emigres to the West were among the first to join. Of these, some prominent participants said that they would participate but not accept the same terms for the encounter. To their own followers, they justified the participation as an opportunity to wage "da'wah" — the call to embrace Islam — and often proceeded to do so onstage. Nor did they reliably bring back a message of understanding to their communities. For

example, after U.S.-based Muslim Brotherhood cleric Said al-Badawi accepted an invitation from the Vatican to meet with Pope John Paul II, he returned home to pen a three-part account in Chicago-based *Al-Zaitounah*, the flagship weekly newspaper of Hamas in the United States. He summed up what he had learned as follows: "Catholicism equals belief in the Trinity, the Trinity equals Paganism, and therefore Catholicism is a Pagan religion."[11] It need hardly be explained that in relegating Catholicism to polytheism — a common tendency in Islamist rhetoric — Badawi did little to mitigate inter-religious tensions.

In Arab countries, by contrast, recent decades have seen the beginnings of a departure from this ancient style, and a shift toward dialogue for the sake of tolerance and nonviolence. Some of the changes arose from top-down government policies, taken in response to a sequence of foreign and domestic pressures. First, after the September 11, 2001 attacks, Western powers pressed Arab governments to stop stoking religious chauvinism by bankrolling or harboring mosques and seminaries that indoctrinated hate. They also called on Arab governments to inculcate a more peaceable alternative. The second form of pressure came from within, as the wave of jihadist mass killing that had toppled the World Trade Center redounded on the region. In 2002, al-Qaeda bombed a synagogue in Tunisia. In 2003, Casablanca suffered triple suicide attacks. Riyadh saw multiple bombings of residential compounds the same year. Similar atrocities followed in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in 2004 and Amman in 2005. These countries now recognized that they too could be victims of jihadist atrocities. Alongside security crackdowns and other measures, governments set out to wage an ideological struggle against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.[12]

A third and more subtle driver of change in inter-religious affairs, peculiar to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, stemmed from elites' desire to manage the globalization of local culture. It

became necessary, for example, to mitigate the friction between locals reared in xenophobic Islamist teachings and the growing population of migrant workers — a majority of the population in several Gulf states — most of whom were non-Muslim.[13] Consider that in the UAE in the 1990s, the influential Muslim Brotherhood-run magazine *Al-Islah* derided guest workers as "pagans" and a "fifth column," and demanded that they convert to Islam as a condition for residing in the country.[14] Such rhetoric furthered the abuse or assault of guest workers, strengthening charges of human rights abuse and exacerbating diplomatic tensions with the workers' countries of origin.[15] The same incitement could also alienate wealthy or powerful non-Muslim visitors to the Gulf, from whom the local government sought to win investment or political support. To these considerations, add a further Arab government concern about globalization: the fear that many young people, swayed by the trappings of global culture, would cease to identify with the religious patriarchy of the state. Tens of thousands of young Saudis, for example, repudiated the hardline Islamic teachings they had grown up with and swung toward atheism, a belief irreconcilable with the traditional Saudi national narrative.[16] Tens of thousands more were meanwhile succumbing to online recruitment by jihadists — also a trapping of globalization.[17] These armed groups offered an alternative loyalty for young Saudis who wished to take the hardline teachings of their childhood to their natural ideological conclusion.

In sum, all these problems called for a concerted cultural intervention to reconcile Islam, national identity, and the demands of a society in transition. State-backed efforts included a measure of education reform, a partial reshuffling of religious leadership, and, of more immediate relevance here, the creation of new platforms for interfaith dialogue and engagement. Witness Jordan's 2004 "Amman Message" and 2007 "Common Word" initiative — each an expression of positive values followed

by a series of gatherings and workshops designed to spread them.[18] The "Amman Message" laid down the Jordanian monarchy's official reading of Islam for clerics to preach, called for ending the jihadist practice of declaring others infidels (takfir), and asserted the legitimacy of other religions and diverse Islamic sects. The "Common Word" document more specifically addressed relations with Christians, who constitute approximately ten percent of Jordan's population.[19] It stressed common ground between the two faiths based on the shared commandments to "love God" and "love one's neighbor." In the spirit of these documents, the government gathered diverse faith leaders — from local priests and clerics to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Catholic Pope — to meet publicly, affirm respect for each other, and discuss the role of religion in healing social rifts. Jordanian King Abdullah II promoted the initiatives at the United Nations and among visiting Muslim heads of state.[20]

A more low-key effort launched in Saudi Arabia between the September 11 attacks and the 2003 residential compound bombings in Riyadh. The King Abdelaziz Centre for National Dialogue eschewed the international stage for a local approach to stem internecine bloodshed and promote a more inclusive Saudi national identity.[21] Its governing board included clerics from the range of Saudi Islamic sects, as well as male and female lay leaders.[22] While its charter called for the parties to discuss the role of reforms in the country's future, the lion's share of "town hall"-style meetings adopted a more narrow focus. Convening in parts of the kingdom where sectarian tensions had approached a boiling point, they attempted to lower the temperature by negotiating remedies to local conflict.[23] "Call me ignorant," observes veteran Saudi journalist Abdulrahman Al-Rashed,

> but I don't see Saudi religious figures participating in international interfaith dialogues and coming home to bring

> change on the ground. If there are any, their ability to win over an audience at Harvard, Yale, or Cambridge would not be an indication of their influence within the kingdom. The Centre for National Dialogue, by contrast, is working the grassroots. It hosts public conferences and private gatherings that have brought Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Ismailis to sit and talk together. They have debated religious figures, [also] raising the fact that their attitude toward the rival Muslim sect, and indeed Jews, is damaging the country on the international stage. Women have been provided with a controlled environment in which to make their voices heard among clerics.[24]

While the decision to initiate these projects was taken by Arab states, Americans played a role in fostering them. Joseph Lumbard, an American convert to Islam with a PhD in comparative Islamic theology from Yale, helped draft both the Amman Message and Common Word documents, as well as convene their respective international gatherings of signatories.[25] The concept of the Saudi National Dialogue Center, while honed by Saudi nationals, developed in the context of Saudi-U.S. government discussions following the September 2001 attacks, in which Americans demanded Saudi action to confront extremism.[26] The Saudi monarch subsequently cited the nascent Dialogue Center, in talks with American officials, as a prime example of his response to their demand.[27] In sum, the example of Lumbard shows that Arab leaders can entrust a sensitive task in the realm of religion to an American citizen who has won their esteem. The role of U.S. diplomatic outreach in pressing for the Saudi Dialogue Center shows that under certain circumstances, the U.S. government can also be a voice in an Arab state's deliberations about how to enable domestic religious pluralism.

At the same time, Arab leaders' interest in placating American demands — and more generally currying favor with Western

allies — also led these powers to launch projects that achieved more foreign praise than domestic impact. In 2008, the Saudi monarchy established the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). Rather than host the organization on Saudi territory, the founders built a headquarters for it in Vienna. The Centre aimed to foster faith-based encounters among different religions, sects, and ethnicities in order to stem the use of religion to justify political violence.[28] But at a private meeting on the sidelines of the founding conference, then-Pope Benedict XVI asked then-Saudi King Abdullah, "What is the significance of having an interfaith dialogue outside Saudi Arabia, where Muslims build mosques and practice their religion freely, whereas inside Saudi Arabia, there is no freedom of religion?" In his response, the monarch did not commit to bringing the new center's activities to Saudi Arabia itself.[29] Nor, for years, did the kingdom's state-controlled domestic media provide substantial coverage of the Center's activities.

After 2017, when Mohammad bin Salman became crown prince, the Saudi government-backed Muslim World League received a new mandate to break with its prior history of extremism and promote inter-religious engagement. The League's new chief, Mohammed Al-Issa, won praise in Western capitals for his outreach to Jewish and Christian community leaders and visits to the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and death camp at Auschwitz.[30] Meanwhile, a security purge of Saudi clerical elites reduced extremist religious discourse within the kingdom substantially.[31]

The signing of the Abraham Accords between three Arab states and Israel in 2020 provided a substantial lift to interfaith efforts — in the two Gulf states that signed them, the UAE and Bahrain; in neighboring Saudi Arabia, which tacitly approved them; and in Morocco, where its historical traditions of Jewish-

Muslim engagement intensified to include official and nongovernment efforts to strengthen relationships with Israeli Jews.

The willingness of Gulf states to lend their machinery and resources to interfaith endeavors has the potential to yield several further benefits beyond their immediate purpose. First, inasmuch as Gulf locals staff the projects, they provide a framework for local proponents of liberal cosmopolitan values to wage their efforts — albeit to a limited degree — with state protection and support. In a region where states historically empowered clerics to weaken liberalizing trends on their soil, this opportunity marks a meaningful departure. Second, as an example to follow will show, state-backed inter-religious endeavors can empower diverse faith leaders to go beyond dialogue and actually partner in serving the public. Doing so matters in the sense that tolerance and acceptance requires the forging of relationships across sectarian barriers, and such relationships become more meaningful when they serve a common need. It stands to reason, moreover, that in order for inter-religious engagement to spread beyond a narrow stratum of elites, clerics must inspire their respective faith communities to work together in a joint effort for the common good. A third added benefit of Gulf support for interfaith work manifests where recipients of the support include religious reformists in poor or war-torn Arab lands — such as the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, cited earlier — which struggle to sustain their operations financially.

An organization that launched in 2018 with support from the UAE government — the Abu Dhabi-based Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities — has shown signs that a Gulf-backed project can provide each of these three benefits. With respect to the first — empowering liberal civic actors — it bears significance that the UAE group's founding arose, in a sense, from a non-government overture: Nada Humaid al-Marzuqi, a former civil servant aspiring to a career outside government, asked the country's

Deputy Minister of Interior, Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, for seed funding. (Marzuqi had previously served as director of the Ministry's Child Protection Center.)[32] Some outsiders who have studied the initiative perceive it more as a "GONGO" (government-organized non-government organization).[33] Indeed, as Marzuqi harbors strong establishment credentials, authorities could trust that her non-government work would also support the interests of the state. But because the state has adopted the promotion of tolerance as a policy goal, Marzuqi could also feel confident of her latitude to pursue the goal as she saw fit. She went on to hire and promote local civic actors who did not share her government background.[34]

With regard to the second and third potential benefits, the Interfaith Alliance has shown that a Gulf-supported group can bring clerics of different faiths together in public service as well as support similar efforts in a poorer Arab country. Marzuqi explained that her group aimed from its founding to transcend dialogue among faiths by catalyzing joint action to protect people of every faith: "We feel that there are already enough groups that merely call for tolerance, and it's time to activate networks of faith leaders as a social force in their own right."[35] The group set out to target two social ills in particular: the degradation of children online through cyberbullying and "sextortion," and hate crimes targeting any denomination. To address the online abuse of children, the group brought together clerics of all three monotheistic faiths as well as Baha'i, Sikh, and other religious communities to conduct joint studies, convene workshops, and expose the problems and potential remedies through media. Lay civic actors from the same faith communities have joined with clerics in these efforts.[36] As to the potential to support equivalent endeavors in poor countries marked by inter-religious tension and civil strife, some of the group's workshops have convened in Ethiopia, the Philippines, and one Arab country: Egypt.[37]

To be sure, the deployments to the latter countries amounted

only to a small portion of the group's activity. More of the work transpired in high-profile Western settings such as the Vatican, the Davos economic conference, and United Nations headquarters.[38] In none of the poor countries, moreover, has the Interfaith Alliance yet built a sustained local partnership; the deployments were rather limited to nonrecurring workshops.[39] Still, having launched relatively recently and with just a small number of full-time workers, the organization merits recognition for having broken new ground. Whether and how it will build on this promise depends largely on which of the group's activities the UAE government prioritizes for support. The Alliance's efforts in Europe and the U.S. naturally comport with Abu Dhabi's policy of building esteem and goodwill with Western allies. If the same allies signal that supporting tangible civic action in Arab lands should take precedence instead — along the lines of Pope Benedict's advice to the late Saudi king — perhaps they can encourage Emirati and other Gulf states to grow support for such endeavors.

For any Arab state, however, investments in interfaith engagement within the Arab region carry the baggage of other ideological and strategic calculations. Witness the Qatari government. Like the UAE, it too has signaled to Westerners that it wants to support interfaith dialogue events — and has convened several, both within its borders and abroad.[40] But Qatar remains a steadfast supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, a leading proponent of religious chauvinism in the region and beyond.[41] This commitment on the part of Qatar has compromised its international standing and potential to contribute meaningfully to the cause of tolerance and coexistence. Prominent Jewish and Christian clerics, for example, have declined to join Qatar-backed dialogue ventures in protest of Qatari support for the Brotherhood.[42] Nor can Qatar as easily act philanthropically on the soil of some of the largest Arab countries in need — notably Egypt — because the local government is at war with the Brotherhood.[43]

The UAE, by contrast, champions an anti-Brotherhood political alliance of Arab republics, including and especially Egypt. This alignment predisposes Abu Dhabi to work with clerics affiliated with "state Islam" — that is, stalwarts of either the local Islamic affairs ministry or more ancient Islamic institutions affiliated with the government. Not by accident, for example, did the UAE-backed Interfaith Alliance find its local Egyptian partner in Al-Azhar — the vast, centuries-old Islamic seminary now led by a supporter of the state, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib, who has taken a stand against the Muslim Brotherhood.[44] Such partnerships do have the potential to register gains, as the record of positive reforms enacted by some institutions of state Islam in recent years has shown. (Recall the Jordanian state-backed "Amman Message" and "Common Word" initiatives, among others.) On the other hand, most Arab institutions of state Islam — and even the most venerated Islamic endowments in the same countries — still harbor clerics, including at senior levels, who promote or tolerate belligerent religious rhetoric.

Egypt's Al-Azhar provides a case in point. Its leader, Ahmed al-Tayyib, still routinely weaves antisemitism into his preaching. Coptic Christians in Egypt, for their part, have faulted the institution for doing too little to reduce Christian-Muslim tensions — and Muslim-on-Christian violence — in the country. As Egyptian scholar Vivien Fuad observes,

> Relations in Egypt between Al-Azhar on the one hand and Christian Egyptians and the Coptic Orthodox Church on the other tend to improve in a manifestation of national unity when the country is in a state of crisis. The rest of the time, relations amount to little more than formalities during public and national holidays.[45]

Al-Azhar has also in recent decades meted out retribution to liberal civic actors who called for religious reform, in the form of

edicts declaring various prominent liberals apostates, which in turn triggered jail time, violent assault, or assassination.[46] Viewed in this context, the UAE's involvement of Al-Azhar in inter-religious dialogue ventures — for example, by organizing public encounters between Grand Imam al-Tayyib and Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi — has arguably lent legitimacy to the institution's irredentist elements.

The country that has perhaps seen the most meaningful purge of such elements from institutions of "state Islam" is, as noted earlier, Saudi Arabia under the authority of Mohammed bin Salman. In addition to striking hard at Saudi Salafi extremism, the kingdom has joined the UAE in countering the Brotherhood, both within its borders and in the broader region.

Meanwhile, despite the encouraging example of the UAE Interfaith Alliance's workshop in Cairo, most Gulf states have done less than they could to help poorer Arab countries develop their interfaith efforts.

By way of context, recall that Jordan has made substantial headway in improving interfaith relations through its "Amman Message" and "Common Word" initiatives. Add to this encouraging trend the example of Morocco, arguably the most advanced among Arab states in terms of the promotion of religious tolerance. Its purge of extremist preachers dates back to the aftermath of the 2003 triple suicide bombings in Casablanca. The monarchy has invested heavily in resuscitating Moroccan Sufi traditions of nonviolence and acceptance, convened international festivals of sacred music that stressed religious syncretism, and brought Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith leaders together in high-profile public settings. The promise of these achievements suggests that both countries could make a larger contribution by exporting their models to the broader region — part of the corrective that is needed after generations of extremist religious exportation by Gulf states. As noted earlier, Jordan's king has made modest efforts to do so through international gatherings.

Morocco has gone further. For example, it has hosted and trained hundreds of Imams from Mali and other strife-ridden African states and created a 24-hour Islamic satellite channel to broadcast tolerance and model interfaith religious encounters. Such efforts are severely limited, however, by the two countries' economic weakness. Substantial support from outside coffers would be necessary to grow the activity — and Gulf states committed to promoting religious tolerance should assist.

## ARAB REPUBLICS: INNOVATION BORN OF SUFFERING

To recap, several Arab states launched interfaith dialogue and engagement projects in response to pressures dating from the September 11, 2001 attacks. In doing so, they created a new space for liberal civic actors to participate openly in public life. At the same time, the earlier-cited example of Saad Salloum's interfaith initiative in Baghdad showed that other promising work in the same field could originate from the grass roots — by a self-identifying liberal with no government background — and survive despite government attempts to suppress it.

The appearance of Salloum's contrasting venture in Iraq reflects a larger political distinction with bearing on prospects to grow inter-religious engagement overall: the historic divide between Arab monarchies and Arab republics. Consider that on the one hand, all of the state-initiated interfaith ventures described thus far occurred either in monarchies — Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and various Gulf states — or in Egypt, the one Arab republic that reconstituted military rule after an Arab Spring overthrow. Iraq, on the other hand, suffered the more violent fate of Arab republics Syria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, and Yemen, in that each saw revolution, regime change, civil war, or substantial loss of territory over the decade between 2003 and 2013.

This striking contrast stems from myriad factors, of which a

departure is warranted into one, as it contextualizes how new opportunities have arisen to foster inter-religious engagement within the more volatile republics. That factor is the historic social fissures, principally of sect and ethnicity, which ruling republican juntas and later jihadist movements and Iran exploited and exacerbated to advance their agendas.

Witness Iraq under the Baath party. A line of Sunni Arab strongmen granted privilege to their sect and brutalized the Shi'ite majority and Kurdish populations, while pretending that all Iraqis were the same under the "flag of Arabism" and that foreign conspiracy lay at the heart of the country's problems. Saddam's war in Iran, claiming a massive toll in Iraqi blood, served as much to bleed and pacify a restive population as to advance a foreign policy objective. Libya's Qadhafi used similar militaristic policies to manage divisions in tribe and clan, through a combination of domestic crackdowns and foreign wars in Tanzania and Chad.[47] The Sudanese dictatorship of Omar El-Bashir, policing the most ethnically and religiously diverse country in the Arab world, outdid Saddam's foreign bloodletting in domestic carnage through civil war in the Sudanese south and genocide in Darfur.[48] Baathist Syria, a poor man's cousin to oil-rich Iraq, mirrors the Iraqi example in that the minority Alawite sect has ruled a Sunni majority population over decades. The Assad government used the pretext of war with Israel to justify "emergency law" within its borders since 1963, and pursued ethnic cleansing in its post-Arab Spring civil war on the pretext of fighting terrorism.[49]

These republican tragedies have prompted intellectuals in multi-confessional Lebanon, home to a 15-year civil war, to formulate the so-called "Lebanese prophecy" — a kind of Arab nationalist version of "The meek shall inherit the earth." It foretold that of all the republics, vulnerable Lebanon would eventually outlive the rest, having surrendered to its own diversity by accepting a weak central government and the principle of power

sharing.[50] (Lebanon has indeed maintained its territorial integrity after the Arab Spring, even in the face of a massive refugee inflow. At the same time, Hezbollah has achieved hegemony over the country's multi-confessional political system.) The two republics that have proved to be the most stable are Egypt and Tunisia — the former, having reconstituting military rule; the latter, having transitioned to a wobbly but persistent democracy. These are also the two republics with the fewest ethnic and sectarian fissures. Their challenge lies in the management of *political* diversity, among rival Islamist and secular nationalist forces. It is mitigated by the benefits of a comparatively homogeneous population and, in Egypt's case, a national identity dating back thousands of years. Even in these two countries, however, outlying provinces have at times devolved into lawless jihadist frontiers.[51]

Yet because of this painful history of polarization and strife, the republics have also been a crucible for continuous experimentation in the management of diverse communities. Mostly, rulers simply stoked the domestic tensions — or buried them under the false unity of militarism — while cynically positioning themselves to their people and the world as a bulwark against chaos. Occasionally, however, they attempted to weaken extremism and militancy by forcibly promoting a more peaceable alternative. Consider Tunisia's Al-Zaitounah University — an institution for training and certifying clerics created by the government of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, in the spirit of the Islamic reformist agenda of Ben Ali's predecessor, founding President Habib Bourguiba.[52] Its curricula included the study of all three monotheistic faiths through the modern lenses of comparative religion, anthropology, and the social sciences. Some aspiring preachers even studied the Torah in its original Hebrew.

The Al-Zaitounah project, alongside lesser equivalents in other republics, rose and fell with the government that sponsored it. Zaitounah was dismantled by Islamists who took power after

the fall of Ben Ali. Amid widespread resentment at the ancien regime, most preachers and scholars who had been a part of it lost their pulpits or posts. Tunisian liberals argue that the rejection of these clerics proved a loss to the country. At the same time, some of their writings proceeded to win sympathy in other parts of the region where they could be appraised without the baggage of their painful political origins. Al-Zaitounah and other republican clerical networks remain available to partner with Arab liberals, people of other faiths, and outside actors for the sake of mending their own societies.[53]

A different set of worthy ideas which the republics spawned arose not as a contrivance of the establishment but rather as a reaction to it. Witness twentieth century Sudanese religious leader Mahmoud Mohammed Taha. Incensed at the injustice he saw around him, he envisioned a movement of religious reform to help the population transcend its many divisions. In what he called the "Second Message of Islam," he argued for appreciating the Shari'ah in its historical context while reaching a new understanding of Islam grounded in interfaith understanding and egalitarian principles. Tens of thousands of followers mourned his execution for "apostasy" in 1985, at the age of 76, by the dictatorship of Ja'far al-Numayri — a bone Numayri threw to Islamists after taking flak for allowing the migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel over Sudanese airspace.[54] Twenty-five years after his execution, Taha's surviving disciples remain a target of Islamist social forces, but continue to pass on their mentor's teachings. On Sudanese social media, new pages by young people which promulgate the "Second Message" have won an enthusiastic audience.[55]

Arab liberal instincts to tap and engage these trends, exemplified by Saad Salloum's work in Iraq, find expression in every Arab republic. Consider numerous examples in Lebanon. Beirut-based human rights lawyer and activist Chibli Mallat, who ran a protest campaign for the Lebanese presidency in 2005, has called

for a new cultural movement called "White Arabism."[56] As he describes it, "white Arabism" would reclaim the early promise of Arabism as a cosmopolitan ideal from the republican rulers whose tyranny in the name of Arabism discredited it. Through sustained civic activism and education, Mallat argues, majority populations could learn to celebrate their national mosaic of identities and recognize people of diverse faiths and sects as equals on the basis of "citizenship." In Arabic, the word for citizenship, "Muwatana," literally means "sharing a homeland." It carries the sense of being a value, an ideal, in addition to a formal legal status.[57]

The same ethic of "Muwatana" figures prominently in the literature of Salloum's Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, as well as numerous Lebanese organizations concerned with addressing domestic Muslim-Christian tensions. These include ventures led by civic actors in partnership with clerics — such as the Adyan Foundation, an interfaith think tank that promotes egalitarianism across the range of civil sectors through an "Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management."[58] Other ventures, led by clerics, include the Lebanese Dialogue Forum and Institute of Islamic-Christian studies.[59]

These and other Lebanese interfaith ventures have established intricate global networks of support — a reflection of the country's deep-rooted relations with political and faith-based communities overseas. The Lebanese Dialogue Forum, for example, receives assistance from the World Council of Churches, an outgrowth of the ecumenical movement, headquartered in Geneva.[60] The Adyan Foundation's supporters include numerous Western governmental endowments, such as the German government-backed Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Washington-based Middle East Partnership Initiative, a program of the U.S. State Department.[61] This spread of relationships, which equivalent ventures in other Arab republics have found difficult to build and sustain, stems in turn from a unique historical trajectory in

Lebanon. Generations of American Protestant missionary activity yielded some of Lebanon's seminal institutions of higher learning and medicine, as well as an enduring affinity between a subset of American and Lebanese political elites.[62] The unbreakable bond between the Lebanese Maronite Church and the Vatican has ensured an umbilical connection between Lebanon's largest Christian sect and Europe.[63] The robust interaction between Lebanese citizens at home and their vast diaspora communities abroad has granted the society wellsprings of solidarity not unlike the relationship between the state of Israel and Jewish communities outside it.[64] These factors have helped assure that even in the face of Hezbollah domination and jihadist violence, the potential to pursue an alternative vision of Lebanon's future has survived.

Scan the expanse of Arab republics and one finds the same potential to advance a society committed to "citizenship" through inter-religious engagement — that is, the same confluence of liberal actors, reform-minded clerics, and popular support for their work — albeit without a stable operational foundation. In Yemen, home to an ancient Jewish community which fled overwhelmingly to Israel in the mid-twentieth century, ongoing civil war makes independent civil ventures difficult to grow. But a yearning to recover and build on memories of a multi-sectarian past finds expression through social media activity by thousands of people, predominantly youth. They congregate, together with Israelis of Yemeni origin, in virtual homes such as "Heritage of the Jews of Yemen," a Facebook page co-moderated by a professor at Bar Ilan University and an official of the Yemeni Ministry of Education.[65] The two cannot act together on Yemeni territory, as Israeli citizens are barred from entering the country. But in an age of virtual conferencing, greater engagement has become possible — and page posts do include calls for encounters between Yemeni Muslim clerics and Israeli rabbis of Yemeni origin. A Libyan cleric, Muhammad bin Gharbun, advocates

similar dialogue — both among Libyans in the interior and vis a vis its Jewish exiles and their offspring in Israel and the West. He shuttles between Libya and his adopted home in the United Kingdom, using Zoom and other technologies to maintain a following in his homeland while using the safety of British territory to model faith-based encounters with rabbis and priests. A political force in Libya even by remote, he has led mediation efforts among feuding parties and militias, as well as built a bridge to Israelis through personal visits to the country.[66]

In sum, the republics harbor enduring constituencies for inter-religious engagement — people who share a hunger for civil peace, born of great suffering. The same countries also host the underutilized talent of reform-minded clerics who were orphaned politically by the collapse of governments they served. Finally, the republics harbor brave civic actors who share in the conviction that after generations of suppression and manipulation of diverse communities — first by autocrats and later by Islamists — only liberal egalitarianism can safeguard these countries' future. Alas, the volatility of the republics has largely prevented these elements from emerging prominently in the public space, let alone operating systematically and sustainably. Even in Lebanon, the republic that comes closest to offering a hub for civic interfaith engagement, the constraints remain considerable. Note the conspicuous absence of Jews, for example, from the range of Muslim-Christian dialogue projects described above, despite the fact that Lebanon, too, harbored tens of thousands of indigenous Jews, who still live nearby, together with their offspring, across the border of Israel today. Hezbollah domination of Lebanon precludes not only the breach of that border by proponents of Jewish-Muslim rapprochement; it imposes severe constraints on all manifestations of liberalism in Lebanon, because it regards egalitarian principles as anathema to its sectarian supremacist agenda.

When occasionally granted an opportunity to serve the cause

of interfaith harmony consistently and without interference, the kind of brave actors described above have done considerable good. Witness Muhammad Abu 'l-Faraj, a Syrian professor of comparative religion who found asylum in the UAE. In 2019, tapped by the government to serve as a principle advisor to its "Year of Tolerance," Abu 'l-Faraj organized the first visit of a Catholic pope to the Arabian peninsula. Prior to the signing of the Abraham Accords, he supported the formal recognition of an Emirati Jewish community, appointment of an Emirati chief rabbi, and dedication of a synagogue in Dubai. He also facilitated the beginnings of new schools curricula for the UAE, designed to inculcate acceptance of the other.[67] When in September 2020, the UAE signed the Abraham Accords with the state of Israel, it committed to fostering a "peace between peoples." Over the period that followed, the government enacted myriad new policies and initiatives to support this goal. Their zeal to engage the people of the Jewish state, by contrast to the enduring chilliness of "cold peace" Egypt and Jordan, reflects the UAE's longer-term effort to condition the population to engagement across the borders of identity.

While the Syrian professor Abu 'l-Faraj exemplifies the value of a republican emigre wishing to contribute to inter-religious understanding in his adopted country, his efforts have had no direct bearing on the religio-cultural fabric of his home country. Though the UAE government has been deploying political and financial capital in Syria, it appears to compartmentalize the two files — that is, Syrian domestic affairs on the one hand and the promotion of inter-religious engagement on the other. Recall, moreover, that the UAE-backed Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities has acted only modestly in other Arab countries thus far. A key challenge with regard to the republics, therefore, is to find innovative ways of nurturing the enormous talent and pent-up demand for change of the sort Syria's Abu 'l-Faraj, Iraq's

Salloum, and Libya's Bin Gharboun wish to foster — at that, on their native soil.

## AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT IN ARAB LANDS

In this treatment of the landscape of inter-religious engagement efforts, Americans have appeared repeatedly. Recall that an American PhD student helped the Jordanian monarchy organize the Amman Message and Common Word initiatives. American faith leaders have participated in the activity of the UAE's Inter-faith Alliance for Safer Communities. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the U.S. government applied pressure on Saudi Arabia which helped stir that kingdom to found a domestic dialogue initiative, in addition to other outcomes. It has also supported Lebanese interfaith work via the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative.

As this study also shows, however, considerable work lies ahead that calls for greater outside participation. Consider the situation as it presently stands. Several Gulf states, while keen to signal progress to Western allies, have not to an equivalent degree supported meaningful interfaith activity in ideologically contested Arab countries. Some remain slow to act within their own borders as well — while other Gulf elements, like Iran, remain committed to supporting Islamist forces that undermine prospects to promote civil peace overall. As to the mostly volatile Arab republics, promising initiatives within them remain woefully under-equipped and overwhelmed by hostile actors. As the U.S. government works to counter the region's extremist forces militarily and help resolve internecine and cross-border conflicts diplomatically, Americans can do considerably more to help mend the underlying fissures by fostering civil engagement across faiths.

Beyond the prior examples, diverse American faith communities, institutions, and divisions of government have waged additional, largely uncoordinated efforts in the service of the same goals, showing clearly that more is possible. A sterling example of interfaith mobilization to serve the public good in an Arab land is the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees. Amid the Arab Spring, Syrian Americans had played a robust role in modest U.S. and European-government backed efforts to support the Syrian opposition in the face of the Assad government's brutal crackdown. Between 2017 and 2019, as the fortunes of war slowly turned against the opposition and more radical groups like ISIS and Tahrir Al-Sham emerged, Western governments began to withdraw their support. The protracted conflict had meanwhile exhausted the Syrian American community's ability to help offset the loss through private philanthropy and medical relief. The Multifaith Alliance arose to help fill the vacuum. Comprised of over 100 participating groups — including Syrian Americans and others of all three monotheistic faiths — the Alliance dispensed over $120 million in aid and built healthcare facilities and bakeries in Syria. Of particular note, the Alliance shipped the aid into Syria from the Golan Heights in cooperation with the Israel Defense Forces' "Operation: Good Neighbor." This operation mirrored the MFA's own inter-religious character, as the IDF and local Syrian leaders cooperated to ensure delivery of the badly needed aid.[68]

The Multifaith Alliance could effectively mobilize thanks to an American civil edifice of interfaith exchange that developed over decades and served a range of domestic and later foreign causes. One may draw a line, for example, between the historic alliance of Jewish and Christian faith leaders in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s to the same two constituencies' partnership against slavery in Africa — including Arab Mauritania and Sudan — beginning three decades later.[69] In more recent years, the rise of hate crimes targeting Jews as well as Muslims in the United States has brought leaders of both communities together in part-

nership against bigotry. Among prominent examples, the Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council has brought some of the largest American groups of both faiths together to report on the problem, join hands in condemning perpetrators, and lobby for remedies.[70] Among American Muslim organizations, some of the largest have been accurately identified as affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups — an issue that prompted the UAE, for example, to designate the Council on American Islamic Relations a "terrorist organization" in 2014.[71] But other American Muslim leaderships have indeed championed tolerance, both at home and overseas. The American Islamic Congress, for example, has advanced its egalitarian agenda through prayer and partnership with people of all faiths. It has also assisted government-backed development organizations, including USAID and the Middle East Partnership Initiative, with small programs in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iraq designed to encourage civil rights advocacy.[72]

Some American Jewish groups, for their part, have adapted the expertise they honed in older dialogue ventures in extending a hand to Arab Muslim elites within the region. Consider the American Jewish Committee (AJC), which through substantial outreach to the Catholic Church had helped facilitate the latter's renunciation of antisemitism at the Second Vatican Council in 1965. In 2011, Rabbi David Rosen, the group's director of interfaith relations, joined the Vienna-based, Saudi-backed King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KACIID) as a member of its board of directors.[73] The Los Angeles–based Simon Wiesenthal Center has also pursued an Arab Muslim interfaith agenda. In September 2017, a forty-member delegation from Bahrain visited the center to unveil the Bahrain Declaration on Religious Tolerance, bearing the king's name and pledging peace and dignity for all religious communities. This initiative was a meaningful stepping stone to the larger spread of interfaith activities among Bahraini Muslims,

Jews generally, and Israelis Jews in particular in the wake of the Abraham Accords.[74]

Viewing the region as a whole, however, most states and civic actors have much to overcome in building on the promise of inter-religious engagement — and Americans can do more to support the process.

2

# ORGANIZED LABOR AS A BULWARK OF EGALITARIANISM

*Independent Arab labor unions espousing a constructive social agenda have emerged as a potential bulwark against tyranny and extremism. Their counterparts in the United States can help them — if the American labor movement recovers its global interventionist spirit.*

INDEPENDENT TRADE UNIONS have a vital role to play in safeguarding any society. As agents of collective bargaining and a voice in public discussions of economic policy, they can help grow and sustain a viable middle class. As civic institutions with a large member base, they can help acculturate the population to the principles of equal opportunity and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of gender or sect. Their advancement of these principles, in turn, can provide a check on corrupt government practices and illiberal social movements. For these reasons, independent unions have been described as "schools for democracy."[1]

As the treatment to follow will show, the Arab region features numerous examples of viable, autonomous labor movements with reasonable economic goals and a constructive social agenda — and in Arab countries where such a movement is lacking, one

finds credible efforts to build one. Consider the implications: whereas Islamist movements won loyalty with the poor by providing a social safety net backed by oil wealth, independent unions offer their own way of winning economic advantages for their members. As such, they pose an implicit political challenge to Islamism. They also pose a challenge to certain autocrats, who have long sought to exercise authority over the national work force through government-dominated labor syndicates. These syndicates are themselves mired in nepotism and corruption, and have served as a conduit for ideologies of scapegoating and blame deflection. Thus both the syndicates and the rulers behind them tend, like Islamists, to view independent unions and their ideals as a problem to be contained or defeated. In the confrontation between these forces on the one hand and the spirit of free labor on the other lies the possibility of progress toward a more egalitarian and stable Arab society.

This overall gloss is challenged, to be sure, by the details of every country and case. Some nongovernment unions in the region are dominated by Islamists, or harbor Islamist elements. Others with a storied history of liberalism and independence have gone astray, in the sense that a ruler has coopted them. By contrast, on the government side, some state-controlled labor syndicates may harbor reformist elements that seek greater autonomy so as to truly represent workers' needs and rights. Unions' underpinning egalitarian principles meanwhile face an especially severe test in several Gulf states where guest workers make up the majority of the labor force and, for that matter, the population. But all these distinctions merely nuance the larger opportunity: myriad Arab labor unions want to serve as a force for positive change in the region — and they welcome American assistance.

## THE ARAB SPRING'S ABORTED SEQUEL: LABOR-DRIVEN PROTESTS IN ARAB LANDS

A worthy point of departure is the Arab Maghreb, where, over the first half of the twentieth century, labor movements provided a working-class base for the struggle against colonial authorities.[2] The Tunisian General Labor Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, commonly referred to as the UGTT), for example, formed a key part of the coalition to resist French rule. Between the founding of independent Tunisia in 1956 and the overthrow of Tunisian strongman Zein el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, the UGTT saw some periods of state domination, others of relative autonomy, and a long-running pattern of tension within the organization between state-coopted senior executives and maverick mid-level and regional leaders. Memorably, in 2008, regional UGTT figures in the southwestern mining hub of Gafsa backed a mass uprising against the Ben Ali government's nepotism and corruption, against the directives of their senior leadership in Tunis.[3] Similarly, at the beginning of the 2010-'11 revolution, the organization's senior leadership at first declined to support the protests — but second-tier regional leaders and thousands more rank-and-file members crucially lent their expertise and capacities to the demonstrators.[4]

In 2011, with over half a million members in a country of 11.5 million — and substantial popularity among Tunisians generally — the UGTT was the only force capable of challenging the Islamist Ennahda party in the country's first post-revolutionary elections. But the group made the fateful decision not to create its own party; prominent UGTT members, acting as individuals, formed dozens of small ones instead. "The population was confused," explained Hatem al-Ouaini, a senior official at the country's teachers' union. "They knew only the UGTT and Ennahda." Even so, labor candidates collectively won more seats

than Ennahda, albeit not enough to block its governing coalition. "Our decision not to participate was a big mistake," Ouaini said.[5]

In the post-revolutionary period, the UGTT organized worker opposition to state austerity measures, as well as resistance to Islamist social policies, such as Ennehda-led efforts to weaken the legal status of women. A range of Islamists responded to union activity with violence. On August 28, 2012, Islamist militants attacked a peaceful union demonstration in the restive Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, wounding seven, while police stood on the sidelines. The incident capped a summer of similar violence, including fire-bombings of three UGTT regional offices by Salafi groups; and calls by several mosque preachers to kill union activists.[6] "The Salafis use violence," said UGTT legal counsel Muhammad Amdouni, "while Ennahda tries to penetrate our ranks with its followers and subvert us from within."[7] These provocations did not stop the UGTT from joining hands with the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers, to form a "National Dialogue Quartet," which helped safeguard the country's democratic transition. The quartet won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia."[8]

In neighboring Algeria, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) dates back to the same period of anti-colonial struggle, when it provided an equivalent bulwark for the National Salvation Front's resistance to French rule. For most of four decades, the UGTA ceded its autonomy to the Algerian state. It made an uncharacteristic show of independence in 1991: amid a national experiment of political liberalization, oil and coal workers struck, and the UGTA negotiated meaningful concessions from the government on their behalf.[9] But in 1992, the UGTA and the state closed ranks again — after the failure of the same political experiment. Islamists won an election, and when the military moved to abort it, triggering a civil war, the union

sided staunchly with the army.[10] Over the 11-year conflict that followed, which claimed over 100,000 lives, the fault line between Islamists on the one hand and statist UGTA supporters espousing socialism on the other grew ever deeper. Among the fatalities was a UGTA Secretary-General, Abdelhak Benhamouda, slain by Islamists. Independent labor unions, while legally green-lighted to operate in 1990, were repressed by the government, with UGTA complicity.[11] Nor did the many anti-government demonstrations seen in Algeria over the 2011-'12 Arab Spring period substantially alter the staunch alignment between the UGTA and the state.

But 2019 witnessed a new and positive departure for independent unions in Algeria, alongside a larger auspicious trend for Arab labor across the region. The context was dual economic pressures brought to bear on Arab economies: on the one hand, austerity demands by international lenders; on the other, the plummeting value of hydrocarbons. Consider that during the 2011-'12 Arab Spring period, Algerian oil wealth had helped the government quell revolutionary energies by restoring food subsidies and creating new jobs.[12] Seven years later, after another sham presidential election triggered new mass protests across the country, the state could no longer buy off the unrest, due to the plummeting price of oil. With youth unemployment in excess of 25 percent, Algerians under 30 swelled the protest movement's ranks.[13] The state-coopted UGTA provided neither encouragement nor support. But nascent independent unions, including the Trade Union Confederation of Productive Workers (COSYFOP) and the Autonomous Union of Workers in the Public Gas and Electric Company (SNATEG), called a general strike.[14] They provided a platform to convey and amplify Algerian workers' demand for a credible transitional government. The state bowed to some of the movement's demands, arresting dozens of senior officials, army officers, and businesspeople who had been accused of corruption. Amid the caretaker government that followed,

however, security forces cracked down on the movement's leaders, in particular its labor organizers. In response, the protest movement's size and scope grew further. On November 1, 2019, hundreds of thousands protested in Algiers to reject a new military-dominated election and demand a civilian-led constituent assembly.[15] Now the unions were joined by a coalition of socialist parties, Amazigh (Berber) parties, and even the Islamist Justice and Development Front, long since atrophied from its civil war heights.[16]

These strides did not upend the system of military rule that has governed Algeria since 1962. Nonetheless, in addition to registering significant gains toward a hoped-for, eventual civilian leadership, the 2019-'20 protest movement served to pilot a new alliance of social forces. Independent labor movements lay at the heart of the alliance, with a greater proportion of white-collar workers and university graduates on the front lines than ever before. A substantially larger proportion of women participated than in any of the Arab Spring revolutions. And whereas most of the 2011-'12 demonstrations brought Islamist gains or sectarian strife, the Algerian movement forthrightly rejected sectarianism, embraced the country's marginalized Amazigh population, and incorporated moderate Islamists as passengers but not as drivers. The leadership shown by independent union organizers and the egalitarian values which the protest movement as a whole espoused were no coincidence.

Over roughly the same period, sustained demonstrations with similar qualities emerged in Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Egypt. Each featured high white-collar and university graduate representation; a substantial female presence; affirmation of equality among genders, ethnicities, and sects; and an overarching economic agenda of opportunity. In Sudan, 2018 anti-austerity demonstrations began in response to fuel subsidy cuts and bread cost spikes in the south-central railway hub of Atbara, formerly a stronghold of the Sudanese communist

party.[17] The Sudanese Professionals Association — a coalition of 17 autonomous white collar unions — provided the organizational backbone, together with Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups. The coalition's "Declaration of Freedom and Change" adopted a focus on ending the oppression of women and ongoing civil wars among rival ethnicities and sects.[18] The pressure which these protesters brought to bear prompted a decision by the Sudanese military to oust and arrest long-serving strongman Omar al-Bashir and replace him with a Transitional Military Council — a dramatic step, though hardly a victory for Sudanese civic actors.[19] Concurrent uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, similarly launched in response to economic failure and government malfeasance, adopted the same repudiation of sectarian politics. In these two countries, where Iran exercises heavy influence via Shi'ite militias and the political system, the protest movements shocked Tehran's local proxies. At the same time, they also repudiated Sunni sectarianism by Iran's local adversaries: parties and factions backed by U.S.-allied Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.[20]

So this historic reassertion of Arab labor as a political force posed a serious challenge to Iranian expansionism, sectarian extremism, and Arab government malfeasance all at once. At the same time, it also fortified the U.S.-backed effort to roll back these trends with a vision of a more just, egalitarian society, and a new set of actors to help pursue it.

Within the territory of America's closest Arab allies, autonomous Arab labor unions have striven to advance the same egalitarian ideals. In Bahrain, where a Sunni king rules a Shi'ite-majority population, the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU) offers an organized, non-sectarian public platform to challenge inequality. During Bahrain's Arab Spring uprisings, GFBTU provided a framework for protestors to convey their demands for greater political and economic rights in terms of a rectifiable injustice rather than an existential struggle. The

group also calls for the unionization of Bahrain's 100,000 migrant domestic workers, most of whom are women, and has itself been led by women, including four of the 15 members elected to its national secretariat in 2016.[21] For that matter, the movement has adopted a progressive outlook on regional politics as well. By the mid-1990s, Bahraini labor activists had already engaged their Israeli counterparts, the Histadrut, and endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[22] In 2020, prominent trade unionists emerged among the champions of the newly signed Bahrain-Israel peace accords.[23]

Whereas North African labor movements draw legitimacy and prestige from their historic contribution to the struggle against French colonialism, unionism in the Kingdom of Jordan emerged from a more fraught constellation of internal and external pressures. Successive waves of Palestinian refugees sought to mold Jordanian unionism to advance their struggle against Israel. Egyptian president Nasser, together with the pan-Arabist coalition of states and movements he led, sought to fold Jordanian unionism into a politically subservient International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions that also included Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian analogues. Jordanian King Hussein, for his part, sought to consolidate authority and weaken domestic opposition, which regarded organized labor as a crucial wedge in the campaign to unseat him. The king gradually established dominance over the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU), which featured ideological elements ranging from Soviet communism to Islamism, and bequeathed this work in progress to his son, the present King Abdullah. Under the latter's reign, the GFJTU's extremist ideological elements have tapered, and the group has played a largely establishment-supportive role in addressing the pressures of globalization, privatization, and a shrinking public sector.[24] Meanwhile, new liberal elements have been agitating to form independent unions in the country. In 2012, an organization of teachers won a years-long battle for

legal status as an independent union, following suppression by the kingdom and an all-out ban on collective bargaining. 2013 saw the establishment of the first independent worker federation in the country — the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Jordan — representing 7,000 workers in phosphates, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and other realms.[25]

The same Nasserist pressures that affected the trajectory of unionism in Jordan played out differently in Egypt. Since 1957, blue collar workers in the country have been managed by a monopoly state apparatus, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF).[26] Member dues have served largely to enrich a small, tightly knit cadre of labor elites. (It is well known, for example, that several hundred of them occupy a private luxury resort on the Mediterranean.) White collar workers have meanwhile been governed by nominally independent labor syndicates, similarly dating back to the mid-twentieth century.[27] Over the decades following the 1978 Egyptian-Israeli peace accords, the white collar syndicates came to be dominated by a combination of Muslim Brotherhood figures and Nasserist elements opposed to peace with Israel.[28] It was they who pioneered the pan-Arab practice of enforcing social and professional ostracism on members of any profession who meet or partner with an Israeli citizen.[29] But neither the white-collar syndicates nor the blue-collar ETUF delivered what their members most urgently needed: genuine advocacy to help working families survive the consequences of rampant, grand-scale elite corruption amid the privatization of a rentier economy.

Thus for two generations, all major organized economic protests by Egyptian workers have emanated from the ground up. The six years before the Arab Spring in Egypt saw 2,716 strikes and other collective actions, involving more than 2.2 million workers.[30] A prime mover in these efforts, independent labor activist Kamal Abbas, had first emerged publicly in 1989 by co-organizing a strike in the town of Helwan. Nineteen

thousand employees of the Iron and Steel Company sought a modest wage increase and a lunch break. Abbas faced prison and torture for his role in the effort. Beginning in the 1990s, Abbas and a small group of colleagues began trying to form independent blue collar unions so as to break the ETUF monopoly. Their umbrella NGO, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), survived to join the Arab Spring protests in 2011-'12.[31] Following Mubarak's ouster, Abbas's group joined a handful of nascent independent unions to form the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) as a rival to ETUF. Conveying the spirit of his aspirations during a 2015 appearance on the pro-government ONTV, he called for a "new social contract" between the government and independent labor based on precedents in other countries. He optimistically compared the state of unionism in Egypt with the gradual liberation of unions under Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. He faulted Gamal Abdel Nasser for failing to follow the Franco model, and expressed hopes that Sisi would choose Franco over Nasser.[32] Instead, the new Egyptian leader waged a brutal crackdown on unionists, and EFITU's tiny leadership splintered.[33]

The behavior of the ETUF state juggernaut over the same period bears observing. The group stood by President Mubarak throughout the Arab Spring protests. After Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi took the helm, he sought to forcibly retire all ETUF managers over the age of 60 by executive order, in order to install stalwarts of his own movement in their place. He encountered fierce resistance within the federation, which refused to follow his orders.[34] "There still is a strong Nasserist current within the organization," observed Heba Shazli, a specialist on Arab labor at Georgetown University. "It is deeply opposed to Islamism and quite comfortable with secular authoritarianism." The group naturally welcomed the army-led overthrow of Morsi in 2014, and stood squarely in Sisi's corner

during the crackdowns on Islamists and unionists alike that followed.[35]

Despite Sisi's brutal repression of free unions, the 2018-'20 wave of protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon inspired some action in Egypt too — but the nature of the activity was telling. To begin with, the man who catalyzed the activity resided outside Egypt: Mohamed Ali, a former construction contractor turned actor who had departed his native Egypt for Spain, used Facebook to spread purported evidence that Sisi and his stalwarts had misappropriated public funds for personal gain. The videos inspired spontaneous protests of thousands of teens and twenty-somethings in Cairo, Alexandria, and six other cities on September 20-21, 2019. Few of the demonstrators were employed workers, however, and no organizational leadership joined or emerged. The state crushed the gatherings, arresting thousands, and later mollified the unrest by restoring rice and pasta subsidies for 1.8 million people who had been disqualified from receiving them by a change in the income level for eligibility.[36]

## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF AMERICAN LABOR INTERVENTIONISM OVERSEAS

The above survey speaks to the potential for a viable Arab labor movement to help stabilize the region's politics and strengthen civil society. While admittedly fractious, diffuse, and full of missing pieces, this constellation of actors critiques autocracy, upholds egalitarian principles, and favors a moderate vision of economic development over the gamut of extremist ideologies that have plagued the region. Most of the free labor activists and organizations described above seek assistance from foreign counterparts, including Americans. Through private discussions as well as public statements, they have expressed a desire for education and capacity building. They have asked for advice on

how to grow their member base, bargain collectively, use media more effectively, and hone their advocacy. They have asked for political assistance in countering their domestic opponents, as well as international lobbying assistance to address threats posed by their governments and trans-state actors.[37]

The United States is not green to the practice of assisting labor movements overseas. American trade union support for foreign counterparts dates back nine decades. It includes a distinguished record of assistance to North African unions at a pivotal moment in their history. Such practices eventually fell out of use, however, and were subsequently resurrected in a more limited form that is inadequate to meet the present-day opportunities for union engagement in Arab lands.

By way of context, as noted in the introductory chapter, the American labor movement had been active in fighting totalitarianism overseas since the 1930s. Motivated by the principle of solidarity for all workers, unions had raised their own money to assist victims of Nazi and Soviet oppression, and during the Second World War, put their international networks at the disposal of the U.S. government to help gather intelligence and sabotage Nazi installations. After the war, the government went on to supplement unions financially so they could help protect the machinery of the Marshall Plan from Communist attacks. The American Federation of Labor, for example, partnered with anti-Stalinist European union leaders to prevent the Soviets from blocking docks, railroads, and barges in France, Italy, and Germany that were used to unload cargo vital for reconstruction from American ships.[38]

From a U.S. government perspective, this partnership reflected a larger foreign policy in which support for organized labor played a vital role. When General Douglas MacArthur drew up plans to rebuild Japan after World War II, he made the establishment of trade unions a strategic priority, dubbing them "schoolhouses of democracy." Nearly five million Japanese had

joined a union by late 1946 — an achievement widely credited with granting working class people a role in the country's politics.[39] Around the same time, West Germany's Confederation of German Trade Unions cooperated with the United States in stabilizing the post-Nazi economy, as well as re-socializing a generation of German workers.[40] Throughout the Cold War, moreover, American policymakers also saw unions as a way to combat communist influence in Eastern Europe — as the labor principle of solidarity led prominent union leaders, notably AFL-CIO chief George Meany, to advocate globally on behalf of human rights denied to workers in Soviet bloc states.[41] Notable among the recipients of U.S. support was Polish activist Lech Walesa, co-founder of the Solidarity trade union, who eventually helped liberate the country. The U.S. government granted support and expertise to these endeavors, but American unions also invested considerable resources of their own. Recognizing the value of such efforts, the Reagan administration cooperated with the AFL-CIO in creating the National Endowment for Democracy in 1983.[42]

The framework in which American labor began to engage some of its Arab counterparts dates to the founding of the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC) by the American Federation of Labor in 1944. The Committee aimed to support foreign trade unions in general and protect them from Soviet domination in particular. Over its decades of activity, FTUC waged some efforts independently and others in consort with U.S. government actors, including the CIA.[43] The latter partnership would eventually face sharp criticism from elements in the American labor movement that harbored strong reservations about U.S. government policy, particularly in Southeast Asia and Central America.[44] But this criticism, which went on to dominate historical portrayals of the group, tends to minimize and obscure the FTUC's strong independent streak. The group's work in consort with the government was not an indication of subservience — as

evidenced by the fact that FTUC also pursued goals overseas which ran counter to U.S. government policy.

The storied career of American trade unionist Irving Brown, which spanned from the Great Depression to the 1980s, provides a case in point — and a prime example of American support for organized labor in Arab countries. Over the decade following World War II, the U.S. government acquiesced to British and French efforts to maintain their colonies in Africa. Brown, for his part, opposed this policy. "We liberated Europe from Nazism," he later remarked, "and the process of liberation should have continued in Africa. … By the 1950s the U.S. should have told the Europeans that their African policies were wrong and would be counterproductive for everybody." Acting on this view over the 1950s on behalf of FTUC, Brown lent considerable energy to strengthening African labor on both sides of the Sahara — including and especially French-occupied Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In Algeria, he helped organize and grow a faction of local labor opposed to French rule and communism alike, which proceeded to play a critical role in the revolution against French rule. The Algerian UGTA, described above, evolved to a considerable degree out of those efforts. In Tunisia, Brown championed liberal revolutionary leader El-Habib Bourguiba, who would become the country's first president; as well as the nascent UGTT — organizing training and $350,000 in financial assistance for these elements.[45] During a fiery speech at a union congress in French-occupied Morocco, Brown explained that labor unions should grow strong and stay free, both for the sake of ending foreign occupation and building a viable country in its wake. "Independence is only a ticket to the arena," he said. "To move from independence to democracy is the toughest job in the world."[46]

Brown's assistance to Maghrebi unions entailed sustained, intense engagement with their chief actors. A former American diplomat observed, "Irving was famous in Africa for his 18-to-

20-hour-a-day style of attacking these African union congresses. It was a personal failure to him if he didn't have a face-to-face session with practically everybody in sight." Of the reports Brown filed from North Africa for his boss, AFL-CIO chief George Meany, a longtime Meany assistant recalled, "Those weren't reports; they were books; they covered the economy, the political scene, the delegates' strengths, weaknesses, and political tendencies; and the special problems posed for the AFL-CIO."[47]

Brown's work, in other words, amounted to a model of expeditionary diplomacy on behalf of American labor overseas. Reared in his movement's domestic efforts — he began his career as an organizer for the United Automobile Workers at Ford and General Motors plants in the 1930s — he migrated his expertise to foreign labor environments, first in Europe under the Marshall Plan and later in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.[48] A quick study and a consummate networker, he could almost as easily inspire an audience in Detroit or Berlin as in Rabat or Dakar. He knew how to apply and adapt his American expertise to suit diverse cultures and economies, and how to cajole and persuade government actors at home and abroad.

Brown's core conviction — that empowering workers and fighting Soviet communism went hand in hand — could not always be reconciled with U.S. government policy or his movement's left flank. On the one hand, Brown quit his position as A.F.L. and C.I.O. representative to the Marshall Plan's Foreign Economic Administration when he came to feel that U.S. occupying authorities sought to prevent trade unionists in Germany from becoming an effective national force.[49] On the other, he and his A.F.L. colleagues refused to go along with the C.I.O. in joining the nascent World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945: out of concern that it would serve Soviet Communism as a tool for domination, Brown actively undermined the Federation instead.[50] As Brown worked relentlessly to fight Soviet influence over five decades, often in cooperation with the U.S. government,

Moscow's formidable propaganda operations worked to tar him as an agent of "American imperialism" — and sometimes succeeded at turning trade unionists against him, both within the U.S. and overseas.[51] Prominent American conservative voices, for their part, distrusted Brown as they distrusted labor in general. American newspaper columnist Westbrook Pegler, for example, tried to label him a Communist "stooge" — to which Brown replied, "I fought against Communists long before you ever decided that it was good business to fight them."[52]

In 1988, a year before Brown's death, President Ronald Reagan decorated him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.[53] But the controversies associated with American labor interventionism overseas ultimately weakened the capacity for Brown's proteges to sustain his endeavors. During the Reagan years, as criticisms mounted of clandestine U.S. government support for brutal anti-Soviet elements in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, a dominant narrative of "CIA shenanigans" emerged in American public discussions. Witness *Wall Street Journal* reporter Jonathan Kwitny's book *Endless Enemies* ("How America's Worldwide Interventions Destroy Democracy and Free Enterprise and Defeat Our Own Best Interests"), which singled out Brown for assault.[54] Such journalism blurred the distinction between intelligence operations and foreign development assistance, to the detriment of the latter.[55]

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, as indicated previously, the "End of History" doctrine compounded the stigma of labor interventionism with a further objection: the defeat of the Soviet Union had made the worldwide march toward democracy inevitable and political action overseas unnecessary.[56] This viewpoint, which developed over the 1990s, effectively dislodged the American ideal of free labor from the American discussion of foreign policy. With the globalization of the U.S. economy, moreover, unionists' prior concerns about foreign political threats to workers' rights gave way to a new focus on the abuse of workers

by multinational corporations.[57] A further blow to American labor's capacity to wage political action overseas came in 2005, when several large unions split off from the AFL-CIO and formed the rival Change to Win Federation. This separation, rooted in a furious debate over the causes and remedies of dwindling American union membership, necessitated sharp reductions in spending.[58] The AFL-CIO liquidated property and assets in Europe and Asia which had formed its base for foreign operations.[59] Thus the case for foreign political action, as far as mainstream American labor was concerned, went from taboo to obsolete to unaffordable.

These constraints did not stop a handful of American unionists, steeped in the Meany-Brown tradition, from striving to apply their mentors' approaches in an Arab society. One was David Dorn, who retired as Director of International Affairs for the American Federation of Teachers in 2013. "The U.S. focus in the [Arab] 'democracy industry' has been in political party building — which is legitimate — as well as a cottage industry of NGOs," Dorn observed. "But I think in the Mideast, a large part of the civil society that represents more of the values we want as Americans is located in the labor movement." Shortly after the Tunisian revolution of 2010-'11, Dorn applied for funding from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a program run by the State Department, for teacher training in the country's smaller cities and towns. Noting that voter support for the Islamist Ennahda party had been stronger in those areas than in the big cities of Tunis and Sfax, he judged that focusing his group's support on union activities there might be helpful to labor in the next elections. After two iterations of the proposal were submitted, MEPI rejected it. Among the reasons cited in an initial MEPI review, Dorn says, was that "one panel member was inclined not to support the American Federation of Teachers politically." Dorn also described being struck, on a visit to the U.S. embassy in Tunis, by the naiveté of a young official serving

as the MEPI officer. Asked why the State Department had funded programs for political parties but not labor unions in the run-up to the prior year's Tunisian elections, the diplomat told Dorn, " Elections are political. Unions are only interested in wages and money." The year of Dorn's visit, the "Highlights & News" page on MEPI's website listed 173 projects and achievements, only two of which concerned support for organized labor.[60]

As one of the more financially sturdy unions that did not split from the AFL-CIO in 2005, the AFT had maintained a modest international affairs division over the years leading up to the Arab Spring. Between 2006 and 2009, under Dorn's leadership, the division carried out a half dozen overseas projects aimed at supporting independent teachers unions by teaching them how to advocate for "teachers' rights, teachers' union rights, independence, and democracy."[61] AFT also offered education aimed at growing union membership. The underlying premise of AFT's dual approach of organizing and educating was a belief that "teachers are a force for democracy; unions are a force for democracy; civil society organizations are key to democracy;" and that making "democratic unions stronger in Yemen can help" in that effort. The practical application of this premise, according to Larry Specht, a former Senior Associate in AFT's International Affairs Department, was based on the view that in order "to make the unions strong, you increase membership, you increase its ability to service its members, and also increase its usefulness to the society in producing better education. That will hopefully increase community support and maybe even lead to less hostility from the government."[62]

The implementation of these projects, however, spoke to the difficulty of waging an effective union venture overseas without skilled expeditionary diplomacy and a sustained presence on the ground. Tasked to identify independent teachers unions in the region for AFT to train, Dorn found the Yemeni Teachers Syndicate (YTS). Indeed a non-government body, it was led by stal-

warts of Al-Islah — an Islamist party founded by members of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, some with ties to Al-Qaeda. "There was always a question of what the relationship was to the [Islah] party," Dorn recalled. "And the Islah party, as we found out, is a pretty broad party, including some pretty unsavory types to some pretty moderate types."[63] A Yemeni advisor to the project advocated strongly for the alliance with YTS, "as he saw democratic forces within that Union," recalls Specht. The same local advisor argued for excluding the government-affiliated union because it was "corrupt." The U.S. embassy, for its part, advised Specht that other than "the hideous right-wing faction, there was a faction of small democrats" within the Islah party. "[But] you can't romanticize something," Specht added, "[YTS's leaders] were under the [Islah] party control."

What should be made of this advice? On the one hand, there was every reason to validate the local Yemeni advisor's assessment that the government-affiliated Yemeni teachers union was corrupt, and no reason to preclude his belief that the Islamist-led YTS harbored "democratic elements." At the same time, the binary choice he presented to AFT was both limiting and suspicious. Why rule out the possibility of "democratic elements" within the government union as well? Why advise the AFT that it had to choose between one group and the other, rather than, say, recruit the most promising elements of both for an independent educational initiative? Had AFT enjoyed the mandate and resources to sustain a proper intervention in Yemen, the local advisor's recommendations would have provided a useful touchstone for further inquiry, but not the last word.

## AMERICAN LABOR INTERVENTIONISM'S REMNANTS: AN APOLOTICAL MISSION

One nonprofit organization with institutional ties to the American labor movement formed in 1997 to support trade unionism

overseas and has maintained operations ever since. The American Center for International Labor Solidarity ("the Solidarity Center"), a "community affiliate of the AFL-CIO," aims to "empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, justice in their communities, and greater equality in the global economy." Through educational and exchange programs, publications, and legal advocacy, the group strives to help union activists "take on societal ills such as child labor, human trafficking, unfair labor laws, infringement of women's rights, dangerous workplaces, and the exploitation of the vulnerable." The group's Director of Policy, Molly McCoy, says its work reflects a new generation of American labor leaders' outlook on the world: "[Prior generations] saw the biggest threat to unions as authoritarian and communist governments, and now we see it as the unchecked power of multinational corporations."[64]

The Solidarity Center represents the consolidation of four Cold War-era labor institutes — the American Institute for Free Labor Development, the Asian-American Free Labor Institute, the African-American Labor Institute, and the Free Trade Union Institute — a decision by AFL-CIO chief John Sweeney shortly after he took the helm. More than 95 percent of the group's $34.4 million in support for 2018 came from U.S. government foreign assistance, primarily via USAID and NED. If a single theme animates the group's activity around the world, it is the protection of workers in developing countries from the negative effects of globalization. "The global economy is not working for women and marginalized workers," explains the most recent annual report. "In partnership with workers, women, and human rights advocates around the world, the Solidarity Center is working to right the scales and mitigate structural oppression, building solidarity and supporting worker efforts to change attitudes, working conditions and laws, with particular emphasis on eradicating gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work."[65] In 2019, for example, the Solidarity Center helped nego-

tiate pacts to protect women garment workers in Lesotho from unsafe and undignified workplaces in factories owned by Kontoor Brands, Levi Strauss & Co., and Nien Hsing Textiles. The group helped union activists across Central America and the Caribbean press for ratification of International Labour Organization Convention 190, to end violence and harassment in the workplace. Standing with Zimbabwean union leaders who faced summary arrest and beatings by their government, the Solidarity Center raised awareness of the human rights abuses, raised money to bail union leaders out of prison, and staged protests at Zimbabwe embassies around the world.[66]

Of the Solidarity Center's five regional divisions (Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa), the MENA group is the least funded. As of 2020, it consisted of 22 full-time staff, with the largest office in Morocco followed by presences in Tunisia, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq. Their strategy calls for "strengthen[ing] workers' political and economic rights by promoting rule of law, defending freedom of association, building capacity and internal union democracy, and encouraging trade union organizing." In practice, this means primarily education and training in consort with local trade unions and labor NGOs. Asked to provide an example, MENA director Hind Cherrouk described her work engaging low-wage women agricultural workers in Morocco. "It's a very conservative society. Women were raised in an environment and culture where you have to lower your gaze, you don't have a voice. We wanted to show them that you do have a voice and can make the transformational change that you seek and have a voice to generate progress."[67]

Thus the MENA office seeks to apply the theme of an international struggle against unchecked globalization to labor problems in a given Arab country, in consort with local partners whom Center staff assess as committed to the same set of values and goals. This mandate has led to relationships with many of the

liberal union actors identified earlier, including the Tunisian UGTT, Egyptian unionist Kamal Abbas, and the nascent Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Jordan (FITU-J). The latter's 2013 founding congress was in fact co-sponsored by the Solidarity Center.[68] The same egalitarian principles have led the group to reject cooperation with state labor monopolies such as the Egyptian ETUF and Algerian UGTA, but not to reject partnership with Islamist-leaning unions -- notably the National Labor Union of Morocco, an affiliate of the Islamist Justice and Development Party. Some of the organization's most effective interventions involved coordinated effort between its staffers in the region and the government affairs division in Washington. Notably, as the Gulf states of Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE moved to sign free trade agreements with the United States, the group partnered with labor actors in those three countries, including the Bahraini GFBTU, to organize Congressional stipulations protecting workers' rights.[69]

These important contributions to the welfare of Arab labor notwithstanding, the Solidarity Center's approach does not amount to a holistic, locally-tailored political strategy to strengthen independent labor actors vis a vis their illiberal opponents. It is a far cry, moreover, from the work of Cold War-era American labor overseas, in which unions "invested their own money in foreign engagement and trained their own regional experts to develop policies independent of the U.S. government."[70] The absence of such a commitment mattered, for example, when President Sisi cracked down on Egyptian labor activists in 2017-'18 without incurring consequences from the Trump Administration. It mattered as well amid the lethal Tunisian Salafi attacks on UGTT personnel and installations in 2012-'13, which the Obama Administration declined to address. In 2018-'20, as Arab liberal egalitarian protest movements led by labor activists registered a seismic pulse in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, the Solidarity Center was not structurally orga-

nized or equipped to substantively strengthen these forces on the ground or lobby for them in Washington.

Waging such a transnational endeavor would not have been easy, to be sure. Molly McCoy, the Solidarity Center's Policy Director, notes that in her outreach to Congress on behalf of the MENA division, "it's actually been fairly hard outside of a small number of people. There isn't a big intersection of [members] who care about the region and care about labor. The members most interested in the region are interested in security, terrorism, ISIS, and energy. It hasn't been as easy to make the case [for supporting Arab organized labor] outside of Tunisia, where everybody's interested because of the UGTT's winning of the Nobel Peace Prize."[71]

McCoy's observation, informed by years of regular encounters with Senators and Congresspeople who collectively determine the nature of U.S. foreign assistance, suggests a further problem: if the Solidarity Center chose to wage political action in Arab lands, it would likely find U.S. government funding difficult to come by. This problem relates to the conceptual division noted earlier, dating back to the 1990s, between the American ideal of free labor and the American discussion of foreign policy. Like the young American diplomat whom AFT official David Dorn encountered in Tunisia, many American lawmakers appear to share the view that in foreign environments, "elections are political, while unions are only interested in wages and money." To be sure, as McCoy noted, the role of the UGTT in stabilizing democratic tradition in Tunisia, a country of 11 million people, did not pass without notice in Congress. But the massive 2018-'20 labor-led protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon — a movement affecting 128 million people, in countries of vital strategic significance for the United States and its allies — appears to have left a comparatively modest impression with the same members. This distinction likely relates to the gap in media attention: the 2015 Tunisian Nobel Prize crowned a 2011-'12 protest movement that

had dominated American headlines for months. The more recent demonstrations made no mark on the mainstream American public discussion. They lacked the luster of a movement targeting pro-American autocrats, as the Arab Spring demonstrations had, and they transpired at a time when Americans' focus had turned sharply inward.

In my own experience of liberal trade unions in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, prospects abound to engage their members not only to strengthen their advocacy of labor rights and ideals, but also to help them apply those ideals to their country's political affairs. By way of context, in October 2020, efforts to forge a Sudanese-Israeli peace accord appeared to stall. Among the reasons, rejectionist forces were working to intimidate and stigmatize the local peace camp. The nonprofit organization I lead, the Center for Peace Communications, lent its capacities to rectifying the situation by mobilizing Sudanese religious, civic, and cultural leaders in Khartoum to rally behind the idea of a treaty. In seeking out partners, the most enthusiastic actors we found were young people, identifying as "labor rights activists," who had joined the mass demonstrations against the government of Omar El-Bashir in 2018. As journalist Safaa al-Fahal told me, "The three ideals we protested for were justice, equality, and peace. By 'peace,' we meant reconciliation within Sudan, as well as peaceful relations with all our neighbors, including Israel."[72]

Some Western critics of the Sudanese-Israeli diplomatic process had claimed that Sudanese public opinion resoundingly opposed the move toward peace. Fahal and other thought partners of hers whom we engaged believed that, to the contrary, a massive number of young Sudanese welcomed a new relationship with Israel, but due to a history of repression under Islamist dictatorship, lacked the organizational capacity to press their case. In response, we helped five veterans of the 2018 demonstrations to help establish the Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association in Khartoum, hone their arguments, and promote their

message, both domestically and internationally. At a critical moment, the activism they went on to lead emboldened advocates of a peace agreement within Sudan, rallied progressive elements within the government, and challenged foreign misperceptions of the process. In sum, they substantially improved the cultural and informational conditions for an agreement. Several of them went on to jump-start civil engagement between the two countries after the the normalization process officially commenced.[73]

It is not difficult to imagine how further expeditionary diplomacy for the sake of making common cause with Arab trade unionists can strengthen the egalitarian fiber of their societies on the one hand, and facilitate political action to counter extremism and promote peace on the other.

## A BLEAK LANDSCAPE

If the American labor movement does not adopt a more targeted, aggressive stance in support of its counterparts in Arab lands, the latter will have to wage their campaigns largely alone. Earlier in this century, a number of European labor institutions did provide assistance to their Arab, particularly North African, counterparts. European states, more directly affected by unrest in Arab countries due to their geographic proximity and deeper commercial ties, appreciated the need to foster and shore up civil institutions in the region. French, Belgian, Italian, Norwegian, and Dutch trade unions provided direct support to Arab counterparts with funding from their respective governments. In Germany, where each major political party also enjoys a state budget allocation, several provided capacity building assistance to Arab unions.[74] But these monies dried up during the 2008 global financial crisis and were not subsequently restored to pre-2008 levels.[75]

Writing in 2013, Heba Shazli, the American scholar of Arab labor, saw hope in each of these bodies -- as well as the European

Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which represents unions in 28 EU member states, and the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO). She envisioned a concerted, perhaps coordinated effort among these groups "to develop and implement an intensive organizing and political education training and leadership program" for labor activists in the Maghreb and beyond.[76] Seven years later, her vision had not come to pass.

As the democracies of the Far East grow their own, predominantly mercantile presence in Arab lands, one might hope to see their formidable labour movements — particularly that of Japan — build new ties to Arab unionists. But their governments have not supported such an effort. The unions themselves, which lack any history of foreign engagement, have in any case seen a considerable decline in membership as their national economies moved away from heavy industries and more people entered the workforce through smaller companies in the services sector.[77]

Meanwhile, the Arab unionists who helped steer the 2018-'20 demonstrations suffered a major setback in spring and summer 2020 as the coronavirus took its global toll. The architects of protest movements in Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia called for a suspension of demonstrations for the sake of public health. A nascent independent news channel in Lebanon, created to lend a voice to protesters, suspended operations over the spring. Security sectors in Algeria and Sudan proceeded to exploit the panic and self-isolation to round up labor leaders and force them to disavow continued action.

The underlying causes of these uprisings, only exacerbated by COVID-19's economic devastation, will surely continue to drive social ferment.[78] But at a moment of great potential for the protesters to channel public enthusiasm into the development of civil institutions — and in particular, to grow and consolidate free unions — a pandemic and state security effectively conspired to arrest their progress. A powerful injection of outside assistance would be necessary to recover the lost momentum.

## TOWARD AN AMERICAN LABOR INTERVENTIONIST REVIVAL

So what is to be done? In her 2013 paper on the role of labor in North African democratic transitions, Heba Shazli opined that whereas "[Arab] trade unions traditionally make economic and social demands, they are recognizing that these reforms cannot take place without serious longterm political change." Though many of the unions lack sufficient "political will and organizational capacity, … with the proper timely support, trade unions can exert enough political pressure, where conditions permit, on political parties, policymakers, and government leaders to support democratic practices and adherence to the rule of law."[79] Her proposed plan called for a substantial injection of capital into Global Union Federations such as France-based Public Services International, to build "an intensive organizing and political education training and leadership program for [Arab] labor leaders and activists." She identified specific labor sectors to focus on, from oil and chemicals to media, and tasked the leading international engagement NGOs in those fields to serve as conduits for the requisite support and expertise. She also called for Arab labor to draw a working model from post-Soviet transitioning democracies in eastern Europe, comparing the political situation in Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt to that of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania in the 1990s.[80]

The regional climate for labor since Shazli issued these wise prescriptions has shifted, however. On the one hand, as shown above, the 2018-'20 protest movements displayed a young labor leadership — liberal, university-educated, and gender-balanced — that is stronger and more principled than their counterparts in the 2011-'12 demonstrations whom Islamists managed so easily to commandeer. On the other, the post-Arab Spring descent into praetorian authoritarianism in some countries and warlordism and chaos in others has brought more brutal and pervasive pres-

sure on civic actors than even pre-Arab Spring autocrats did. On balance, the optimistic view that the unions of post-Soviet democracies in eastern Europe could provide a working model for Arab labor appears less plausible. Shazli published her paper amid a temporary political free-for-all in Egypt that may have looked like an incubation phase for civil society but proved, in retrospect, to be a preparatory phase for counter-revolutionary coup. The same pattern has since repeated twice: the 2019 departure of an aging president in Algeria brought only a new crowns to an old junta.

To be sure, some recent trends run in Arab labor's favor. Their Islamist nemeses are weakened and scattered, due to violent authoritarian crackdowns. As the previous chapter showed, moreover, the same autocrats have also launched constructive interventions to begin to roll back Islamists' influence on the religious fabric of society. But where unionists take a stand against economic injustice — and confront the political structures that perpetuate it — they meet the sword of tyranny, now newly sharpened. The United States and its European allies, consumed with political and economic turmoil at home, manifest less of an appetite to confront these powers on their shameful human rights record.

The American labor movement can meaningfully address these problems. To do so, however, it must undertake the difficult process of recovering its interventionist spirit, developing an independent foreign policy toward the region, and vigorously pursuing the latter, both at home and abroad. Labor leaders can begin by instilling greater awareness of the immense contribution to global peace and security which their twentieth century forbears made through concerted overseas engagement. Holding up these precedents as models for the future, they can challenge younger unionists to innovate a twenty-first century strategy to advance the cause of labor in the Middle East and North Africa. They can provide a framework and career path for these young

people to hone their vision by expanding unions' international affairs divisions, incorporating Arabic language skills and area expertise, and launching exchange programs to bring American unionists to the region. The latter's findings, in turn, can inform outreach to American journalists who cover labor issues and briefings to sympathetic elected officials. As American unions chart new partnerships with Arab counterparts, Heba Shazli's proposed education and leadership program offers an excellent blueprint to adopt. The web of international labor organizations she traced, moreover, provides a suitable network of Western democratic allies beyond the United States, each with a knowledge base and track record of their own.

Some of the building blocks for a labor interventionist revival already stand at the unions' disposal. Though the Solidarity Center in Washington has primarily applied a general take on "globalization" to Arab societies, it has in doing so built a spread of relationships with Arab actors who harbor more locally grounded aspirations. As the American labor movement develops a tailored approach to Arab union engagement, the Solidarity Center can provide crucial knowledge and expertise. Though in Congress, as Molly McCoy observed, few members with a foreign policy focus appreciate the importance of unionism to the future of the Middle East, some do, and others can learn. As greater outreach to American media spawns more public attention to Arab unions, this enriched public discussion, combined with more extensive Congressional outreach, can increase members' interest and commitment. Finally, though funding for American labor interventionism in the region has not been forthcoming from the unions themselves, a new commitment to engage Arab unionists can attract new forms of support. These include private philanthropy with an Arab development focus, as well as greater U.S. government assistance. As the example of Irving Brown shows, government support and an independent policy outlook are not mutually exclusive.

Should American labor pursue a unique approach to the Middle East and North Africa, it can use its formidable lobbying capacities in Washington to pressure autocrats who persecute Arab unionists, and demand greater space for the latter to organize freely. While protecting and empowering these actors, it can also adopt the principle that no Arab government is a monolith, and engage reformist elements in state-controlled labor syndicates. The expeditionary diplomats whom American unions equip to study, befriend, and assist Arab labor can map a granular approach to every city and town, and make a distinguished contribution to the region's welfare.

3

# EDUCATION REFORM TO ADVANCE CRITICAL THINKING AND RAPPROCHEMENT

*While sclerotic Arab school systems instill quiescence and sow division, liberal reformists in the same lands want to replace old, bigoted curricula with a message of pluralism and the habits of critical thinking.*

THE PRIORITIES of national development differ between war-torn Arab countries seeking a semblance of stability and stabler ones attempting to grow an economy. All of them, however, face the same essential challenge in the realm of education: prepare a diverse, youthful population to play an active role in fostering a pluralistic, civil society. To do so, they must overcome a legacy of authoritarian pedagogy which aimed to do the opposite: instill quiescence and sow division. The challenge is further complicated by the fact that numerous would-be agents of Arab school reform, as in any part of the world, are themselves a product of the old system.

A 2018 monograph by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ably describes this predicament. It observes that for generations, Arab states construed education as a service to be consumed uncritically by the population, rather than a part-

nership, for the sake of building knowledge, between educators and their society. In exchange for the opportunity to learn by rote and acquire baseline cognitive skills, Arab students effectively forwent the higher-level skills of analysis, evaluation, and critical thinking, as autocrats had deemed them dangerous to teach. Denied these benefits, learners more passively accepted official facts, formulated and imposed by government bodies, about their national history and religious identity. Teachers and textbooks inculcated the tropes of scapegoating and blame deflection, a belief in the false unity of militarism, and discomfort with explorations of diversity within the population.[1] They manufactured a black-and-white worldview of villains and victims — in which a Jewish or Israeli conspiracy to enslave the world lay behind problems large and small, ordinary people were powerless to stop it, and only the ruler could save the day.

To provide an archetypal example, Iraqis who experienced the rule of Saddam Hussein recall that schoolchildren used to gather weekly around a flagpole, wearing blue-gray uniforms, while a teacher clutching a megaphone led the following call-and-response: "Our President?" "Saddam Hussein!" "Our slogan?" "One Arab nation with an eternal message!" "Our goals?" "Unity! Freedom! Socialism!" A youngster with a semiautomatic rifle would then fire a round of blanks over the heads of his classmates.[2] The same children consumed picture books drawn from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* and learned to sing the following anthem of Nasserist pan-Arabism: "We heed your call, o flag of Arabism / All of us come to your defense. / We heed your call, o flag of Arabism / and let us make of our skulls a ladder to your glory."[3]

"Generations were raised on such philosophies," recalls Saad Salloum, the professor at Mustansiriya University in Baghdad who leads the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue. "Meanwhile, we were denied the opportunity to meaningfully examine our own society. Through the ideology of pan-Arabism we learned

more about Algerians, Tunisians, and Egyptians than we did about Iraqi Christians, Yazidis and Jews. The external 'other' was our bogeyman, while the internal 'other' was, at best, a mystery."[4] Having purged the humanities and social sciences of their essential analytical tools, moreover, Arab school systems assigned them a lowly status. They meanwhile exalted education in technology and the sciences, which the state had deemed useful and non-threatening. But Arab students, lacking the requisite rearing in methodical inquiry or deliberative discourse, too often strained to engage these technical fields creatively.[5]

The denial of intellectual autonomy to generations of Arabs not only failed as a national development strategy; it also ricocheted back on Arab rulers. When jihadist and other opponents of the state crafted their own educational plans to attract and brainwash followers, they exploited the same vulnerability to manipulation which Arab government schools had instilled. They accessed the same ingrained tropes of scapegoating and blame deflection, moreover, to serve new ideological goals. Witness the plagiarism in this anthem of the Muslim Brotherhood and its armed splinter groups, dating from the 1990s: "We heed your call o Islam of heroism / All of us come to your defense. We heed your call o Islam of heroism / And let us make of our skulls a ladder to your glory." Substituting only the phrase "Islam of heroism" for "flag of Arabism," the song easily refracted the old militant directive onto a new set of targets, including Arab governments and the ethos of secularism.[6] As some Arab leaders meanwhile moved to moderate their policies toward Israel, or establish relations with the Jewish state, the rejectionist worldview they had instilled for generations enabled their opponents to tar them as traitors.

Fast-forward to Tunisia under Islamist rule in 2014. As ISIS drew local youth by the thousands to join its fighters in Syria and Iraq, Latifa, a secular Tunisian vocalist with a pan-Arab following, lamented the region's devolution from the optimism of the

Arab Spring to the darkness of civil war. In hopes of inspiring a solution to the problem by rekindling a feeling of Arab unity, she reached back into the region's cultural legacy to make a new recording. What she found was the same old song: her new performance of "We heed your call" with the original "flag of Arabism" reinstated won millions of views on social media.[7]

Would Latifa's "ladder of skulls" serve to mend fractured societies, let alone inspire a constructive nation-building agenda? The question is relevant to the field of education reform because that same year, in several states where the ruler survived the Arab Spring, schools took steps analogous to the Tunisian singer's revival of a Nasserist anthem — by introducing new counterrevolutionary education programs that doubled down on the false unity of militarism. In neighboring Algeria, for example, the country's armed forces launched a national chain of secondary schools called the "School of the Cubs of the Nation" (Madrasat Ashbal al-Ummah).[8] An official documentary about the venture said it aimed to instill the values of "patriotism, Arabism, and national defense." The video shows school children discussing the need to neutralize foreign threats, and refers to international conspiracies to destroy the country. In one scene, a teacher writes, "The French Campaign Against Algeria" on a chalkboard.[9] Critics have assessed the "School of the Cubs of the Nation" as an effort to turn young people into informers and enforcers for the junta — comparing it to Nashi, Russia's Kremlin-backed youth movement, established in 2008 to protect Russia from being "governed externally."[10]

As a case in point, the Algerian venture should raise questions about longstanding international efforts to help improve the region's schools, most of which channel aid and assistance through Arab Ministries of Education. Recall from the previous chapter's treatment of a liberal protest movement in Algeria that some elements within the country do not embrace the dark narration of foreign or domestic affairs that the "School of the

Cubs of the Nation" seeks to implant. To the contrary, tens of thousands of demonstrators have acknowledged the historical mistreatment of Algerian Amazigh, extended a hand in friendship to outsiders, and called for genuine civil rule. In other words, a critical mass of young people have apparently come to feel that the militant messaging and rote learning of their school days did not suit them, and formed an alternative, liberal worldview independently. This promising shift does not negate the possibility that millions of Algerians cherish the jingoistic tropes of their schooldays, or that many more embrace the crude Islamist analogue to them. It does suggest, however, that some of the Algerians best suited to wage a campaign of liberal education reform may not work for the government schools system — or that those reformists who do, lack sufficient influence within their institution to effect change.

A winning international strategy to support Arab education reform, therefore, would not only help reformists gain ground within the state system; it would also empower educators in the broader population who seek to play a role without waiting for the system to reform itself. As the examples to follow will show, remarkable people in several Arab countries have innovated techniques to bypass government schools in imparting advanced skills to their fellow citizens. They want to grow their efforts, as well as make common cause with like-minded establishment elements, but could use some help.

## RENEGADE EDUCATORS FOR CRITICAL THINKING

Among the range of independent education initiatives, one cluster of activity revolves around the aspiration to spread critical thinking. Proponents of this skill set feel that Arab societies can apply critical thinking to negotiate their internal differences,

marginalize extremist groups, foster national reconciliation, and, in so doing, grow more stable, secure, and prosperous. So argued Omar El-Enezi, a 23-year-old medical student at King Abdelaziz University in the Saudi port city of Jedda when we first met in 2013. "When people talk to each other here," he said, "too often they make arguments based on logical fallacies, impossible to resolve. It's detrimental to the country to leave them that way."[11] In his view, an "ignorant movement" advanced by state-backed clerics, media, and schoolteachers has effectively suppressed the use of logic and reason. He said he aimed to counter this movement by popularizing critical thinking and the scientific method, and instilling a fascination with the many branches of science and technology which these techniques have enabled. Enezi and three friends had recently launched a project aiming to do so: an online media platform called Asfar ("zeroes") named after the world-altering numeral invented in ancient Babylon. Through audio, video, and prose, Asfar conveyed ideas about logic and science in humorous, Saudi-inflected Arabic, tailored to the sensibilities of its audience.[12]

Enezi came to critical thinking intuitively, he recalled, as a ten-year-old in 2001. Some prominent Saudi clerics had issued a religious edict against Pokémon children's games and playing cards, alleging that the franchise promoted "Zionism." "Everybody was throwing away their Pokémon toys," he said. "I had a lot of those cards and didn't understand why I had to give them up." He went online and researched the meaning of the purportedly subversive names and symbols on the cards. He found all the cards to be benign, he said, and decided to hold onto his collection. "But I noticed that a lot of my friends didn't think the way I did," he added, "and so I kept my head down—for years."

Saudis who share Enezi's inclination to challenge orthodoxy tend to gravitate to the sciences, Enezi explained, and they gain courage to express their views by discovering that they are not alone. Only after Enezi entered the department of medicine at

King Abdelaziz University in 2011 did he begin to speak more openly about his ideas, in the company of peers. Asfar was an outgrowth of his friendships with Baraa Orabi, a computer engineering student minoring in philosophy; Rakan al-Mas'udi, a self-described "humanist and enthusiast of equality" born in Syria and studying in Jedda; and Mohammad Al-Hamrani, a medical intern and amateur musician. All fluent in English, mainly from their study of the language at home (Enezi, for example, has never visited an English-speaking country), the young men supplemented their studies with online American university courses about secular reasoning and the latest research in their fields, and established an informal weekly salon to discuss what they learned. From essays by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, they discovered Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution. They found a website, yourlogicalfallacyis.com, that gave them a framework to perceive patterns of conversation in Saudi Arabia that seemed to stifle public discourse.[13] And by listening intently to comedian Joe Rogan's weekly online radio show, they learned about what makes a podcast entertaining. Then they bought a microphone and set up a makeshift recording studio with echo-absorbing fabric.

A typical Asfar podcast, from Valentine's Day 2014, is called "The Biography of Love: Attraction and Human Psychology."[14] The four co-hosts talk through an online lecture by Yale University president Peter Salovey that examines the theory of the "love triangle": intimacy, passion, and commitment.[15] Hamrani points out that though love is experienced by the brain, "It's not the same as a headache," in that it cannot be explained in strictly chemical-neurological terms. "The difficulty of explaining love begins with a problem of language," Enezi says. "In English there are distinctions between 'I like you,' 'I love you,' and 'I'm in love with you.' In Arabic we have distinctions of our own." Riffing on Enezi, Hamrani points out that love between two people plays a different role in an individualistic culture such as Salovey's than

in a traditional society like Saudi Arabia, in which "larger groups, like families and clans, are more deeply vested in a couple's relationship." Later the discussion segues from Salovey's lecture to books the group has read, like Gerald Schoenewolf's The Art of Hating. Mas'udi points out that love and hate are not polar opposites but rather twins in intensity, equidistant from apathy. Sounding a note of optimism, he adds, "You might be surprised to see hate very easily turning into love."[16]

These productions, Enezi said, "are intended for a more patient and sophisticated audience." For browsers with a shorter attention span, Asfar's cartoons on YouTube offered a three-minute educational fix. Take "Critical Thinking" (Al-Tafkir al-Naqdi). It is an animated cartoon illustrating philosopher Daniel Dennett's "Seven Tools for Critical Thinking," with an eighth added by the Asfar team as well as adjustments tailored for the Saudi audience.[17] Other cartoons explain the scientific method and topics ranging from the theory of evolution to Pluto's demotion from planetary status. The cartoons are tightly scripted, with a soundtrack, crisp animation, frugal use of text, and several laugh lines per minute; they speak to the group's passion for science and reason.

Such efforts have at times faced pushback, however, from other elements within the society that forthrightly oppose critical thinking. Witness Palestinian Salafi cleric Murid al-Kallab, who produced a four-part series called "Skills of Thought: Critical Thinking" which was disseminated via the popular YouTube channel "IslamAcademy," funded by clerical elites in the kingdom. After presenting a crude definition of critical thinking, Kallab says,

> The candle of critical thinking must be extinguished, and its light must be turned off, when it contradicts a proof text from the Qur'an or prophetic Hadith. In this situation, there is no place for critical thinking. We must simply believe and surrender. If not, I

> would be violating logic. . . . In this situation, logic says that God's wisdom cannot be understood by humankind . . . [and] you don't have the right to choose what of God's wisdom to apply or not apply.[18]

This perspective was the definition of Salafi orthodoxy, in a country where clerics had long wielded overwhelming power to enforce it. When we spoke, Enezi pointed significantly to the case of poet and journalist Raif Badawi, who faced a prison sentence in 2011 after posting a series of tweets that allegedly insulted the prophet Muhammad. In May 2014, having lost a court appeal, he was sentenced to ten years in prison, a thousand lashes, and a fine of a million Saudi riyals (roughly $267,000).[19]

Asfar, a tiny, all-volunteer operation with only a few thousand fans, took pains to avoid provoking the ire of the Saudi religious establishment. "We're proceeding cautiously, keeping it light, and avoiding confrontation," Enezi explained. The group studiously avoided presenting scientific perspectives on God, and never commented about politics. Enezi recalled,

> There was one series of episodes we were frantically cautious about making, which was the three-episode series on evolution—because by discussing evolution you are immediately throwing out the idea of a 'Design.' When we launched the episodes we were really worried about a negative backlash from the community. But we only got a few—you know, two or three—confused comments, and the rest of them were actually excited about the topic. Some of them said, 'We never knew this before. Thank you very much.' So the community, currently, is a lot more enlightened than we thought.[20]

Though Asfar was just a drop in an ocean of Islamist media productions, it was not alone in advancing its core ideas. Another modest operation, "Scientific Saudi," subtitled American video

shorts about science without comment.[21] An anonymous Facebook page created in Saudi Arabia, "I believe in Science," was a forum for Arabic-language discussion of the world's latest discoveries.[22] A handful of individual enthusiasts, like Riyadh's Khalid al-Judi', have also videotaped themselves expostulating on the merits of critical thinking and posted the clips to YouTube. While some of these youths have established contact with one another, others produced the content without encouragement or support, and said they felt intellectually isolated.[23]

Under Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, policies shifted with regard to clerical hegemony over the public space in a manner that initially seemed to augur well for efforts like Asfar.[24] But the concurrent stifling of nongovernmental civil initiatives by liberals appears instead to have caused a chill effect on the little community of independent proponents of critical thinking. Asfar, for example, has produced no videos or podcasts since 2017.

More aggressive Arab efforts along the lines of Asfar emerged in Egypt, where a number of ventures similarly aimed to address the failure of public schools to teach critical thinking, by reaching the population directly through various media. A 30-episode TV series called "School of Mischief Makers" [Madrasat al-Mushaghibin], which aired on the national satellite channel ONTV in 2014, features a classroom of cheeky students, of both faiths and hailing from all parts of the country, enduring a lecture by their aging, strait-laced teacher.[25] Over the course of each episode, it emerges that the teens and not the teacher harbor the reactionary views, having passively absorbed it in their childhoods. In one episode, he shows them that their arguments escalate into brawls because they fail to reason empathically with each other. In another, he makes the case that one learns by questioning and challenging the teacher, and might even teach the teacher something along the way — then applies the principle to their experience with Islamic education at the hands of clerics.

Discussing Egypt's Coptic population, he challenges the students' presumption that their Christianity makes them less Egyptian, explaining that, to the contrary, Islam is Egypt's newcomer.[26]

Albert Shafik, who served as ONTV's Deputy General Manager when the program aired, said the network had been striving to fill a gap in the public school system. "Our government schools employ hundreds of thousands of teachers whose own education was overwhelmingly rote learning," he observed.

> It's foolish to expect that they would suddenly be able to switch on a light and teach critical thinking, a skill which many of them do not possess. But in the meantime, we have 20 million youngsters learning from them, and we need to introduce something new into this cycle. So we felt that if we put a fictional model teacher in front of a mass audience, he could serve as a kind of educational proxy, both to students and to teachers. Perhaps some teachers would screen episodes from the show in their classes, for example. And indeed, we were heartened to learn that many teachers did that. They really want to help the kids, and when an opportunity comes along to spread a message more effectively, they seize upon it.[27]

In a separate, more expansive effort, an Egyptian social entrepreneur built a dedicated educational organization that aimed to reach millions of Egyptians online, as well as begin to change the government school system from within. In 2012, Egyptian internet activist Wael Ghonim, widely touted as a prime mover in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, donated revenues from his bestselling memoir to create a media foundation for the production of online learning videos. Tahrir Academy aimed to combat "the deteriorating state of Egyptian culture [caused by a] mind-numbing educational system based on rote memorization." With support from a production team in Cairo, volunteer lecturers posted 600 videos to YouTube, garnering over 20

million views. In one example of Tahrir's attempt to promote the alternative to rote learning, an 11-part lecture series explained the meaning of critical thinking and, ever so gently, its social and political implications. People who lack critical-thinking skills "think only they are right" and "find conspiracies in everything in life," explained host Islam Hussein. Embrace critical thinking, he said, and "your mind will be yours alone. . . . No one will be able to easily control you, or manipulate you to serve his goals. . . . It will effect every aspect of your life: personal, social, political. . . . [Critical thinking] will also be your defense against any distorted news spread by the media." The process of adopting critical thinking begins with self-criticism, he added: "Look into the mirror. Set aside your racial, political, and social identities and try to view things in an unbiased way."[28]

Tahrir's staff appreciated the difficulty of bringing such lessons to government schools, where most teachers were themselves the product of rote learning. But the video series offered a burst of public exposure to the concept, and some teachers, having discovered it spontaneously, shared it with their students. The NGO meanwhile sought to build inroads into the government education system. In April 2014, Tahrir Academy welcomed Dr. Farouq al-Baz to join its board of directors. As brother of the late Osama el-Baz, longtime senior advisor to former president Hosni Mubarak, he offered the possibility of access to stalwarts of the military-led government. The organization hoped that el-Baz could win establishment buy-in for Tahrir to begin to play a role in reforming schools curricula and retraining teachers. At a media event in Cairo, he heartily endorsed Tahrir Academy, dubbing the group "an ambitious, patriotic project. … The energy and zeal of the Academy's young volunteers is enough to show that a better future lies ahead for Egypt." He predicted that the group would become "influential within a short few years." This all-Egyptian effort did not attempt to enlist Egypt's foreign allies in advocating for it through consultations with the country's

leadership, for fear of drawing suspicions or triggering pushback. But critics of the project within the educational establishment tarred it as a "Zionist plot" anyway, and the bottom-up lobbying did not garner high-level political support. After funding dried up, Tahrir Academy scaled back its efforts. It posted no new videos between 2015 and 2020.[29]

In sum, Asfar, Tahrir Academy, and other independent ventures reflected the presence of highly motivated social entrepreneurs who aim to remake Arab education, as well as pent-up demand for the content they create. But they did not muster the practical assistance or political support that would have been necessary to sustain them, let alone integrate the programs into their respective national education systems.

## THE LIMITS OF SYSTEMIC EDUCATION REFORM

A larger set of reform initiatives are those that emanate from within Arab education ministries — or launch semi-independently, with establishment support, for the expressed purpose of improving the system. These efforts reflect different, at times contradictory views about the role of Arab society as a partner with the government in educating youth. They also speak to uncertainty as to how to deal with entrenched hardline elements that oppose liberal reform.

By way of example, in 1990s Egypt, as the state struggled against a jihadist insurgency, education ministry officials recognized that the fighters' followers included government school teachers who sought to radicalize and recruit youth within the classroom. Egyptian education minister Hussein Kamal Bahaa El Din, who held the post from 1991 to 2004, adopted a policy of transferring them from Egypt's major cities to the country's southern and border governorates. Unsurprisingly, less than a

generation later, the areas to which they had been sent proved to be the most supportive of Islamists in successive elections — and a stronghold of resistance to later attempts by the Sisi government to weaken extremist religious messaging in mosques and seminaries. Bahaa El Din had clearly appreciated that his ministry had a problem, but his attempts to mitigate it proved counterproductive. His 13 years in charge of education had meanwhile seen no methodical strategy to revise the values or skill sets Egyptians were trained to teach.[30] Doing so would have been enormously difficult, to be sure: the country's vast education ministry, starved for resources, harbors at least as many feuding fiefdoms and dysfunctional bureaucracies as any other school system. Nor, after all, did the country's ruler necessarily support the kind of reforms that would have sharpened the population's capacity to deliberate critically and act autonomously.

The United Arab Emirates, a much smaller autocracy, made its own early efforts to mitigate Islamist influence in schools as well as develop the beginnings of an alternative. Years before it commenced an all-out crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the government undertook a series of personnel adjustments to weaken the movement's ability to sway the population. In 2003, according to local newspaper reports, authorities moved 170 Brotherhood figures employed by the Ministry of Education, including 83 who held managerial roles, to various local divisions of government where they would control no platform of public messaging. (An equivalent reshuffling of mosques and media occurred in subsequent years.)[31] While the government did not move to replace these figures with proponents of a liberal education, it did take steps to inculcate an alternative set of values. Witness the educational division of the "Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness," a project of the UAE Ministry of Interior initiated in 2011 which partnered with the education ministry. Its elementary schools curricula, introduced nationally, taught millions of

schoolchildren to regard the legal system as the supreme framework for their actions — superseding tribal, political, and ideological loyalties. On the one hand, the "rule of law" as defined by the Bureau did not meet the standards of democratic governance: the curricula did not suggest, for example, that the population should have the right to amend the laws. In other words, it effectively promoted the principle of "rule by law," whereby the legal system serves the autocrat as an instrument by which to govern. Nonetheless, the project represented a step forward, in that children learned to embrace a transcendent civic ethos of religious, ethnic, and gender equality under the law.[32]

Despite such encouraging signs, Arab government school systems across the broader region continued to manifest deep resistance to change. In response, some Arab establishment reformists have supported the creation of nongovernmental initiatives that would aim to improve the caliber of teaching in government schools through partnership. The Arab Thought Forum, a private endowment launched by Saudi prince Khalid bin Faisal, supported one such venture called TAMAM (an Arabic acronym for "schools-based development"), a regional NGO headquartered in Beirut and led by American University of Beirut education professor Rima Karami-Akkary. The group defines a successful Arab education as "revolv[ing] around constructive citizenship," and holds that every student "should become an agent of change; a continuous and reflective learner; an innovative and critical thinker; and a promoter of ethical social responsibility … [toward] a more tolerant, equitable, and just society." Karami-Akkary believes "the above cannot be achieved under the existing Arab educational systems," but that by forging a "learning ecosystem" that binds schools to NGOs, institutions of higher education, and parents' groups, a holistic effort can meaningfully enrich the student's experience.[33] TAMAM seeks to catalyze such efforts by embedding personnel within an Arab school and building "leadership teams" of educa-

tors, parents, and students. The teams work together to identify obstacles to an outstanding civic education; lobby for and implement improvements; and monitor results. TAMAM brokered relationships with a small network of government and private schools in Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, and Sudan.[34]

On the one hand, Tamam's deployments to Arab education systems were scattered and diffuse, and most participating schools served relatively affluent, cosmopolitan communities that had already made the crucial decision to seek help in pursuing a citizenship-centered learning model. Even in Saudi Arabia, where the organization's patron served briefly as education minister, TAMAM's practices were not institutionalized on a large scale. Nor in any of the schools where it operates has a TAMAM venture directly challenged hardline elements in an education ministry that oppose the evolution toward civics-based education. On the other hand, relative to its small size, the group's outcomes have been substantial. Using social media, moreover, TAMAM has distributed video clips that movingly document the success of a given school's pilot project for other Arab schools to consider and emulate. Discussions of the material on Facebook, for example, suggest that the concepts and practices are spreading.[35]

In building relationships with school systems in numerous Arab countries, TAMAM claims authenticity as an indigenously conceived and funded organization, backed by a Saudi prince. Other nongovernment initiatives with roots outside the Arab region have also built inroads to Arab education ministries. Among recent examples, the Life Skills and Citizenship Education Initiative (LSCE) is an educational model launched through the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) in 2017 to spread "a holistic, lifelong, and rights-based approach to education in the Middle East and North Africa."[36] Offering a framework to enrich learning through school, the workplace, and communal life, it

espouses 12 core "life skills," in four thematic categories. "Learning to Know" (the cognitive dimension) covers creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving. "Learning to do," aiming to boost employability, features lessons in cooperation, negotiation, and decision-making. "Learning to be," a module to build autonomy, teaches resilience, self-management, and communication. Finally, "learning to live together" — the foundation of citizenship — inculcates respect for diversity, empathy, and participation.[37] LSCE emerged amid the massive waves of refugees and internal displacement wrought by post-Arab Spring civil wars. Through partnerships with NGOs, international lending institutions, and foundations, it has catalyzed small pilot projects among Arab education ministries in Djibouti, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, and Yemen.[38]

As UNICEF offers a framework to impart advanced skills and egalitarian values for a diverse society, other UN bodies have served to voice concern about the incendiary texts and teachings that impede such progress. In 1995, UNESCO member states ratified the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, which calls for "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human" and "accepting the fact that human beings, naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, behaviour and values, have the right to live in peace and to be as they are."[39] This statement followed the Education clause of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples; and other internationally endorsed UN declarations in affirming educational principles for all member states to follow. Though lacking an accountability mechanism to ensure that the signatories comply, the statements have at least articulated a global standard for teaching about the "Other," and provided a set of criteria on which to evaluate textbooks and teaching systems.

For educational reformers across the region, the availability of such criteria naturally begged the question of what steps could be taken to encourage, persuade, or pressure Arab governments to implement them. The 25 years since the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance had seen the promise of independent Arab initiatives like Tahrir Academy and Asfar, the emergence of reformist establishment-backed NGOs like Tamam, and some evidence of internal reform within education ministries. Yet in sum, as a new generation of children passed through the crucible of Arab schools, in most Arab countries, overall progress toward improving their education remained far from adequate.

## ISRAELI-ARAB EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Israel, the country and polity most widely reviled by Arab textbooks and teachers, has harbored its own kinds of expertise in the field of Arab education. The earliest and most underutilized kind was the institutional memory that arrived by way of Jewish refugees from Arab countries. On the eve of the Second World War, 900,000 indigenous Jews still lived in their ancestral homelands across the Middle East and North Africa. A professional class, their numbers included a substantial number of schoolteachers and administrators. Jewish populations fled the Arab region en masse, primarily to Israel between 1947 and 1974.[40] The dynamics of Arab-Israeli conflict precluded the possibility that the educators among them would reconnect, over the decades that followed, with the school systems of the countries they had fled: most Arab governments imposed a blanket ban on Israeli-Arab civil engagement of any kind, and well into the twentieth century, even Israel's Egyptian and Jordanian peace partners effectively maintained it. Meanwhile, as demonizing

portrayals of Jews, their faith, and their nascent state held center stage in Arab schools, media, and mosques, the Jews who had actually lived alongside Arabs, now gone, faded from local memory.[41]

A later form of Israeli expertise in Arab education developed out of national concern that antisemitic and anti-Israel canards in Arab schools fueled social and political animosity toward the country and its people and sharpened the case for terrorism. Israeli researchers knew that some Arab voices, appearing on Arab satellite television, decried antisemitism and incitement in the region's schools as injurious to their own societies.[42] But as Israelis were blocked by Arab governments from engaging Arab civic actors directly, the idea of making common cause with such figures in a campaign for education reform was a nonstarter. Seeking a different route to press for change, several Israeli education scholars began to raise international awareness of the phenomenon of hate speech in Arab schools. They hoped in doing so to raise the political price to Arab governments for perpetuating hate-filled curricula, and thereby prompt improvements.[43]

Prominent among these efforts, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), which launched in Jerusalem in 1998, acquired and examined textbooks and curricula from Arab countries to determine whether they met "international standards on peace and tolerance as derived from UNESCO declarations and resolutions." The organization pledged to assess "whether young people are being educated to accept others — be it their neighbors, minorities and even their nation's enemies, and to solve conflicts through negotiation and compromise while rejecting hatred and violence."[44] IMPACT-se's reports indeed exposed flagrant violations of the UNESCO standards, and triggered an international outcry. As a result, the European Parliament froze some of its funding to the Palestinian Authority in 2018 pending improve-

ments to the latter's school curricula. The Swiss, German, and British governments demanded clarification from Palestinian officials before committing to a renewal of support.[45] In the U.S. Congress in 2019, lawmakers introduced a bill that would require the Secretary of State to submit annual reports reviewing the educational material used by Palestinian Authority and UNRWA schools in Palestinian territories, after finding that "new Palestinian curriculums fail to meet the international standards of peace and tolerance in educational materials established by UNESCO."[46]

It bears noting that IMPACT-se surveys of Arab textbooks were not limited to the Palestinian areas: the group's reports also covered Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia, as well as non-Arab Muslim-majority countries Iran and Turkey and, for that matter, orthodox Jewish school systems in Israel.[47] The fact that Western legislative action arose only with respect to Palestinian textbooks reflects American and European governments' outsize role in underwriting the Palestinian Authority and, by consequence, the role of their legislatures as a site for the airing of disputes among advocates of Palestinian and Israeli causes. But IMPACT-se's influence on Western policy toward Arab education systems well exceeded the litter of bills and parliamentary inquiries which its reporting catalyzed directly. As part of a larger movement of research institutions dedicated to exposing antisemitism and other bigotry in Arabic discourse, the group helped advance the issue in Western policy discussions of the Middle East generally. A generation after IMPACT-se's founding, the problem of "incitement in Arab schools" is now routinely raised by Western lawmakers and diplomats in high-level meetings with Arab allies, and informs continuing inquiries by the U.S. State Department and European foreign ministries in explorations of civil development across the region.[48] So substantial pressure has been applied. But to the extent it aimed to cause actual reform in Arab schools, has it succeeded?

Beginning in 2015, a series of actions by Arab governments indeed signaled the beginnings of a departure from their history of demonizing Jews, Judaism, and Israel. IMPACT-se noted that the 2015-'16 school year in Egypt saw the removal of some anti-semitic religious textbooks from circulation, and the release of a new high school geography book acknowledging that peace with the Jewish state had enabled "the promotion of economic and social development and the repair of [Egypt's] infrastructure."[49] Though the book maintained the bogus claim that the 1956 and 1967 wars stemmed from an Israeli aspiration to expand "from the Nile to the Euphrates," it inserted the iconic, humanizing photo of Israeli Prime Minister Begin and Egyptian President Sadat clasping hands together with President Jimmy Carter.[50] Additionally, the public rededication of long-dormant synagogues in Manama and Alexandria, and the construction of new ones in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, amounted to highly public expressions of tolerance by the governments of Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain which constituted a further contribution to public education, albeit not through schools.[51] The same could be said of recurring public expressions of acknowledgment and empathy with victims of the Holocaust by Ibrahim Al Issa, head of the Saudi Muslim World League, following generations of Holocaust denial by that institution — and subsequent reforms of the Saudi school system, also praised by IMPACT-se.[52] These expressions of acceptance and shared humanity were commonly ascribed to the regional realignment that placed Israel in a de facto camp with Sunni Arab powers against Iranian and jihadist forces. Within that strategic context, Arab powers understandably began to mitigate longstanding Jewish and Israeli grievances. Inasmuch as IMPACT-se had served to articulate the grievances about Arab education, it arguably helped inform the new cultural agenda that Arab states began to pursue.

By the same token, however, the limits of these reforms to a handful of Arab countries reflect the limitations of an Israeli

inquiry into Arab textbooks that did not — and could not — involve a collaborative exchange with the Arab educators who used them. In any society, the pivotal role teachers play in interpreting the textbooks, using the curricula, and serving as a role model to students overall matters at least as much as the texts themselves. Thus a strategy to reform education that does not include professional development and new standards for the teachers will not succeed. Similarly, the "hardware" of critical thinking, empathic reasoning, participatory learning, and analysis provides learners with skills they require to evaluate the "software" of political narration, historical memory, and spiritual instruction. It is of course good news when, as the post-2015 period has shown, some Arab school systems are retiring antisemitic "software" and replacing it with a more humanistic alternative. But subtle improvements to a textbook require a higher level of cognitive engagement in order to register with students — which in turn requires a willing, well-prepared cadre of teachers. A new kind of teamwork will be necessary to bridge "hardware" and "software" solutions and reform Arab education holistically, from teachers to textbooks.

To begin to imagine what such a partnership would look like, consider the mutual gaps between the Israeli activity noted above and the Arab reform initiatives described previously. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's Asfar and Egypt's Tahrir Academy produced creative, compelling content to spread critical thinking education online, but shied away from overtly applying critical thinking skills to the controversies that raged in their societies. These independent actors judged it perilous to make such waves without establishment political backing, and their attempts to garner such support did not succeed. On the other hand, Israel's IMPACT-se, while well disposed to sympathize with their agenda, could not engage these actors, due to Israel's strained relations with the two countries (a cold peace with Egypt, that is, and no official relations with Saudi Arabia quite yet). IMPACT-se

could apply international pressure against the chauvinist strand in Arab education systems, which both Israel and Arab liberals opposed. But public pressure on its own is a blunt device, best applied in coordination with private partnerships to develop an alternative to the objectionable material. The constraints IMPACT-se faced in offering such partnership stemmed from Israel's isolation from Arab societies and, by consequence, from the group's necessarily narrow focus on monitoring the content of textbooks from a distance.

In any case, neither independent Arab ventures like Asfar and Tahrir Academy nor an Israeli group like IMPACT-se would be able to contribute meaningfully to the reform of Arab school systems without the courage and commitment of Arab establishments. To his credit, as noted earlier, Egyptian Education Ministr Hussein Kamal Bahaa al-Din manifested an awareness of his institutions' failings. Nor was he alone in the region in recognizing the need for transformative change. As the Algerian example shows, however, some state educators favor a retrenchment of authoritarian pedagogy. Meanwhile, Bahaa al-Din's reform policies amounted at most to nibbling around the edges of the problem. It remained to be seen, moreover, whether private initiatives like TAMAM, itself a demonstrably confrontation-averse venture, would open their doors to the participation of independent Arab actors, let alone proponents of humanist treatments of the Jewish or Israeli "other."

With the signing of new peace accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco in 2020, opportunities to do so grew considerably. The UAE leadership signaled from the outset that it aimed to move past the "cold peace" outcome of Egypt's and Jordan's pacts with Israel and foster a genuine "peace between peoples." In a swift signal of intent, less than one month after the agreement's signing in August, the UAE's Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence and Israel's Weizmann Institute of Science signed the first public memorandum of under-

standing between Israeli and Gulf educational institutions.[53] While other agreements followed among the two countries' universities, UAE elementary and secondary schools began to inculcate support for the principle of peace with Israel, as well as awareness of the region's indigenous Jewish history, in their respective curricula.[54] Marcus Sheff, the founder of IMPACT-se, wrote in the *Times of Israel* that the new openings across the Arab world

> present the opportunity to engage with curriculum developers in the region. … What is required is professional and culturally sensitive curriculum research, the understanding of where problems lie, cooperation with partners, the willingness to teach alternative content and the authority to drive change — and to build a more tolerant and better future for our region.[55]

Sheff had discovered a new world of possibility.[56] Meanwhile, although the field of engagement for an Israeli educational NGO had expanded to only a few new Arab states, liberal reformists in other Arab countries emerged around the same time to show that they too wanted to advance along the same lines. In July 2020, for example, the Iraqi Institute for Diversity Studies — a subsidiary project of the NGO Masarat, profiled in chapter one — published a first-ever series of textbooks on the country's non-Muslim minority faiths, including Mandaeanism, Yazidism, Judaism, and Christianity. Geared toward clerics, media, and teachers, the textbooks aim to better inform Iraqis who in turn educate children and the general public. "The idea is to prevent the preferential treatment of one particular religion as the 'best' or the 'dominant' faith over others and actively work against the introduction of religious monopolies," explained Masarat head Saad Salloum. Khalil Jundi, author of the volume on Yazidism and a Yazidi himself, said he felt the project had the potential to "liberate the minds of young generations." The Institute tapped American

Rabbi Ephraim Gabbai, who is the child of Iraqi Jewish refugees, to pen the book on Judaism, and invited this author, also an American of Iraqi Jewish background, to join an advisory board that would help devise the strategic rollout of the project. This grassroots venture received the endorsement of the newly elected Minister of Culture and Antiquities, Hassan Nadhem — a first step in a long process of lobbying for its adoption by the country's Ministry of Education.[57]

The presence of an American rabbi in an Iraqi educational reform initiative reflects the relevance of American civil society as a vector in overcoming gaps in connectivity which most of the region's education systems have not yet bridged. Equipped with the human network and knowledge of the field which American expeditionary diplomacy can provide, the United States can vitally contribute to the ongoing struggle for Arab schools reform. American educators can forge partnerships that strengthen the capacity of independent Arab ventures aiming to spread high-level analytical skills and corrective social narration among their populations. They can build new inroads to Arab education ministries and the semi-independent NGOs that serve them, to more granularly assess the state of reform efforts and become a voice in discussions of their future. They can also play a bridge-building role in helping to connect Israeli voices to Arab reformists beyond the circle of "Abraham Accords" states, as the latter work together to overcome generations of Arab pedagogy rooted in the use of Israel and its people as a foil. As these civil partnerships develop, U.S. officials and lawmakers can more judiciously exert their influence to win on Arab governments to open a space for the most promising schools reform ventures to take shape. By empowering the youngest generation to think critically, embrace diversity and the "other," and apply their creative powers to the range of fields, Americans can help secure the region's future.

4

# ARAB THINK TANKS AS AN ENGINE OF DEVELOPMENT

*Liberal Arab thinktanks, mostly cash-starved and embattled, harbor laudable goals: help resolve domestic conflicts, popularize a problem-solving approach to policy, and professionalize young researchers who go on to serve in government.*

James McGann defines think tanks as "institutions of research, analysis, and engagement that generate policy advice on domestic and international issues, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions, and bridging the gap between the government and the public at large." His taxonomy of think tanks draws distinctions among government-, university-, party-, and business-affiliated institutions. He traces the gradations of independence among think tanks of each variety, ranging from those subservient to government on the one hand to those that enjoy a diverse and broad-based supply of private funding on the other.[1] McGann has also shown that while the West, where think tanks originated, remains the global leader of the industry, younger think tanks in developing countries have gone on to make important contributions. His 2019 study of think tanks in Asia, for

example, demonstrates that in countries of diverse political structures, from democratic South Korea to authoritarian China, local think tanks have made a distinguished contribution to government reform, social cohesion, and economic growth.[2]

Beyond their universal function as a hub and distributor of useful analysis, think tanks can serve a vital function in ideologically contested environments: provide a safe space for quiet engagement among feuding factions. They can also address the gap in awareness and connectivity between such fraught environments on the one hand and distant powers on the other. Finally, in any part of the world, a think tank can enrich the outlook of staffers and fellows who go on to serve in government, as well as help mid-career public servants refine their ideas while between government jobs.[3]

Arab think tanks carry the promise of providing all these services across the Middle East and North Africa. Their numbers, moreover, have grown considerably in recent years. In 1996, Palestinian policy researcher Khalil Shikaki estimated that the Arab region harbored 15 think tanks, of which only "six or seven produce publications regularly or have any influence on the political leadership of their respective countries."[4] By 2019, the University of Pennsylvania's Global Go To Thinktank Index Report surveyed approximately 1,000 Arab think tanks. Though the largest and most influential of these were headquartered in relatively stable Arab countries, others operate in the region's war-torn environments, from Libya to Yemen.[5]

But the University of Pennsylvania study's evaluation of these institutions also found numerous shortcomings, which speak to the long road ahead for Arab think tanks to realize their potential. The study's estimations of regional excellence in nearly every category suggest that most of the institutions do not meet international standards; Israeli, Iranian, and Turkish think tanks consistently topped and disproportionately populated the list. Judging from the study's sub-rankings by field of research, more-

over, most Arab think tanks appear to maintain a singular focus on defense and hard politics, to the exclusion of other sectors.[6] Consider, for example, that while Arab think tanks made a modest showing among the top-ranked institutions addressing "defense and security" (three Arab think tanks out of 110 globally) and "foreign policy and international affairs" (three out of 156 globally), none made the list in "domestic economic policy," "environmental policy," "international development policy," "international economic policy," "science and technology policy," "social policy," or "transparency and good governance." As to "food security," "domestic health affairs," "global health policy," and even "energy and resources," Arab think tanks made only one showing per category.[7]

American think tanks, their personnel, and their benefactors can and should support improvements in these institutions by engaging them more substantially, both in the security and foreign policy realms and in the more underserved areas of expertise noted above. In so doing, they can strengthen Arab think tanks' role as a catalyst for reform of the region's governing structures, civil sectors, and societies. But an examination of Americans' present role in Arab think tanks shows that the connectivity remains limited — and at that, mostly confined to the "defense and security" and "foreign policy and international affairs" divisions toward which Arab think tanks are overwhelmingly skewed.

For Americans to contribute more robustly to improving the quality and impact of these Arab institutions, they need to scrutinize the field, as well as explore the structural challenges American think tanks would themselves face in engaging it.

## AMERICAN THINK TANKS APPRAISE THEIR ARAB COUNTERPARTS

Periodically over the past three decades, American Mideast policy researchers have examined the field of Arab think tanks as a subject of strategic focus in its own right. That is, they appraised the significance of these institutions collectively as a non-state actor in the region, then mulled ways of using them as a channel to advance U.S. policy goals. Such explorations naturally employed a rubric informed by American policy priorities at any given time.

Consider the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's 1996 forum "Ideas and Influence in Middle East Politics: The Role of Think Tanks." Participants noted the supporting role some Arab think tanks had played in bringing about the newly inked Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, and asked what further contributions they could make to the peace process. Khalil Shikaki, a visiting fellow from a think tank in Ramallah, observed that not only had the "original Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles [grown] out of discussions that began between Israeli think tanks and PLO officials," but that Arab and Israeli think tanks had also jointly convened track two discussions between the parties. Going forward, panelists suggested, Arab think tanks could advance the nascent peace process by "help[ing] transform the peace reached between leaders to a peace between peoples." They could "educate the public and deconstruct false perceptions bred by ignorance that stand as barriers to peace," as well as "provide information to the public that governments may not be prepared to impart."[8]

After the September 11 attacks, as the more expansive challenges of countering extremism and reforming Arab governance region-wide came to the fore in the United States, American studies of Arab think tanks adopted a new gloss that reflected the shift. A 2004 Brookings Institution report noted approvingly that

after the 2001 tragedy, American think tanks' Middle East programs "were no longer centered around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," and that "internal Arab political, economic, and social conditions" within Arab states had now taken center stage. On the one hand, this observation reflected a new interest by American researchers in surveying the expanse of Arab think tanks, now proliferating rapidly, beyond Arab-Israeli matters. On the other, Washington's new strategic focus on "public diplomacy" — in essence, correcting Arab misapprehensions of America, its culture, and its intentions vis a vis the Middle East — narrowed the inquiry. The Brookings report repeatedly stressed the potential to use Arab think tanks as a conduit to "enhance the image of the United States in the region," at a time when "the relationship between the United States and the Arab world has reached a low point."[9] Like the larger set of public diplomacy initiatives which the U.S. undertook at the time, the emphasis on rebranding America obscured a more important area of inquiry: how to bolster Arab think tanks' capacities for the sake of empowering them to promote reform.

A further inflection point in the study of think tanks followed the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011-'12, when American hopes ran high for swift democratic transitions across the region. The 2013 U Penn *Mena Think Tank Summit Report*, summarizing proceedings from a gathering of Arab think tank leaderships in Istanbul, adopted the rubric of "capitalizing on transitions." Speakers stressed that "the public … [is now] a political force," and that think tanks should accordingly focus on educating the public to use its new power to foster improved governance. Positing that think tanks could now free themselves from Arab government control, the report counseled "find[ing] the sweet spot between influence and independence," meaning that they should consider maintaining their close ties to government in order to ensure that it listens to their recommendations. Participants expressed so much confidence that people power would

grow and dominate the landscape that they worried think tanks would lose their relevance as a distinctive driver of reform. "It may be that MENA governments, having witnessed the potential power of mass movements, are bypassing think tank advice and instead paying heed to public opinion in their policies." Think tanks must "seek audiences with the people" for their "scientific research" so as to serve as a check on populism."[10]

It need hardly be demonstrated that key findings in each of these studies were subsequently overtaken by events. In the years following 1996, obstacles to an Israeli-Palestinian "peace between peoples" metastasized, while the political will to overcome them through a concerted multi-sector civic effort did not emerge.[11] Over the generation following the September 11 attacks, the popularity of the United States increased, decreased again, and sometimes swung back for reasons unrelated to American public relations campaigns. A consensus meanwhile emerged in Washington that the U.S. had focused too much on trying to improve perceptions of America and not enough on addressing the dysfunction in Arab governance and politics in which anti-Americanism festered. As to the march toward Arab democracy which the 2013 University of Pennsylvania study predicted, it faced the setbacks of successive Islamist electoral sweeps followed by a counterrevolutionary authoritarian resurgence. The latter shift, in particular, challenged the view that think tanks' influence rested largely on their relationship with a mass audience. They faced different problems instead, as subsequent sections will show.

In other ways, however, all three studies identified trends in Arab think tanks that proved prescient and remain relevant. First, they detected an arc of improvement in the quality of Arab thinks' output. Each study argued in substance that for decades, a handful of Arab government-controlled think tanks had published mostly anti-Israel diatribes and paeans to the ruler — tethered to ideology, inflected by emotion, and heedless of the

region's actual needs and problems. More recently, the studies observed, younger scholars have adopted a more solutions-oriented approach. They idealize sober analysis, scientific inquiry, and evidence; take greater interest in national and regional development issues; and aspire to global standards of research and writing and the international respect and access such work brings. Another observation which the three studies shared was that any Arab think tank with an independent streak faces precarious circumstances: it struggles to survive financially given the dearth of local or foreign support, and strains to operate freely due to pressure by host governments to deliver conclusions that conform to official policy.

These shared observations provide a useful point of departure for a survey of the competitive field.

## LIBERAL ARAB THINK TANKS: A VIEW FROM INSIDE ONE

One way to learn about the status of reformist think tanks in the region today is to work inside one. Since 2012, I have been a senior fellow at the Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research, a prominent institution headquartered in Dubai. A departure is warranted into the circumstances in which the organization started, its output since then, and the challenges it has navigated along the way.

The Center emerged through the interconnected lives of four Saudi liberal reformists, all born in the early 1970s, of whom three had come to their ideals from a background in Islamist extremism. Abdullah bin Bjad al-Otaibi and Mishari al-Dhaydi had been thought leaders of the Ahl al-Hadith, a Salafi group that counseled nonrecognition of the Saudi state or any other government in the region, with the qualified exception of the Taliban.[12]

They spent two years behind bars, where they began to widen their intellectual horizons by reading books from other cultures, available in the prison library.[13] They also befriended a third ex-radical: Mansour Alnogaidan. Formerly a spiritual leader in the "Brotherhood of Burayda," which fused Amish-like asceticism with militancy, he underwent his own prison transformation to become a proponent of Islamic reform and a piercing critic of the country's senior clerics. All three, having defected from their extremist camps, incurred death warrants from former comrades and needed a new home.[14]

They had also come to agree on a new worldview which they call "liberal incrementalism" (al-liberaliya al-tadrijiya). The concept and rationale bears describing. It holds that the road to liberalism in Arab lands runs not through revolution, but rather through a long-term process of promoting classical liberal principles and constructing civil institutions that adopt them. They argue that although autocrats and liberal democrats ultimately seek different outcomes, they can reach a generational truce, accommodating each other's interests for the sake of mutual benefit. For Otaibi, Dhaydi, and Nogaidan, the United Arab Emirates was the prime example of a reformist autocracy with which they could come to terms and win the space to pursue their agenda.[15]

The fourth figure to whom the Al-Mesbar Center owes its founding, Turki Aldakhil, had never joined an extremist group. Born to a conservative Saudi family in Riyadh, he grew up curious about the world beyond the kingdom and keen to test the chinks in clerics' armor. He deepened his understanding of the Saudi Salafi mindset by studying theology at Al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, one of the three institutions in the kingdom that licensed clerics to preach. But he graduated from the seminary to pursue a comparatively worldly career in Saudi establishment news media, then worked his way up from the domestic press to pan-Arab broadcasting.[16]

For insight into the future of his field, he made a student's sojourn to the University of Oregon's Department of Media Studies, where he explored how American news outlets were migrating their presence to the Internet. He had picked an especially poignant time to live there: on September 11, 2001, he and his Saudi roommates in Eugene, Oregon, huddled around their TV and watched New York's Twin Towers collapse. "Within a day of the terror attacks," he recalled, "a group of American students of all faiths allayed our unease. . . . They assured us that they understood the difference between the fundamental decency of the Saudi people and the warped ideology to which the hijackers had fallen prey. They formed a circle around our mosque, providing a sort of emotional security for us as we prayed." Thus he returned to the Gulf bearing a profound lesson in tolerance, heightened affinity for the United States, and new skills in digital media.[17]

Together, Otaibi, Dhaydi, Alnogaidan, and Aldakhil possessed some of the rarest and most important qualities for effective political action in their homeland. They had an encyclopedic understanding of Saudi Islamist discourse, from the treatises of the religious establishment to the trenches of radicalism. Three of the four also had a proven capacity to actually impact the extremist milieu, having not only inhabited it but also served as leaders within it. Erudite and quick-witted, they understood how to funnel scholarship and theory into public discussion and practice. Turki Aldakhil contributed establishment credentials, a track record in Saudi establishment politics, and a vision to carry it into the twenty-first century informed by cutting-edge practices in the West. In the eyes of distant foreign governments, this combination could actually be misconstrued as dangerous — and indeed, it would not have been easy at the time to find a Western democratic state willing to harbor all four figures, in light of the backgrounds of some. UAE authorities, by contrast, understood who they were and where their ideas had led them. Thus over the

decade following the September 2001 attacks, they enjoyed the freedom to use the territory to build an intellectual foundation for their cause.

The Dubai-based Al-Mesbar Center was founded by Aldakhil, managed first by Otaibi and later by Alnogaidan, and grounded in scholarship from all four principals and their colleagues. (Reflecting the founders' perception of how a think tank works, "Al-Mesbar" is a medieval Arabic nautical term for a periscope.) Its stock in trade, a monthly book-length volume of scholarship, examined the inner workings of the major Islamist movements, their splinter groups, and their chief actors—one faction at a time, hundreds over a decade, beginning in Saudi Arabia and extending into the larger Arab and Muslim world and beyond. In parsing each group's aspirations, strengths, and weaknesses, the books provided rare knowledge to a larger audience of liberals who lacked intimacy with the terrain. Al-Mesbar also published books that helped envision a corrective to extremist trends. For example, scholarship by and about women in the region documented the conditions they faced and ideas they had developed about how to pursue their rights. Other books empathically portrayed the presence of Jews, Christians, and Muslim minority sects in the Gulf and beyond, serving to counter ignorance and demonization and press the case for pluralism and equity.[18] Crucially, special volumes about the many nonviolent readings of Islam introduced Saudi and Gulf elites to salubrious models for religious leadership: the syncretism and tolerance of Islam as traditionally practiced in Indonesia, for example, and the merits of Sufism, Islam's mystical strand, in nurturing body and soul. In the sense that this output carried formulations as to how to apply classical liberal principles to government, the Al-Mesbar Center provided the "advice on domestic and international issues, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions" which McGann describes among an effective think tank's attributes. Inasmuch as the issues, ideas, and stories which the books used to

sway government policies also proved useful to Arabic media — as a basis for journalism, documentaries, public affairs programming, and other content — the Center has also served McGann's key goal of "bridging the gap between the government and the public at large."

These strides are mitigated, to be sure, by the tradeoffs inherent in operating in an authoritarian environment. Al-Mesbar publications limit their scrutiny of high politics in the UAE and do not publish the work of scholars who have antagonized the Emirati establishment, whatever their scholarly merit. All the group's findings and arguments are premised on support for dynastic continuity in that country, and any differences with state policy are thoughtfully conveyed as a difference over the best means to achieve the leadership's delineated end-goals. But the organizations' principals share a genuine commitment to these goals, and accordingly regard the concessions they must make as well worth the freedom of movement and operation, the opportunity to make their case to decision-makers convivially, and the protection from Islamist extremists which such an arrangement affords. In sum, the Center's chief actors feel they have found McGann's "sweet spot between influence and independence" — and thanks to the smooth conduits of connectivity they have built between their research and Arabic broadcast media, they have also found "audiences with the people … [for their] scientific research."[19]

## OBSTACLES TO ARAB THINK TANK DEVELOPMENT

Replicating such a "sweet spot" is of course very difficult. As noted previously, numerous Arab think tanks have begun to operate in countries where authoritarian rule remains strong, such as Algeria and Egypt, as well as ideologically contested envi-

ronments where a government has lost central control, such as Yemen and Libya. Of these, some resemble the Al-Mesbar Center in that they were established outside the state system by Arab liberals, then proceeded to negotiate a modus vivendi with the government to grow their operations. Others, by contrast, trace their inception to a decision from the upper echelons of authority. That is, the state created it to serve as a framework to *acquire* Arab liberals or reformists and activate them to serve its interests through directed research.

Which of these varieties fares best in the region? Which type of Arab think tank can best serve as a point of entry for American specialists in a range of fields, whether to help grow the institution itself or to work through it to engage the host country?

Consider the case of Algeria. In 2014, the media company that owns the television network *Al-Shurouq* and a daily newspaper by the same name created a think tank called the Al-Shurouq Center for Research and Strategic Studies. At its inaugural banquet, director Ali Fudhayl said it was a "pioneering venture in Algeria, especially given the absence of any serious institutions of its kind."[20] He said its purpose would be to serve as "a resource for officials, whether in economics, politics, security, societal, or cultural policies inside the country, as well as counterterrorism practices."[21] In mission and structure, it bore some similarity to the Al-Mesbar Center, in that it grew out of a liberal media enterprise separate from the state but well disposed to partner with it. Six years later, however, the organization had published little in the way of research, nor convened any public conferences. The problem, according to Algerian observers, lay in the restrictions they faced airing critical views of the government's domestic social and cultural policies.

Among more stable think tanks in the country, Algiers hosts the African Union's "African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism," a regional enterprise with a security focus. In 2008, the United States Ambassador to Algeria, David Pearce, spoke at

the opening of its workshop on combating terrorist financing in North and West Africa — marking a period which saw the beginnings of intensified security cooperation between the two countries. But the organization's mandate is narrow, limited to intelligence and hard power coordination. Its relationship with the public, or non-government researchers, remains limited and severely constrained.[22]

Similar challenges have weakened nascent research institutions in Egypt which sought to balance a relationship with the Egyptian establishment on the one hand with foreign partnerships on the other. The 2012 arrests of dozens of NGO workers in Egypt on bogus charges of conspiring with foreign actors against the state had a chilling effect on a range of nascent liberal think tank ventures that had launched in the heady months following the Arab Spring demonstrations.[23] Liberal independent scholar Amr Bargisi, for example, sought to build a research facility that would conduct feasibility studies for the construction of civil institutions embodying liberal universalist principles. He courted American sources of financial and intellectual support, including private philanthropists motivated by the opportunity they saw, amid counterrevolutionary army rule in Egypt, to help roll back Islamism. But the international support base Bargisi assembled did not win the requisite buy-in from state authorities, and Bargisi judged the development of the think tank in Cairo to be unworkable and likely dangerous.[24] One does find continuity among Egyptian think tanks long established and supported by the state, such as the storied Al-Ahram Center for Strategic Studies; or formally tied to the government, such as the Center for Information and Decision-Making Support, the official think tank of Egypt's cabinet.[25] The former offers a point of access and temporary residency for visiting American researchers. The latter, while mainly closed off from public view, has been assessed as approachable by researchers who have sought to build ties with it. Thus some

opportunities, insufficiently tapped by American inquirers, stand to be tested.

Meanwhile, by contrast, a variety of think tanks in the war-torn, ideologically contested environments face a difference set of obstacles, yet have shown energy in striving to overcome them. Typically operating on a shoestring budget, they are often fueled by the energy of volunteers, or scholars with other day jobs who contribute substantial effort for meager supplementary wages. The year 2004 saw the launch of the Yemen Polling Center in Sanaa. With a staff of three, it carried out demographic and sociological surveys of Yemenis, with modest support from international organizations which sought the data for the planning of relief and humanitarian efforts in the country. In the Libyan capital Tripoli, shortly after the 2012 overthrow of Qadhafi, a young, British-educated Libyan social entrepreneur, Anas El-Gomati, created the Sadeq Institute as an independent research body. The government of Prime Minister Eyad El-Sarraj granted the organization latitude to operate autonomously, and the group convened an international conference for researchers. Research studies carried out by the organization remain unavailable for public view — taken down from the group's Web site owing to domestic political sensitivities, according to Gomati. Operations froze in 2018 for lack of financial support. The global economic downturn due to COVID-19 led would-be donors to stall their intended contributions.[26]

Asked about the challenges he faced in garnering outside support, Gomati said that even before the virus wreaked economic havoc worldwide, neither American nor European philanthropy had been forthcoming in supporting Arab think tanks. The kind of funding which Western think tanks themselves offered to their nascent Arab counterparts, he said, was "exploitative in nature," amounting to commissioned, wholesale information retrieval for use by senior fellows in the West seeking to buttress their own writing with fresh evidence. "It's

better than nothing," Gomati said, "but it is no foundation to build an institution."[27]

## HOW AMERICAN THINK TANKS CAN HELP

Despite these challenges, as noted earlier, Arab think tanks, if given a chance to grow, have the potential to help fill gaps in knowledge and connectivity between local policymakers on the one hand and their counterparts in distant capitals on the other. In some ways, the opportunity to do so has grown: beyond the ease of publishing and distributing research globally via online platforms, the routinization of videoconferencing through applications like Zoom enables policy institutions anywhere to convene international symposia and workshops at minimal cost.

But while technical and geographical impediments have eased, a range of structural imbalances still conspire to constrict these forms of exchange — not altogether, to be sure, but in three key ways that skew the connectivity. These imbalances merit attention, with an eye to how they might be overcome so that American think tanks can do more to support the development of their Arab counterparts.

The first of the three is the stark imbalance between the translation of Westerners' Mideast policy research into Arabic on the one hand and the translation of Arabs' equivalent work into English on the other. Western think tanks including the American Carnegie Center and the British Royal Institute of International and Strategic Studies have endowed projects to translate their scholars' work into Arabic and promulgate it systematically. Doing so has grown these institutions' influence, as well as helped Arab media and policy elites gain a clearer understanding of how Western institutions perceive and parse their region. It has also provided a small but badly needed

amount of revenue to the Arab think tanks that carry out the work — the sort of "wholesale" contract services which Libya's Gomati said were among the few sources of Western funding available to Arab think tanks. The same Western institutions have invested considerably less, however, in translating Arabic policy research into English.

An exception is Fikra Forum, a project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy that promotes dialogue among policy voices by translating research in both directions — primarily from Arabic into English. A dedicated translation and editing unit sifts through submissions from across the region — substantially more material than it has bandwidth to use — and designates 15 articles each week to publish simultaneously in the two languages.[28] This seemingly modest output reflects considerable effort: as noted in the prior chapter, many bright and talented Arab scholars were denied a decent education in critical thinking and evidence-based polemics. Fikra Forum's collaborative editing process affords them the opportunity to gain some of these skills, while enriching an English-speaking policy audience with information and perspectives to which it would otherwise not have access.[29] The fact that Fikra Forum is virtually unique in this respect among American think tanks reflects a stunning deficit.[30]

The second imbalance is sub-regional in nature. Among the minority of Arab policy research that wins an international audience, the lion's share emanates from Lebanon and Egypt — whether via the policy institutions of those countries or through think tanks in other countries where scholars from Lebanon or Egypt reside. This trend, too, relates in part to education: it stems from the long history of intellectual engagement between American and other Western centers of higher learning and those Arab institutions in which they have long been vested. For example, a sizable community of Arab scholars and policymakers of international renown share an alma mater in the American

University of Beirut. They enjoy the benefit of transnational human networks — and traditions of excellence — that have been nurtured and maintained by Lebanese and Americans working in consort since American Protestant missionaries endowed the university in the nineteenth century. No equivalent institutions with a historical pedigree dating back that far have endured in North Africa or the Gulf littoral.[31]

To be sure, new Arab nodes of international educational partnership have emerged more recently in the Gulf states: beginning in the 1990s, the UAE and Qatar financed the construction of academic branches for Western universities within their borders, including Georgetown's Doha campus and "NYU Abu Dhabi."[32] It will take time, however, before these hubs engender their own distinctive networks and intellectual culture. Some countries in the Maghreb harbor policy institutions that maintain meaningful connectivity with counterparts of Europe: thanks to French-Arabic diglossia among elites in these countries and their enduring engagement with France, numerous think tanks in Morocco, Tunisia, and even the comparatively closed society of Algeria maintain relationships with their French counterparts.[33] Tunisia, moreover, has seen an inflow of American support for local think tanks, among other NGOs, since the 2010-'11 revolution.[34] For the most part, however, Maghrebi think tanks lack access or sustained engagement with their counterparts in Europe or the United States. Meanwhile, countries with their own distinguished indigenous intellectual traditions and a vibrant community of think tanks — notably Iraq — distantly trail their Egyptian and Lebanese counterparts with respect to their international human networks.

The designations "Arab" and "Western" are of course artificial and problematic to apply in an interconnected world. Consider the many Americans of Arab ethnic background who contribute vitally to their country's policy research on the Middle East and North Africa — and, for that matter, the visiting scholars from

Arab countries who often join them at some of America's leading think tanks to conduct collaborative research. Is such a hybrid community producing "American" research or "Arab" research? The presence of such a mixture within an American think tank's walls adds variety and diverse perspectives, and gives visiting research fellows from the region a special opportunity: the freedom to explore, debate, and express ideas on American soil that many Arab states would deny them.

The third imbalance relates to the question of financial influence on American think tanks by outside elements. In 2014, a landmark investigative report in the *New York Times* found that foreign powers have donated considerably to American think tanks, and, in doing so, are "increasingly transforming the once-staid think-tank world into a muscular arm of foreign governments' lobbying in Washington." Among major Arab donors, the report noted that the United Arab Emirates had provided $1 million to the Center for Strategic and International Studies to build a resplendent new headquarters near the White House. This sum was dwarfed, in turn, by Qatar's $14.8 million, four-year donation to the Brookings Institution which established a satellite facility in Doha.[35] The report argued that American think tanks' quest for such funding — and, naturally, the desire to maintain the flow of revenue — compromised their independent gaze on donor nations and the regional agendas they were pursuing: "Some scholars say they have been pressured to reach conclusions friendly to the government financing the research."[36]

On the one hand, the *New York Times* assessment may have exaggerated the relationship between foreign funding and influence: in response to the charge that their research was compromised by the largesse, defenders of the think tanks have argued that foreign funding does not *create* convivial voices so much as it finds its way to voices that are already convivial. On the other, the departure of one Mideast policy voice from a leading think tank after she found herself at odds with a foreign donor

appeared to support the *New York Times* story's case.[37] In any event, the *Times's* tabulation of foreign capital invested in American think tanks made clear that Gulf powers had spent considerably more on building goodwill with American think tanks than the United States has invested in building the capacity of Arab ones.

To summarize, the potential of think tanks to serve policy and public engagement applies as much to the Arab region as anywhere, but the political, cultural, and material constraints the region's think tanks face remain formidable. While long-established institutions ensconced or backed by Arab states endure — and some nascent groups have carved out a space for themselves to function — think tanks with an independent streak face daunting obstacles. The United States, for its part, has done relatively little to assist them, and a range of structural challenges have reduced American think tanks' wherewithal to do so. Nonetheless, openings and opportunities to boost the American role in supporting these institutions have emerged, and merit exploration.

5

# ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR NEW NORMS

*Liberals in Arab entertainment media want to spread universalist principles to a mass audience — and look to Hollywood as their natural partner.*

BEGINNING FIVE DECADES AGO, a belief in the power of entertainment to improve the world inspired a number of idealists in North and South America to weave social messages into TV comedies and dramas. These actors eventually discovered one another, came together, and expanded their work into other parts of their world.

One of them, Methodist minister David Poindexter, championed the use of TV entertainment to advance the principles of environmental conservation, gender equality, and family planning. In the early 1970s, he convened the CEOs of America's three television networks and urged them to encourage screenwriters and producers to lace these values into their plot lines. He also incentivized such efforts, by convening awards ceremonies to celebrate the Hollywood talent that heeded his call. Among the outcomes, TV star Mary Tyler Moore used her immensely

popular sitcom to help stigmatize sexism. In another success, the heroine of the sitcom *Maude* had a midlife abortion.[1]

A like-minded voice in Mexico, playwright and TV producer Miguel Sabido, was meanwhile experimenting with similar techniques to serve some of the same objectives. Over the 1970s and early '80s, he created six "telenovelas" which modeled family planning for Mexican audiences. He appears to have succeeded: not only did the period in which they aired see the country's birth rate decline faster than the equivalent anywhere in the developing world; when the same programs re-aired in other Spanish-speaking countries, fertility rates fell as well.[2]

After Poindexter and Sabido learned of each other's work, they forged a plan to jointly test their approach in other societies. They began in India with a pair of soap operas that sought to elevate women's status, discourage child marriage, promote equal educational opportunity for both genders, and enshrine a woman's right to decide whom to marry. For these productions, they also secured Rockefeller Foundation funding to conduct follow-on survey research that attempted to quantify the programs' impact on social behavior. The favorable conclusion — that their approach had succeeded in diverse cultural environments — helped develop their instinctual approach into a professional discipline, now known as "entertainment education."[3] Poindexter proceeded to found a nonprofit institution, Population Communications International, to apply the same methodology on radio and television worldwide. By 2020, 22 years after its founding, the organization, now known as the Population Media Center, had deployed to 54 countries on four continents.[4]

Amid this remarkable run of programming, however, two limitations emerged with particular relevance to Arab environments. First, among the organization's 54 projects, only one of them involved an Arab country: a radio play in Sudan.[5] Second, even as the activity expanded across the globe, the themes and values it instilled remained limited to the same small number of

important yet relatively noncontroversial themes: public health, birth control, women's rights, and environmental protection.[6] The Arab region, too, faces the gender and environmental challenges which the Population Media Center seeks to address — thus the Center's striking absence from the region raises the question as to why. Meanwhile, the region's manifold sociocultural challenges which the Center has *not* addressed — corruption, extremism, internecine strife, and so on — speak to the limits of the Center's potential to positively influence Arab societies even if it managed to enter the field.

The challenge of applying entertainment education to address these problems in Arab countries calls for some historical context. In the Middle East and North Africa, the use of storytelling to influence behavior — and for that matter, the suppression of storytelling for the same reason — dates back millennia. Though one may trace the phenomenon to ancient times, the early decades of the Abbasid empire, which ruled from Baghdad beginning in 750 CE, provide a relevant point of departure. The most widespread form of entertainment then — a band of storytellers known as "qussas" — reached thousands through Friday sermons in the city's mosques and public squares. They went beyond the explication of Qur'an and prophetic tradition to recount the travails of caliphs, as well as the underground movements that had brought them to power. In doing so, they also competed with one another to advocate rival political and ideological factions.[7]

Scholars of early Islamic history believe that rulers and dissidents alike paid the storytellers to slant the narration in their favor. In this respect, the content of the stories reflected an effort to influence society — not to adopt a value per se, but to inspire loyalty to a particular leader or movement. In a sense, this influence endures: the texts available to modern historians of the Abbasid period, all of which were compiled several generations after the events they describe, stem from an oral

tradition that grew in part out of the storytellers' Friday sketches.

Some powerful figures of the early Islamic period naturally sought to streamline the heterodox tales emerging out of mosques. Ali bin Abi Talib, the prophet's son-in-law, evicted the storytellers of Basra from the city's mosques and replaced them with new preachers who agreed to limit their sermons to the articulation of Islamic doctrine — itself a subject of contest, to be sure. Similar crackdowns occurred over the decades that followed, amid a larger process of de facto separation between the lay, political authority of rulers on the one hand and the social influence of clerics ('ulama) on the other.[8]

The relationship between storytelling and politics is intrinsic, as well as universal — as much a fixture of present-day democratic systems as authoritarian ones. But in the Arab region, centuries of political revolution and evolution culminated, over the modern period, in authoritarian systems that impose their ideas more methodically and pervasively than their predecessors. These governments engage in a continuous struggle for narrative dominance through all forms of media, including and especially entertainment. In recent decades, autocrats faced new challenges to this dominance, as new media technologies threatened their control over the information and media content their societies consumed. But amid the post-Arab Spring retrenchment of authoritarianism, rulers found ways to reassert control. Given Arab autocracies' relentless, ongoing effort to dominate the entertainment landscape, it is easy to see why an idealistic American NGO — bearing even a modest social agenda — would find it considerably more difficult to engage Arab entertainment media than its equivalents in India, sub-Saharan Africa, or South America.

Nonetheless, new trends in the region present an opportunity for Americans to play a constructive, collaborative role in bringing stories to light that advance positive values and ideals.

Against tough odds, some Americans have begun to do so — at that, transcending the narrow purview of the Population Media Center to broach controversial themes with bearing on regional politics. Their work proves that such activity is feasible, and suggests that more is possible.

The following exploration of the region's entertainment industry helps demarcate the opportunity. It is followed by an overview of the role some Americans have played within it, and an assessment of how they might advance further.

## EGYPTIAN ENTERTAINMENT AS A SOFT POWER EXPORT

The story begins in Egypt, the longstanding capital of Arab entertainment, where over the past 80 years, storytellers transformed cultural and political sensibilities within the country and across the region. This influence may be parsed in terms of four stages. The first occurred over the period of Egypt's monarchy, in the early twentieth century, which featured lax government authority over entertainment. Free of state impositions, film studies turned out movies primarily for profit's sake. From the early 1930s into the early '50s, the country prolifically exported musicals, comedies, and dramas to every Arab country — at one point ranking third in the world in the number of films it produced, after the United States and India. These films channeled the cosmopolitan ethos of modern Cairo, by then a hybrid of Arabic and Islamic tradition on the one hand and Western norms on the other. Due to the movies' popularity, Egypt's light and peppery dialect of Arabic came to be understood throughout North Africa and the Middle East, and the ideas it carried began to impact cultural sensibilities.[9]

The second stage came with the advent of republican rule in

1952 and the gradual nationalization of entertainment, under the oversight of President Gamal Abdel Nasser's Ministry of Information and Culture. This shift meant neither that the charm of Egyptian media was wrecked by bureaucrats, nor that its creators and performers were coerced into their new roles. To the contrary, Nasser's Egypt began as a vibrant cultural capital in which government won over many artists. Even as the country's television network broadcast Nazi-inspired antisemitic films, the President also commissioned the translation and performance of plays by Bertolt Brecht, and brought the Bolshoi Ballet to Cairo.[10] Some of the country's greatest composers and vocalists embraced Nasser's pan-Arabist project. Breathing life into the strident radio broadcast *Sawt al-Arab* ("Voice of the Arabs"), they wrote and performed songs to stir public emotion in favor of toppling Nasser's enemies — Arab kingdoms and Western colonies — from Baghdad to Algiers.[11] While this popular entertianment reached millions, Egyptian intellectuals expounded on the same messages to a smaller number of influential elites, both within and beyond their borders. According to a popular expression of the time, "Books are written in Cairo, printed in Lebanon, and read in Baghdad."[12]

A third stage was characterized by decline. Beginning in the late 1970s, President Anwar El-Sadat turned against Egypt's leftist strand — widespread in entertainment media — while opening a space for the Muslim Brotherhood to publish and broadcast its values. The mass promulgation of Egyptian Islamist literature stoked sectarian chauvinism and turned a large swath of the population against the secular tendencies of Egyptian television and movies. Amid ensuing rise in factionalism and division within Egypt — a trend that only grew under the rule of Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak — Egyptian media began to turn inward. Its supremacy in the pan-Arab entertainment market meanwhile faced new challenges. Assad-ruled Damascus, claiming the torch of pan-Arabism, produced and exported

dramatic productions in the Nasserist tradition.[13] Saudi- and other Gulf-owned media invested in their own entertainment products.[14] Egyptian productions declined in quality and number.

Beginning in 2013, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi began to initiate what he hoped would develop into a new, fourth phase of Egyptian media. His counter-revolutionary government shut down the Muslim Brotherhood's television and print outlets and jailed Islamist journalists. Sisi proceeded to convey the aspiration to bring together Egyptian news and entertainment media in an agenda for cultural reform.

On September 3, as a presidential candidate, he convened a gathering of 70 of the country's best-loved entertainers, live on national television. They included the legendary Faten Hamama, star of stage and screen, who had made her film debut in 1939. The crowd applauded as Sisi interrupted his own remarks and left the podium to embrace the 83-year-old actress and escort her to her chair. He went on to charge the crowd with a mission: "I've gathered you all here because when we talk about media, we're talking about the capacity to instill a conscience," he explained. Then he outlined his vision to revive the entertainment industry as both a lucrative business and a tool of Egyptian soft power.[15] A week later, in a separate televised discussion, he spoke about the role of media in his proposed domestic agenda. "In my view," he said, "the consciousness of Egyptians is formed in their family, their houses of worship, their schools, and in media. And among them today, the media is more important than any other." He called on media professionals to "bring back the relations between Muslims and Christians to where they used to be, but better." Adding that "the loss of communication between state institutions and media is a problem," he asked them to uphold "the principle that disagreements on television should not exceed the principle of citizenship."[16] It was understood to be an allusion to Islamists, long a

fixture on the region's TV talk shows, that rejected the idea of the nation-state.[17]

Such top-down projects to streamline a country's media are of course anathema to principles of free expression which international media advocacy and human rights groups champion.[18] But in Egypt, most media companies and workers shared the government's outlook on Islamism, and chose to eschew a confrontational approach to the government in favor of a partnership to advance an anti-Islamist, though not altogether liberal, agenda.[19]

As noted earlier, while Egypt's entertainment industry remains prominent in the Middle East, it has shrunk since its mid-twentieth century heyday. The field is dominated by five companies — two of which date back to the golden age of film in the 1930s, and all of which currently produce more television serials than films. Even as a boutique industry in a country of heavy-handed professional syndicates and red tape, these survivors have been turning a profit since the Arab spring — thanks to a vast population primed for escapism; a region in tears, hungry for relief; and the fact that the rival Syrian entertainment industry has been weakened by civil war and pan-Arab anti-Assad sentiments. The Egyptian scene is also larger than it looks, in that native talent finds its way into wealthy Gulf states with movie and TV aspirations of their own.[20]

In terms of the social and political impact of the range of content, it emerges out of a subtle relationship between the industry, its censors, and the policies of the Egyptian government, as well as ideological divisions among the investors.[21] It also reflects the worldview of the producers and writers themselves: in some cases, the legacy of ideological chauvinism they imbued; in others, the vision of a future cured of it. Outsiders who scrutinize the content and learn about the players have found opportunities to assist the ones who want to support positive social and political reform.

A survey of the story lines of a given Ramadan season provides a snapshot of the state of the art. In 2013, the holy month began on July 8, ten days after the military operation to restore army rule — which means that most of the writing and production happened under the Muslim Brotherhood. The productions bespoke an arts community in open revolt against Islamist authorities. "Al-Da'iya" (The Preacher) features a cleric in love with a violinist. As their relationship deepens, he confronts extremism and hypocrisy among his colleagues. "Ism Mu'aqqat" (Temporary Name) casts Brotherhood candidates in Egypt's then-recent parliamentary elections as cheats. Secularist ideologue Ilham Shaheen scripted the slapstick comedy "Nazariyat al-Gawafa" (The Guava Theory), which mercilessly spoofs the Brotherhood. Among the two major TV series created by Egyptians outside the country, the more successful was the Saudi-backed "Al-Arraf" (The Fortuneteller), a comedy starring beloved Egyptian comic actor Adel Imam. It reflected the Saudi kingdom's commitment to build public opposition to Brotherhood rule. Imam plays a con artist who makes millions, lands in prison, escapes amid the chaos of the 2011 revolution, and goes on to win political power in the new Egypt. Numerous TV critics and the public generally interpreted the story as a dig at President Mohammed Morsi, who was jailed along with other Muslim Brotherhood activists during the January 2011 revolution.[22] Coverage of the production interpreted the con as a metaphor for Islamists' use of religion to gain power.[23]

By contrast, a historical epic, scripted by Cairo's Yusri al-Jundi and funded and filmed in Qatar, fit more into the anti-Semitic tradition of earlier productions like *Horseman without a Horse.* (That 30-part pseudo-historical epic, premised on the belief that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* detailing a Jewish plot to enslave the world, was truly authored by a Jewish cabal, as opposed to the Russian secret police.) Recounting the circumstances under which a Jewish tribe in seventh-century Arabia was slaughtered

by Muslims — the carnage recreated in great details toward the end — it builds the case that the Jews deserved it. "The series shows how the Jews' . . . nature endures," Jundi told a journalist. "Despite the fact that hundreds of years have passed, they still spread corruption wherever they live." But perhaps in a sign that the tastes of Arab audiences were beginning to shift away from the focus on an external enemy and toward intra-Arab issues, it was Imam's *Fortuneteller* that drew the larger crowd. *Khaybar* turned out to be a flop.

Two seasons later, among the crop of shows that had been produced in Egypt under the rule of Sisi, the biggest local and regional hit turned out to be *Harat al-Yahud* [The Jewish Quarter] — the first Egyptian program to star sympathetic Jewish characters in 70 years. Telling the story of a fictional Egyptian Jewish family in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, it depicts them as attractive, loving, and fond of their Muslim and Christian neighbors. The program demystifies Jewish rituals, and features a love affair between a Muslim army colonel and a young Jewish woman. It also portrays Israelis in a hostile light, and Egypt prior to the establishment of Israel as a land entirely free of religious chauvinism.[24] But in the eyes of one of the show's creators, Sharif Zalat, the overall purpose of the production was to combat the demonization of Jews in a manner palatable to Egyptian audiences. "We spent a fortune on producing the show. But our goal wasn't just to make money. We wanted to send a message."[25] Broadcast throughout the region during the holy month, it was portrayed disparagingly in some Arabic media as an exercise in "normalization."[26]

The last production of its kind had been a feature film produced in 1946 called *Hasan, Marcos, and Cohen* — about a friendship between a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew. But one fan of both, Hani al-Muhanna, a former deputy minister in Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity, notes an essential difference between the two: "*Hasan, Marcos, and Cohen* was more a case of

art reflecting reality back then," he observed. "*The Jewish Quarter* is more aspirational, in that it seems to reflect a desire on the part of its creators to begin to restore that reality."[27]

What are the circumstances under which an Egyptian screenwriter breaks with tradition, braving a predictable backlash by a large segment of society, to take such an initiative? Many Egyptians — including prominent journalist Bashir Abd al-Fattah, a Brotherhood supporter who decries the program — picture a dynamic of strict command and control, whereby the president dictates themes to the writers and the censor enforces his will. "Sisi wants normalization, and the TV shows are a component of his policies," Abd al-Fattah claims.[28] But screenwriters like Bilal Fadhl see a more complex dynamic, stemming from three considerations on the artists' part. The first is self-censorship: In an environment in which the president has effectively teamed up with the Israeli leadership in a crackdown on the Brotherhood and Hamas, the likes of Yusri al-Jundi would not risk the time it takes to produce a show like *Khaybar,* likely to be rejected by the censors, unless the entire process takes place outside Egypt. The second consideration, as in any commercial industry, is the profit motive. This impels an effort to find common ground between the artists' own values and convictions on the one hand and an investor's agenda on the other. The profit motive also impels an attempt to gauge the public's mood and evolving tastes. With respect to the latter, in turn, widespread anger at the Brotherhood prompted a new public openness to making common cause with the Jewish state. Some writers decided to play to it. The third consideration is of course the agenda of the state. As noted earlier, it is indeed the case that Sisi meets with media and encourages them to lace specific messages into their programming. These are not directives per se — but they are cues which artists supportive of the government are disposed to follow.[29] A writer like Jundi, who does not care for the Sisi agenda, simply takes his business elsewhere.

The interplay among Egyptian entertainers, their convictions, the need for a backer, and the agenda of the state invites questions as to how investors and creative partners from outside the region might serve to encourage and build on the more positive trends. While some liberal values, such as fostering a culture of tolerance, have found local advocates, what other aspects of liberalism remain largely absent from the scene, and appear less likely to manifest spontaneously? Who are the writers and producers most open to advancing them? What are the red lines currently imposed on creative expression, whether by the state or the society, that would stand to limit the unbridled expression of something new? Finally, what forms of support are needed to advance these themes, and where might the support be found?

One example of an underemphasized liberal value is the principle of the rule of law — that is, a system whereby state and society alike embrace and abide by the law, the population has the right to amend it, and all are equally accountable to it. In championing the Egyptian security sector's crackdown on the Brotherhood, most TV programs made light of their many excesses. Meanwhile, comedy and drama alike have not done enough to spotlight the damage wrought by the culture of bribery and corruption so widespread in Egypt. Yet beyond the realm of big-budget entertainment, the rule of law is a theme which liberal activists in the country have begun to introduce in some political platforms, online video shorts, and television appearances. Their efforts would enjoy a boost if entertainment media sought to amplify them.

Leaving aside for the moment the factors of self-censorship, audience tastes, and cues from on high, Egyptian entertainment media are also limited in what they can express by the limited pool of foreign investors who have been actively supporting them. The country's talent garners considerably less support from the United States or Europe than smaller Arab countries, notably Lebanon and Morocco, each of which benefits immea-

surably from French — and increasingly American — funds.[30] Jordan provides a third example of a cash-strapped Arab country that has worked hard to lure Western investors for local films, as well as attract Western filmmakers to produce their own there. Egyptian entertainers would like to win Western backing — but the days when Gamal Abdel Nasser persuaded Cecil B. Demill to film *The Ten Commandments* on location are long past: compared with Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan, and oil-rich Gulf states like the UAE, Cairo presents few incentives, as well as daunting bureaucratic and union hassles.[31]

In light of Egypt's poor reputation as a destination of foreign capital for entertainment, film executives in Hollywood might be surprised to know that of the 19 television serials produced in Cairo in 2014, 17 made a profit for their local or regional backers. So while the government has not made it easy for investors in entertainment, those who know the territory well enough have been rewarded for their gumption. The risk is low by American commercial standards: most films cost between $150,000 and 300,000 to produce. These are also modest sums from the standpoint of American film philanthropy, which have provided grants and matching funds to projects elsewhere in the developing world but barely to Egyptians.

To be sure, it is difficult to navigate the myriad conditions that see an idea for a program germinate, bloom, and find their way to a mass audience — in particular, when it carries a controversial social message. But producers in the country share the view that those who try would have the wind at their backs: as indicated previously, the country's leadership wants outside investors and has signaled a desire to restore Egyptian productions to their historically dominant status in the region. The example of *The Jewish Quarter* demonstrates that there is support for the use of entertainment media as a tool of soft power influence as well as profit. These factors make it possible to envision a process whereby outside investors conceive of a project in coop-

eration with local talent and build Egyptian establishment consensus for its message.

## ENTERTAINMENT FOR DOMESTIC AUDIENCES ONLY: A NICHE OPPORTUNITY

By contrast to Egyptian entertainment productions, those of most other Arab countries receive little attention beyond their borders. This does not mean that they are less important as a potential focus of American engagement. To the contrary, collaboration in more localized entertainment projects presents the opportunity to address domestic issues with greater precision. In ventures that aim to move beyond the Population Media Center's less controversial themes and address complicated sociopolitical issues, such precision becomes especially important.

Algeria, long one of the region's more closed societies, provides a case in point. It is a country in which widespread feelings of despair lie beneath a thin veneer of patriotism. The national mood is painfully captured in Merzak Allouache's film *Harragas* [Illegal Immigrants], which was banned by the state but viewed via the Internet in living rooms across the country.[32] It tells the story of four young men who risk their lives to smuggle themselves into Europe. The film opens with a suicide by one of their friends. He has left a note explaining that although he can no longer bear to live in the country, he does not wish to die by drowning on a broken boat to France. The movie ends with the death of most of his friends, as he had predicted. All the film's protagonists repeatedly convey the feeling that they are helpless in the face of dark forces that control their country — in their view, a regime beyond repair.[33]

*Harraga's* storyline reflects a tragic trend: In 2015, 1,273 Algerians sought to enter Europe illegally and 250 died along the way — a number roughly on par with the number of Algerians who joined ISIS the same year. As in Egypt, drug addiction has

become a national pandemic and incidents of murder and rape have spiked. Political participation is largely the province of elites: Though there are 156 parties in the country, most have fewer than 2,000 members. As to how young people understand these trends, the distrust in state institutions depicted in the film is borne out by numbers: According to the global index of corruption, which rates countries on the basis of how corrupt their populations *think* their government is, Algeria ranks the tenth worst in the world.

Local television networks do produce a variety of sitcoms and dramas, on budgets that are exceptionally low by regional standards. The country's distinctive Arabic vernacular is not easily understood by Arabs in Egypt, the Levant, or the Gulf. In neighboring Morocco, where the dialect is similar, the intense animosity between the two states renders Algerian content unappealing, whatever its quality. Meanwhile, Algerian channels import the programs that enjoy the most popularity in all Arab countries, particularly those created by the Saudi-owned juggernaut MBC, together with Egyptian and Syrian productions.[34]

As to the domestic programs, they face far greater restrictions on the subject matter they are free to cover. Depictions of Islamist extremists only rarely pass through government censors. Corruption and oligarchy are also red lines. Social problems such as drug addiction, and cultural problems such as intolerance of the other — both of which have become acceptable fare for Egyptian plot lines — are explored by inference and innuendo.[35] What remains to present is a combination of slapstick and shallow plot-lines. The 2012 season of *Djemai Family*, a long-running serial dramedy, centers around a college graduate's chronic unemployment, a problem attributed to his laziness as opposed to the weak state of the Algerian economy.[36] In an episode of the drama *Asrar al-Madhi* [Secrets of the Past], a twenty-something down on his luck secretly enters his brother's apartment, unearths a loaded pistol from his drawer, and strug-

gles over whether to steal and sell it. Why does his brother own the gun? Has he joined a jihadist group? Is he a member of a crime gang? Presumably the screenwriter wished to raise such questions, but he either hesitated to answer them or lost the scenes that did on the cutting room floor.[37]

A partial exception to these stringent limits is the latitude enjoyed by the producers of *Qahwat al-Gusto*, a half-hour weekly political satire featuring impersonations of the country's leaders — even the president himself. But the nature of the spoof rarely goes beyond their idiosyncratic mannerisms, as opposed to their policies or personal vices.[38] Slightly more daring are comedy shorts produced online by young people. "DZ Joker," for example, created a video about the presidential elections, in which people of all ages, watching a public service announcement about the importance of voting, laugh uncontrollably.[39] These two exceptions — one, a satire without substance; the other, a timid online dig at the system unsanctioned by censors — amount to exceptions that prove the rule.[40]

This is the climate in which the movie *Harraga*, telling the story of four young Algerian men who risk their lives to smuggle themselves into Europe, was rejected by censors but spread virally through bootleg copies on DVD. Even that film shied away from exploring the political circumstances that feed into the desperation the men in the story experienced. But in breaking the taboo on the phenomenon of illegal emigration, the movie tapped into enormous pent-up demand.

The one form of entertainment produced on a consistently high budget is the genre of historical dramas about Algerian history — in particular, the war to end French occupation, led by the FLN (Front Liberacion Nacional), which has ruled the country ever since. The "Ministry of Mujahideen" — the term for holy warrior, which Algerians use to refer to veterans of the independence war — was established for the expressed purpose of funding such films. In 2011, the government passed a law effec-

tively restricting Algerians from making any movie about Algerian history without formal state approval.[41] The films which the government does approve and fund predictably glorify the FLN and vilify the French, with a particular focus on those French soldiers who went on to emerge as political leaders in their country. Witness the 2013 Oscar-nominated drama *Zabana!*, backed by the Mujahideen ministry, which tells the story of a resistance fighter who was executed by French soldiers during the war. In a dramatic scene featured in the movie's trailer, a committee of French colonels votes on whether to end the policy of executing Algerian resistance fighters. The camera zooms in on a young Francois Mitterand — a future prime minister — as he pointedly votes "no."[42]

Such movies, which serve to reinforce the prestige of the ruling party by "waving the bloody shirt," enjoy a large audience in France, where the plot lines advance the society's ongoing effort to grapple with its collective guilt as a former occupying power.[43] But they make no effort to foster equivalent introspection in Algeria about the excesses of the country's resistance, such as the targeting of French children in terrorist attacks or the mass slaughter of rival Algerian factions, not to mention noncombatant Algerian loyalists to the French. In an essay on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence in 2012, Bernard-Henri Lévy recounts a conversation with an FLN leadership figure, Zohra Drif, who as a teenager during the war participated in the infamous "Milk Bar Incident," in which French children were killed. Drif justified her actions by insisting that the children were "'party' to a 'system' of global exploitation." Lévy argues that in light of the decades of bloody repression that followed independence, it is in the interest of Algeria, too, to come to terms with its history. The country is ruled, he says, by a "dictatorship linked to the falsification of history whose dark side has been whitewashed … [and which] strangles liberty," using "the crimes of colonialism [as] the eternal excuse."

He concludes, "Democracy in Algeria … must begin with memory."[44]

Judging from the popularity of *Harragas*, an Algerian movie about the war that indeed fosters introspection would generate intense interest in the country. But whereas in Egypt, investing in an entertainment production can be justified on the basis of profit alone, Algerian censors virtually ensure that no provocative film or program can be legally marketed in the country. Thus philanthropic funding would be necessary to enable such a production. But for any filmmaker who would dare produce it, non-profit support is barely available: By contrast to Morocco — in which, as noted previously, the film industry receives considerable grant aid from France — Algeria is "perhaps the least funded film industry in the Arab world," says local filmmaker Fatima Zohra Zamoum.[45] So while demand is strong in Algeria for entertainment productions with a fresh set of social messages, the opportunity cannot be seized without new sources of support.

Another example of a relatively insular Arab entertainment industry is that of the tiny Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. A Shi'ite-majority country ruled by a Sunni royal elite, it has at times witnessed sectarian strife, exacerbated by Iranian-backed proxies aiming to sow division on the one hand, and royalist conservatives adopting an outlook of Sunni supremacism on the other. Yet since the country's independence in 1971, Bahraini royals have also welcomed into their court a small community of Sunni liberals. They promoted the view that on the one hand, if Bahrain developed a culture conducive to the pursuit of egalitarian policies, it could provide a model for larger Arab countries with their own, similar problems — but if on the other hand it failed to do so, the monarchy would devolve into a state of sectarian apartheid.[46]

One Bahraini elite who shared this concern was movie director Ahmad al-Ajami. His 1972 film *Ghadan Alqak* ("I'll Meet

You Tomororrow") adapts *Romeo and Juliet* in Bahraini dialect, with Shi'ite Capulets and Sunni Montagues. The film inspired a meaningful discussion, expressed publicly in the country's public affairs programming, over what political, cultural, and economic measures could be taken to help address the social problems for which the star-crossed lovers served as a metaphor.[47]

The idealistic tradition of Bahraini filmmaker Ahmad al-'Ajami continued to find expression through a later period of sectarian conflict, between 1994 and 1999. In the Ramadan season of 1998, Bahraini television aired a 30-part drama by screenwriter Jassim Jaseem, *Sa'dun.* Set in the early 1960s under British rule, it tells the story of a poor Shi'ite boy who runs away from home, fleeing the dysfunction of his family, and seeks the kindness of strangers. He falls in with a mixed ethnic group of boys — one, from his looks, the descendant of East African slaves; another from the community of Sunnis who also live on the margins of society. A Sunni schoolteacher befriends Sa'dun, helps him learn to read, and teaches him to become a Bahraini nationalist — in the sense of setting his eyes on a future free of the British. A Christian mother of three shows him how love and forgiveness can bring a broken family back together. Sa'dun repairs his own life and returns to his parents with the wisdom of Bahrain's diverse society. He becomes a pillar of strength for them, and a symbol of national unity.[48] The series is commonly regarded in Bahrain as the country's seminal narration of identity. Airing shortly before Prince Hamad's coronation as King in early 1999, it helped acculturate many Sunnis to the principle of noblesse oblige as the leadership called for a new, brighter chapter in domestic affairs.[49]

Shi'ite critics of Bahraini drama have much to say about the vision of Bahraini unity which the program apparently wishes to instill. Their grievances begin with the fact that the program locates the problems of Bahraini society as originating in the Shi'ite community: the weakness of its family structure, its

detachment from Arab nationalism. Elites come across as guardian angels, each embodying a universal message, and only Sa'dun and his family are placed under the microscope.[50] Never mind the historical revisionism that grants the Sunnis of Bahrain, who parted amicably with the British on the basis of a "treaty of friendship," a place in the annals of post-colonial resistance. It is inherently problematic, moreover, to use a foreign adversary as the basis for constructing a national identity.[51] Yet 15 years after its debut, in rerunning the program amid the acrid polarization of post-Arab Spring Bahrain, the government accessed the longing of elites, as well as some members of the underclass, for a restoration of civil peace.[52] A February 2014 article by columnist Abd al-Aziz al-Khudair in the daily newspaper *Al-Watan* asked, "Shall the days of Sa'dun return? … Bahrain has been a symbol and a model of love and mutual understanding for the region, thanks to the honest, decency, and forbearance of its people. But in recent years, with the rupture in our social fabric, we have lost our most precious asset."[53]

Subsequent entertainment productions indeed attempted to reflect the spirit of unity Khudair called for, broadening it to the vision of a unity that spans the Gulf. But it was again the unity of resistance to a common enemy. Witness the children's cartoon, *Heroes of the Gulf* ("Abtal al-Khalij") — a Bahraini adaptation of Marvel Comics' *The Avengers*, starring a team of six, each with a flag, a costume, and a superpower, under the banner of "Unity in Strength." They eviscerate monsters that have breached their borders, and poisonous snakes lurking within their own desert sands. They also team up and converge on Arab lands more distant — blocking a missile headed for the pyramids of Egypt, for example.[54]

In sum, both the Algerian and Bahraini examples reflect the presence of liberal television and film producers who have sought to influence the public discussion in constructive ways. At the same time, they speak to the limitations of such efforts. In the

Algerian case, an extreme form of state control over entertainment makes it necessary for divergent voices to make their movies and distribute them for home screening only. In the Bahraini example, no such phenomenon of emigre entertainment exists, while the domestic productions have been rare and problematic. Yet in both cases, there is something to build on: talented artists and a motivation to stir positive change.

## HOLLYWOOD-ARAB PARTNERSHIPS, FORGED BY SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

By contrast to the Population Media Center, a small number of other American NGOs have managed to enter Arab entertainment markets bearing bold social agendas. Their efforts stem from a school of thought about American-Arab media engagement dating back to policy debates following the September 11, 2001 tragedies. As the introductory chapter noted, these attacks spawned a substantial investment in waging public diplomacy by means of a U.S.-operated pan-Arab television channel. But the same drive to counter the region's toxic media messaging that spawned the channel also inspired an alternative American approach to strategic communications in the region, sometimes referred to as the "partnership approach." It argued that for a fraction of the cost of maintaining a regional satellite channel, the U.S. could reach a larger Arab audience by collaborating with indigenous media outlets. That is, where local broadcasters wanted to make common cause in spreading a positive social message, Americans could help them by imparting expertise, co-producing shows, and otherwise investing in local liberal media capacities.[55] Such work would differ from the assistance which groups like the National Endowment for Democracy gave to nascent democratic media ventures: in order to reach the largest

possible audience, it would be necessary to engage outlets owned or dominated by authoritarian elites. Doing so became feasible after Arab states set out to enact positive cultural reforms for the sake of their own stability. As noted earlier, in the wake of Al-Qaeda attacks in Arab countries between 2002 and 2005, autocrats allied with the U.S. began to introduce the ideals of tolerance, civil society, and a more constructive form of nationalism via media, schools, and mosques. A decade later, in the age of ISIS, they intensified such efforts. So from an American standpoint, there appeared to be enough overlap between the autocrats' drive for change and the principles Americans championed to justify cooperation.

A leader in this approach with regard to broadcasting, Washington-based America Abroad Media, aimed to "empower and support local voices that convey universal values through creative content and media programming." With support from the U.S. Government and private donors, the group co-produced "town hall" programs, documentaries, and reportage with outlets in several Arab and Muslim countries. Airing on indigenous radio and television, some served to demystify the United States, while others broached local issues including corruption, the subjugation of women, and the need for a culture of tolerance. Some content helped foster a more honest discussion of Jews or Israel. For example, a 2008 episode of the Al-Arabiya talk show *Panorama*, produced with assistance from AAM in Washington, hosted Ziad Asali, President of the American Task Force on Palestine, and Israeli diplomat Jeremy Issacharoff, then Deputy Chief of Mission at the Israeli embassy in Washington, for a friendly discussion about the status of peace efforts. A 2012 town hall in Tunisia, co-produced by AAM and the local TV channel Al-Tunisia, enabled Jacob Lellouche, a member of the country's small Jewish community, to join representatives from each of Tunisia's ethnic and religious denominations for a discussion about minority rights.[56] As with the finer examples of TV

productions in the prior segment on "bottom-up" efforts, these programs worked within the constraints laid down by the ownership of a given outlet to nudge the conversation forward.

AAM later sought to adapt its approach for entertainment programming. In 2017, the organization's president, Aaron Lobel, joined Paula Dobriansky, a former undersecretary of state, in calling on the U.S. Government to "provide catalytic funding to help compensate for the limitations of the Middle East television market … [by assisting] visionaries who understand that the best response to extremism is programming that inspires and empowers their predominantly young audiences."[57] The case for doing so at the time stemmed from a desire in Washington to see Arab allies use their media to more forcefully denigrate and marginalize ISIS. Lobel convened a series of educational workshops in Arab countries in which seasoned Hollywood screenwriters and producers provided mentorship to their Arab counterparts. He built a substantial network of entertainment industry movers spanning Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, North Africa, and the Levant.[58]

Powerful Arab media outlets responded favorably to the kind of outreach Lobel advocated — including those with a history of producing antisemitic content. For example, one of the networks that welcomed partnership with Hollywood to counter ISIS was Saudi-owned MBC. In March 2017, Ali Jaber, the network's director of programming, came to the U.S. State Department to deliver the keynote address at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS. "We look at ISIS as an idea, a narrative — a dangerous one. We believe that the only way to beat that idea is to create another one that is better, more appealing, and progressive." Jaber said he welcomed investment and assistance from the United States, but also conveyed a reservation: "What we look to Hollywood for is to teach us the craft of storytelling, not to produce for us ideas of their own."[59]

Between 2017 and 2020, while honing its approach to Arab

entertainment media as a nonprofit organization, AAM also launched a for-profit spinoff, Black Birch Entertainment — a "Hollywood production company … [dedicated to] purpose-driven stories for, about, and from the Middle East and Muslim communities around the world."[60] Its initial projects included a co-production with award-winning Egyptian director Marwan Hamed — a historical drama about the leader of the violent twelfth-century Islamic splinter cult known as the Assassins (Hashshashiyin). Chronicling "the earliest example of and inspiration for terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS," the project promised to chip away at the terrorists' case for followers by exposing the bankruptcy of their ancient roots.[61]

The promise of AAM and Black Birch reflects the fact that in Cairo, as elsewhere in the region, some writers and producers are both favorably disposed and politically enabled to partner with Americans in promoting a salubrious social message. The leadership of the country, for its part, welcomes foreign partnerships that may help restore the Egyptian film industry to the size and prowess of its golden age. Americans have only scratched the surface of this opportunity. Nor have they connected with the likes of Algerian creative talent, who have found enormous pent-up demand for productions such as *Harragas* which start a conversation about problems long swept under the carpet. Bernard-Henri Lévy rightly calls for greater honesty in Algerian discourse, whereby the "crimes of colonialism" cease to be "the external excuse" for an oligarchy "whose dark side has been whitewashed."[62] Supporting efforts to do so through the media can serve to help pry open an important, closed society.

In sum, Americans have an opportunity to participate in "entertainment education" projects reaching a a pan-Arab audience through the entertainment capitals of Cairo and the Gulf, as well as access more intimate audiences through local partnerships from Algeria to Bahrain. Arab production studios are a vital field of engagement for American expeditionary diplomacy.

6

# A CULTURAL APPROACH TO PROMOTE THE RULE OF LAW

*A civil movement in Sicily which used rule of law education to fight the Mafia now provides a template for Arab reformists devoted to fighting corruption and graft.*

THREE OF THE five prior chapters assessed, respectively, the role of organized religion, education systems, and entertainment media in strengthening the Arab region's liberal reformist current. To recap, chapter one showed that concerted efforts to promote inter-religious engagement have fostered warmer perceptions of the religious and sectarian "other," particularly among young people. Chapter three profiled state- and non-state initiatives to mold a mindset of critical thinking, as well as counter intolerance of the other, through lessons children learn from teachers, textbooks, and Web content. The fifth chapter highlighted initiatives that laced positive social messages into film and broadcast comedy and drama — both in Arab entertainment media and its counterparts around the world.

Among Arab actors who have pursued these approaches, most perceive the three sectors as intrinsically linked, forming a larger

whole. Recall the example of activist Saad Salloum's tolerance-promoting NGO in Baghdad, Masarat, which oversees an inter-faith council, a media program for tolerance, and the production of new textbooks on Iraq's diverse ethnicities and faiths. For Salloum, education, media, and religious leadership, when harnessed for the sake of a mission, form the fundamental drivers of cultural change in his society. As the region's governments and trans-state extremists alike adopt the same principle to serve their own social agendas, he observes, proponents of liberal institution building can and must do the same for theirs.[1]

The concept of a multi-sector campaign for cultural reform has also been applied elsewhere in the world by like-minded actors who similarly adopt "culture" — defined as widely held ideas, beliefs, and social traits that influence thinking and behavior — as their primary field of activity. A departure is warranted into this "cultural approach" and some of its more prominent success stories. After doing so, I will share a direct experience of an effort to adopt the practices of expeditionary diplomacy to apply the three facets of the cultural approach in Arab countries.

Proponents of the approach share the belief that they are filling a gap in much of the international development work which donor nations support globally. They fault the latter work for adopting the implicit theory that in order to establish inclusive, pluralistic governance based on liberal principles,[2] one should focus chiefly on enshrining rights through a constitution, constructing the physical elements of a state (ministries, courts, police, voting booths, and the like), and training the population to manage them. Provided such an effort proceeds without interference, the theory goes, a just government and viable economy will follow.[3] Proponents of the "cultural approach," by contrast, stress that dozens of attempts to do so have not succeeded because the liberal values underpinning the desired institutions have not taken root in the culture. It stands to reason, for example, that no

police force can establish security unless the majority of the population accepts and abides by the legal system — including and especially the police themselves. No legal system functions properly where ethnic or religious supremacism trumps the principle of equality under the law. No economy garners adequate investment where graft is the most common means of exchange.[4]

The converse of these observations stands to reason as well. In environments where the majority of the population embraces rule of law principles, citizens can try to police themselves, lessening the burden on courts and law enforcement. Judges and police officers by and large administer their duties with integrity. The society, working together, can break the cycle of nepotism, corruption, and unemployment that blocks economic growth and perpetuates marginalization and poverty. In a culture of egalitarianism, women emerge as civic leaders and professionals, contributing income to the household and energy to public life.[5] It also becomes possible to mitigate other, external pressures to which state failure is commonly ascribed. Young people are less vulnerable to overtures from supremacist groups because they believe in the ideal of transcending communal divisions. In making these observations, proponents of the "cultural approach" do not argue for delay in the construction or repair of state institutions. They insist, however, that in any effort to overcome tyranny, corruption, or chaos, the material aspect of state-building must be joined by a cultural campaign to promote the requisite values. And given that culture, as defined above, relates intrinsically to ideas, organized effort for the sake of cultural change necessarily focuses on actively promoting a specific, beneficial idea; targeting a harmful one; or both.

## SICILY'S ANTI-MAFIA MOVEMENT AS A TEMPLATE FOR ARAB CIVIL SOCIETY

One important example was the historic, nonviolent struggle against the Mafia waged by civic actors in southeastern Sicily in the 1980s and '90s. Their challenge was daunting: Though nominally an autonomous democratic region, the island had been at best a "hybrid democracy," in which the trappings of democratic governance — laws, elected officials, police, and courts — were in reality dominated by organized crime. Murder rates during the period approached the level of killing in Lebanon, then in the grip of civil war. Outside the narrow circle of Mafia elites, few had a fair opportunity to pursue a decent life.[6]

Though a variety of efforts to defeat the Mafia had been attempted in the past, notably those led by Italian communists, a group of neo-liberal Sicilian reformists emerged with a new plan to do so by rallying the population around the unifying vision of a "culture of lawfulness." The concept was designed to take aim at the culture of criminality which had been essential to the Mafia's hold on the island. For generations, Mafiosi had used Sicilian patriarchal traditions to depict the "Godfather" as steward of the island's honor and heritage. They portrayed their power and crimes as a sort of classy, authentically Sicilian legal system with a justice all its own. Though the Mafia and its "soldiers" constituted only a sliver of the population, most Sicilians felt that resistance was not only dangerous but futile. The mob was simply a "fact of life," people would say — the "way things are" in Sicily.

To change these ideas, activists worked, as Baghdad's Saad Salloum now works, through the three crucial sectors of organized religion, education, and media. With respect to the first category, their efforts were vastly enriched by support from the Catholic church: Priests broke their multi-generational silence about the Mafia, preached against joining it, and denied communion to its members. With respect to education, reformists

worked with school teachers to prepare the next generation for a new way of life — by advocating rule of law principles, promoting personal responsibility, and fostering a feeling of agency. School curricula changed the way children understood their own heritage by presenting alternative role models from the island's history who embodied a different, lawful set of values. This new narrative served to recast the Mafia don as an aberration, no longer the guardian of Sicilian identity.

As to the third major sector — the media — entertainers and journalists alike joined the effort. News reporters began to expose Mafia criminality and its devastating effect on the island, breaking their own taboo of silence. They also sought out and magnified signs of hope that had the potential to counter the culture of defeatism. They profiled, for example, brave judges and police who refused to succumb to Mafia bribery or intimidation. The stories served to embolden the population as well as generate solidarity and a kind of protection for civil actors who challenged the Mafia. Entertainment media joined the campaign too: The same true stories of uncowed police and judges, told in dramas such as the 1987 TV series *La Piovra* (*The Octopus*) and the 1989 film *Il Giudice Ragazzino* (*Judge Ragazzino*), turned civic leaders into heroes and role models. Comedies such as *Tano De Morire* (*To Die for Tano*) ridiculed organized crime figures, while music videos such as *Piensa* (*Think*) (1994) spoke directly to young people, urging them to consider the devastating consequences of joining the criminal underworld. Media specialists surveying the relationship between popular culture and public attitudes in Sicily have concluded that the entertainment industry was instrumental in weakening organized crime in the area.[7]

While the outcomes of a cultural struggle against the Mafia are not easy to quantify, the anti-Mafia movement has claimed success by citing a combination of indicators and inference. With respect to indicators, they note that by the turn of the twentieth century, Mafia-related murders had fallen to the single digits

annually. Long shunned by outsiders, Sicily reemerged as a prominent destination for international tourism. Formerly one of the most corrupt places in Europe, the island achieved an A1 issuer rating by the investors service Moody's in 2002.[8] Once a region from which people fled, it became an area where newcomers arrived to build their futures. With respect to inference, they point significantly to the case of Naples, where organized crime continued to thrive for decades after its waning in Sicily. Both Italian provinces enjoyed the same advantages in terms of intensified security sector work and greater national investment in the local judiciary. The most striking contrast between the two was that Sicily developed a "culture of lawfulness movement" at a time when Naples did not. To be sure, organized crime was not defeated in Sicily either; in the 21st century, its people have seen reversals in the gains they made in the twentieth — evidence of the need to counter the tendency toward regression. But few dispute that the darkest days have passed.[9]

The Sicilian experience was remarkable but not unique. Strikingly similar measures were adopted during the same period in Hong Kong and the urban regions of Colombia — each long a bastion of violence, corruption, and dysfunction; both subsequently regarded as safe, viable, and desirable places in which to live and work. The three examples, each arising spontaneously and without coordination, went on to inform a variety of efforts to proactively apply the "culture of lawfulness methodology" to other countries facing similar problems. Ventures arose in Colombia[10], Mexico[11], Botswana, the Caribbean states, and the Republic of Georgia.[12]

Whereas the precedent models of cultural change in Sicily, Bogota, and Hong Kong occurred in nominally democratic environments, other successful cultural interventions were launched by autocrats. South Korean military dictator Park Chung-hee did not build a democracy; to the contrary, he stymied attempts to do so. But in the 1970s, top-down strategies of values promotion

became a mainstay of his rule, and he has been credited for fostering a culture of agency and pluralism which proved essential for the country's eventual democratic transition.[13] Through the "Saemaul Undong" ("new community") movement, he organized villages into semiautonomous collectives and empowered them to work their way out of poverty by building roads, irrigation systems, and housing. The project aimed as much to enrich the countryside and create a national infrastructure as to transform the culture of defeatism and passivity that had prevailed after years of occupation and war. Other initiatives that also took aim at cultural impediments to development took place in cities.[14] By contrast to South Korea, wealthy Singapore remains an authoritarian state — but in the mid-twentieth century, the ruling party enacted successful cultural policies to overcome a legacy of violent ethnic and religious strife. These included, again, the mobilization of media to isolate violent actors as well as to promote a culture of tolerance.[15] Present-day advocates of ending one-party rule believe that should the country move in a democratic direction, the culture of ethnic and religious pluralism would lend itself to the development of political pluralism.[16]

All of these examples merit consideration in light of the challenge of the cultural approach to liberal reform in the Arab world.[17] The Sicilian experience shows that where a violent clique has used patriarchy, heritage, and honor culture to dominate a traditional society, it is possible to effect the culture in such a way as to isolate and undermine the group. Parallel efforts in Hong Kong and Bogota demonstrate that a similar approach can succeed in diverse environments. As to the authoritarian examples, they are important not only for their positive and negative lessons but also as polemical tools in authoritarian countries: Arab cultural reformists can appeal to an autocrat for support by pointing out that stable, undemocratic Singapore has benefited from equivalent "cultural interventions." As for the

ruler who would like to initiate the effort himself and needs to enlist the support of skeptical liberals, South Korea's experience holds out the promise that this generation's autocrat can lay the groundwork for next generation's democracy.

To be sure, the precedent models also highlight that cultural transformation takes years, if not decades; and regardless of the nature of the host government, a long-term plan is difficult to sustain. In a democracy, there are fewer political impediments to a civic cultural campaign — but the short-term outlook spurred by electoral cycles makes it harder to focus politicians on any long-term project. An autocracy, by contrast, holds out the promise of long-term planning and continuity — but also wields the power to snuff out any effort on a hair trigger. As for war-torn and failed-state environments, success requires a vast reservoir of leadership, courage, creativity, and luck. Given the intermingled destinies of 21 Arab states, an effective cultural approach to national development must navigate the twists and turns of freedom, tyranny, and chaos.

## A PAN-ARAB GATHERING IN PALERMO AND ITS IMPACT

In 2006, the National Strategy Information Center in Washington invited me to help gauge whether Arabs would be interested in applying the "culture of lawfulness methodology," inspired by the Sicilian anti-Mafia struggle, in their own societies.[18] In other words, might the story of the Sicilian Mafia—a "society within a society" that used violence to achieve its goals at the expense of the population—resonate with Arabs as a metaphor for hostile elements indigenous to their region? If so, would they wish to adopt the "culture of lawfulness" approach as a means of countering those elements? I felt optimistic that the

answer to both questions would be yes. Part of the reason was simply that I had heard the term "mafia" used often in the region as a means of describing local problems. For example, numerous Lebanese friends, living at the time under Syrian military domination, described the powers of the Assad intelligence services and their local ally, Hezbollah, as a kind of "mafia rule."

In light of the important role Sicilian media had played as a catalyst for social change, I felt that Arabic media should be prominent in any effort to migrate the Sicilian techniques to the Middle East. Perhaps if Arabic media professionals used their platforms to raise awareness about the meaning and utility of rule-of-law principles, they could catalyze equivalent effort by religious leaders and educators.

We conceived of a workshop in which Arab media talent would converge on the Sicilian capital Palermo—a historic crossroads of East and West, its culture a hybrid of European and Arab traditions. The structure of the workshop would mix education with action. First, bring the Arab participants together with their Sicilian counterparts who had played a leading role in the anti-Mafia struggle. Through a series of presentations and discussions, work together to explore the commonalities, as well as the contrasts, between Sicily under the Mafia and present-day Arab societies. Next, divide the Arab participants into small groups, tasking each to envision a media project—for example, a soap opera script, a series of newspaper columns, or several talk show episodes—that creatively applied the Sicilian approach to a local Arab problem. Before concluding, participants would commit to actually producing and airing the segments. They would also agree to reconvene six months later to share their achievements, describe how the public reacted, and, if all went well, make plans for another round of publishing and broadcasting. We would not pay them to do any of this: we saw the success or failure of the experiment as a function of whether the participants chose to follow through without a material incentive.

In search of suitable candidates to take part, I visited six of the region's eight kingdoms and emirates—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Jordan—judging their media environment at the time to be more permissive than that of Arab republics such as Algeria, Egypt, and Syria. I honed the planning for the workshop through conversations with these countries' filmmakers, screenwriters, editors, and pundits and invited them to participate. A few formed conspiracy theories about the project. Others feared that if they accepted the invitation, their co-workers would suspect them of serving as "foreign agents." Most, however, had no such reservations, saw the project for the well-intentioned effort that it was, and spread the word among colleagues. We had considerably more candidates than space in which to host them. The participants — twenty in all — included the head writer of a hit Saudi comedy series and a handful of liberal journalists from the Dubai-based news network Al-Arabiya. They were joined by proponents of liberal reform in Bahrain who managed a newspaper and a Sudanese lawyer who wrote a weekly column in Qatar. To try our hand more modestly at engaging religious leadership, we also secured the participation of a preacher at a mosque in Jordan. Given that the Catholic Church had lent crucial moral weight to Sicily's "culture of lawfulness movement," it seemed important to test whether one reform-minded Muslim cleric would draw inspiration from it.

Over the course of the five-day workshop, some participants enjoyed the pasta and Italian movies we screened but rejected the comparison between the Mafia and their own societies' violent actors. Most, however, found the parallels to be compelling: they felt that the Mafia-driven culture of intimidation, as well as its perversion of Sicilian history and heritage, bore striking resemblance to techniques that various power cliques had used to dominate their environments. Saudi participants, for example, described clerical elites in their country as a "religious mafia."

They added that the Sicilian experience of "hybrid democracy" resonated more deeply than notions of an American democratic model to which they had previously been exposed.

Six months later, the group had created approximately 100 articles, news segments, entertainment sketches, and sermons — all conceived in the course of the workshop, each aiming to introduce the concept of a "culture of lawfulness" approach to Arab social and political reform. Several stirred demonstrable public interest and, in some cases, an echo effect —through other media that reacted to the content in their own publications and broadcasts. More important than the immediate results were the long-term outcomes: over the decade after the workshop convened, some participants continued to apply the ideas they had gained as they rose in stature. A few also helped spread the "culture of lawfulness" beyond the realm of media, into other sectors of society.

One sterling example merits special attention. The participant was Saudi writer and intellectual Mansour Alnogaidan — mentioned earlier, in chapter four, in a discussion of a UAE-based reformist think tank, the Al-Mesbar Center for Research and Studies. As a young man in the north-central Saudi town of Buraidah, he had led a militant Islamist cell. But over several years in a Riyadh prison, he read hundreds of books, which opened his mind and heart, and underwent a profound, self-styled intellectual transformation. He emerged as a leading liberal voice calling for an end to clerical hegemony over his society.[19] At the time I met him, he had been blacklisted by his country's major media establishments. Intensely curious about the world beyond the Gulf, he eagerly joined the workshop.

Alnogaidan committed to two projects in the course of the Sicily gathering. The first told the story of Saudi human rights lawyer Abdel Rahman Al-Lahim, a champion of the rule of law in his country. Lahim had angered the kingdom's hard-line Islamist courts for defending an array of liberal activists, a schoolteacher

charged with heresy, and a Shi'ite girl from the southern town of Qatif who had been sentenced to two hundred lashes for the "crime" of being raped. At the time, the Saudi court system had revoked Lahim's license to practice law.[20] International media praised him. In the domestic discourse of Saudi Arabia, however, his enemies mostly controlled the megaphone and used it to tar Lahim as a "traitor," a "Zionist," and an agent provocateur. There had been no commensurate Arabic-language telling of Lahim's true story: who he was, what motivated him, and why he believed so deeply in the principle of equal treatment under the law. The poverty of Arabic-language coverage of Lahim made it difficult for him to win support in the court of Saudi public opinion, let alone build a following for his ideals. Mansour spent two weeks with Lahim and wrote a substantial profile of his life and work. Published in the Bahraini newspaper *Al-Waqt*, it spread widely in Saudi Arabia online. It became the basis for like-minded Saudis with clout in the kingdom to build an informed moral case for restoring Lahim's credentials and demand that the government protect him from the many death threats he had received. It also opened the door for an even larger number of Saudis to convey their own support for Lahim and hold him up as a role model to others.

Alnogaidan's second project was a historical treatment of the Saudi religious police, the self-styled guardians of public virtue, who restricted benign social interaction between the sexes and sometimes extracted bribes to overlook purported offenses — all on penalty of arrest. The study traced the institution's roots in the kingdom's founding, assessed its claims to legitimacy on the basis of Islamic legal texts, and implicitly questioned its fidelity to both the spirit of its mandate and the letter of Islamic law. Alnogaidan's rare combination of intellectual acumen, Islamic jurisprudential expertise, and intimate familiarity with the Saudi Islamist mindset made his critical reading of the organization razor-sharp and difficult to refute. Bahrain's *Al-Waqt* serialized

the study in ten parts. It was subsequently republished as a standalone book.[21] For liberal intellectuals in the kingdom, the material served to fortify the case for limiting the group's authority. By the time the Saudi government finally stripped the religious police of its power to make arrests—in May 2016—Alnogaidan's formulations about the institution had helped inform the polemics surrounding the decision.

Alnogaidan honed his political communication skills during a period in which his views were beginning to gain mainstream acceptance in Saudi Arabia. As noted in chapter one, after the bloody Al-Qaeda bombings of residential compounds in Riyadh in 2003, a cultural space opened up for some writers to reflect critically on Islamist movements.[22] This was the atmosphere in which maverick Saudi media personality Turki Aldakhil eventually founded the Al-Mesbar think tank in the UAE. He aimed, much the way Alnogaidan's study of the religious police had done, to equip reformist elements in the Gulf with a more informed view of how to advance their goals. Alnogaidan was hired and swiftly promoted to manage the organization. In training staff and crafting plans to spread the ideas to which he remained committed, he found himself applying techniques he had learned in Sicily.[23]

A further outcome of the Palermo workshops was the establishment of a permanent institution in the United Arab Emirates called the Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness, referenced earlier in chapter three.[24] Having learned about the Sicilian model through the Arabic media content the workshops generated, UAE officials found aspects of the approach to be worth appropriating. They requested a proposal as to how to methodically instill a "lawful culture" among the population of the UAE. Two years later, the bureau launched, backed by the government, with an annual budget of $1.5 million. Curricula that the bureau developed for the country's schools taught children to regard the legal system of the state as the supreme framework for their actions —

superseding ideological, religious, and tribal loyalties. The bureau began to train the UAE's national police force to abide by the laws they enforced, through an ongoing program of "integrity education." It also introduced programs designed to regulate the relationship between the country's many guest workers and their employers in diverse sectors. While the workers learned their rights and responsibilities, employers learned why they should respect the dignity and rights of these foreign employees as called for in the legal system. "These are issues that all six GCC states have in common and need to address," explained Salah al-Ghoul, who launched and headed the UAE bureau when I met him in 2012 to help train his senior staff. "We aspire to create a model that others in the Gulf will emulate."[25]

To be sure, the "rule of law" as defined by the UAE's Bureau for the Culture of Lawfulness did not meet the criteria of democratic governance, in that the bureau did not inculcate the principle that citizens should have the right to amend the laws by voting. In other words, what the bureau actually promoted was "rule *by* law," whereby laws serve the head of state as an instrument by which to govern more evenly. Nonetheless, thanks to the bureau, children and police alike gained exposure to the ideal of a transcendent civic ethos of religious, ethnic, and gender equality under the law. They also gained a platform from which to call for some civil rights and potentially demand a larger platform and greater rights over time.

## WEIGHING LIBERAL SUPPORT FOR AUTOCRATIC REFORM

The establishment of the Bureau for the Culture of Lawfulness reflects the fact that the UAE, like other countries in the region, finds the "cultural approach" appealing as a means to fulfill its

policy objectives. Its distinctive mandate and methodology, moreover, arose directly from ideas, conjured in newsprint and over the airwaves, that stemmed from the collaborative media project which we convened in Sicily. In this respect, the Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness also showed how an exercise in expeditionary diplomacy — my recruitment and engagement of the media professionals from eight Arab countries — can yield concrete results.

At the same time, the confined nature of the bureau's reforms highlighted the compromise inherent in engaging institutions controlled by an authoritarian state. Some democracy advocates would understandably reject such a partnership, out of concern that rather than support democratic transition, it would serve to ornament the status quo. This concern is both legitimate and important to express. While some international actors, including expeditionary diplomats, adopt an approach to Arab engagement based on compromise and incremental change, others should indeed "hold the line," in insisting upon what democracy in its purest form means. Who can say which combination of efforts, in the fullness of time, will have played a crucial role in fostering peace and social justice in the region? Civic activism can and should take many forms, with continuous experimentation, innovation, and adjustment. It is a matter of vigorous trial and error, in the spirit of the old Arabic adage "Throw the fig at the wall. If it doesn't stick, at least it will make a stain."

As for advocates of liberalism who do choose to engage authoritarian establishments, it falls on them to establish criteria that appraise the moral and practical trade-offs of any project. Some criteria would be more obvious than others. To begin with, the morality of a given choice should be assessed on the principle that there are gradations of right and wrong: All Arab countries have abused human rights, but whereas the republic of Syria has slain hundreds of thousands of its own citizens, the kingdom of Morocco has made serious efforts, acknowledged by rights

groups, to mitigate past abuses and reform the practices of its security sector.[26] Some autocrats pursue benign foreign policies and contribute to regional peace efforts, whereas others stoke hatred and wage unjust wars. Most rulers share the desire to uphold national sovereignty as the overall organizing principle for the region, but some collaborate with trans-state militias seeking to puncture maps and borders. No Arab government has devised an adequately transparent and accessible legal system — but some rule by whim and fiat, whereas others rule by law.

There are also utilitarian criteria, such as the state's capacities as a soft-power exporter in its own right, and willingness to put these capacities to constructive use. For example, if, as chapter five suggested, the Egyptian government makes a steadfast commitment to press its storied entertainment industry to promote positive values through comedy and drama, enjoyed by tens of millions across the Arab world, it may merit new advantages from its international partners in other realms. The same applies to Gulf states with respect to their exportation of values through the mosques and schools they finance worldwide: the act of exporting religious ideals of peace and coexistence is a public good—a service that benefits everyone—meriting acknowledgment and support from the international community.

In formulating an approach to any Arab establishment, one must bear in mind that no Arab state is monolithic: each government consists of cliques and fiefdoms that vie for power and influence, some holding views that overlap with liberal principles, others dead set against them. Where it is possible to access and strengthen genuine reformist elements within the state, the opportunity to do so justifies engaging nearly any Arab government and its stalwarts. But such doors can close as easily as they open: even squabbling factions within the state may close ranks against their population's organized political opposition groups or in the face of international pressure. Some rulers permit their domestic opposition to operate within limits, whereas others

persecute them. In some countries, the opposition is more liberal and pluralistic than the incumbent, whereas in others, it is the other way around.

In engaging the region's peoples and institutions, outside actors will naturally make differing and at times conflicting choices, each throwing its own fig at the wall. The understandable desire to avoid such dilemmas helps explain why for decades, as noted in the introduction, so many international development organizations have adopted a posture of political neutrality in their Arab projects, seeking to minimize controversy.[27] Admittedly, an approach based on picking sides poses the risk of creating new mishaps and debacles. But the perils of continued neutrality are foreseeably disastrous, whereas the prospects for success through a more active approach are promising.

They are promising in part due to a silver lining amid the tragedies of civil war and chaos across the region. In some relatively stable Arab countries, ruling elites' traditional focus on quashing internal opposition has been joined by the fear of genuine danger at the border, posed by Iranian proxy militias and Sunni jihadist groups. As a result, autocrats worry more than in the past about how to boost the population's willingness to fight for the survival of the state. They recognize the need to remedy the causes of mass disaffection by granting Arab majorities a share in power and wealth, thereby vesting them in the system. They also know that doing so requires changes to the system: meaningful steps toward equality under the law, a culture of pluralism and tolerance, economic reforms, and a political role for Arab majorities in determining their own future. These are liberal values. Pursuing them entails not only weakening the religious supremacists and establishment conservatives that oppose them; it also means empowering the Arab liberals who espouse them. A handful of autocracies have, to varying degrees, taken positive steps along these lines: in addition to clamping down on militant ideologies, they have granted a new space for Arab

liberals to pursue their own agenda—on the condition that they reject calls for revolution and press for change incrementally.[28]

This new understanding between "liberal incrementalists" and their host governments is a mutual gamble. The ruler of a given Arab state hopes that in enabling them, he can achieve an outcome resembling Singapore: develop his country, mitigate popular frustrations, and provide an alternative to militant ideologies, all without losing his hold on power. Liberal incrementalists, for their part, want their country to evolve along the lines of South Korea: they hope that in accepting a generational truce with an undemocratic government, they can create the cultural, economic, and political conditions necessary for a more democratic system to eventually emerge.

With these delicate considerations in mind, one can intuit the reasons why the principle of the rule of law, together with the proposition of advancing it through culture, would find both a receptive ear among liberal reformists and a qualified welcome by some Arab rulers. Consider the two points of view. From a ruler's perspective, the law, when employed as a tool of autocratic governance, provides a way to both assuage people's fears of arbitrary treatment and hold them accountable to regulated standards of behavior. It also offers a framework to engage the public in rooting out corruption by low- and mid-level bureaucrats, merchants, and others. As to the effort to promote a "culture of lawfulness," it can do double duty. First, it gives liberals a mission and an occupation that pose no immediate threat to the ruler's hold on power. Second, if the effort actually succeeds in moving people to behave more lawfully, the culture of lawfulness can reduce the burden on police and courts, as well as reduce corrupt practices that weaken the national economy. But the"culture of lawfulness" approach also poses some risks to an autocrat. For example, one key principle of the rule of law — that citizens have the power to amend laws through an elected legislature — would, if enshrined, allow the population to lawfully weaken or even

cancel the ruler's authority. Judges, enjoying the power to hold everyone equally accountable to anti-corruption laws, could try the ruler, his family, or their friends. These pitfalls can be navigated, however, by limiting the definition of the rule of law in such a way as to effectively cordon off the autocrat and his inner circle — in other words, promoting rule *by* law under the label of the rule *of* law, as the UAE government chose to do.

Arab liberals, for their part, understand the autocrat's calculations. They naturally share the concern, noted above, that in partnering with the ruler in such a venture, they may merely ornament the status quo. Yet as Arab liberals' willful participation in the UAE's "Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness" project has shown, they see a compelling case to take the risk. It rests on a familiar critique of their own society, as well as an inference they draw from the fact that culture is inherently fluid. With respect to the critique, they hold that due to the legacy of generations of Islamist inculcation on the one hand and the longterm suppression of Arab liberalism on the other, Arab democratic legislative experiments, like the democratic elections that followed the Arab Spring, presently do more to enshrine Islamist precepts than foster egalitarianism under the law. Liberals' desire to avoid such an outcome becomes a case for provisionally accepting and even advocating a variant of the rule of law that excludes the public from actually amending laws — in other words, autocratic rule *by* law. They believe that, given an opportunity to inculcate the culture of lawfulness, can mold a new generation that will aspire to enshrine egalitarian principles, rather than sectarian ones, into the legal system. In the meantime, Arab liberals can also move a substantial number of bureaucrats, security officers, and civic actors to embrace the laws of the state as the ultimate worldly arbiter of human behavior.

The second plank of their case — the inherent fluidity of culture — holds that the cultural approach, by its nature, can mitigate the ruler's dilution of the rule of law as well the exclu-

sion of his inner circle from legal accountability. As liberals work through media, mosques, and schools to inculcate personal responsibility to adopt and model lawful behavior, they have the opportunity to reach all segments of the population, including the upper echelons of government and its stalwarts. So even if autocratic elites enjoy a dispensation from legal accountability in the present, they are not impervious to the gradual influence of education and messaging on the structure of government in the future. That is, if the "cultural approach" does not change the behavior of those who rule now, it has the potential to influence the mindset of those who will succeed them. Meanwhile, given the ruler's self-interest in promoting rule *by* law under the rubric of rule *of* law, liberals enjoy a mandate to communicate ambiguously. They can impart their less controversial messages explicitly, and more sensitive ones implicitly. The creative tension between their ideals and the ruler's interests, like many political relationships, may erupt into conflict from time to time — but between the ruler's need to build bridges to his people and liberals' need for a space in which to operate freely, the culture of lawfulness value proposition appears mutually desirable enough to survive.

A similar set of opportunities and problems applies to other egalitarian principles besides the rule of law which Arab liberals also aspire to spread through the "cultural approach." Consider the aspiration, described in chapter three, to instill critical thinking skills and a culture of civil deliberation. In benign autocratic environments, liberals can win the latitude to do so through schools, for example. They cannot, however, win the freedom to apply the same tools of critical thinking in media discussions of public policy where doing so exceeds the red lines of the ruler. Recall as well the efforts to promote a culture of tolerance for the "other," as described in chapter one. Arab liberals can win the space to introduce new readings of Arabic and Islamic history that inspire pride in traditions of tolerance,

and awareness of past injustices toward differing ethnicities or sects. Doing so can instill a more empathic disposition toward the "other," as well as promote a new, cohesive national identity that welcomes diversity and fosters national reconciliation and inclusion. All these goals suit autocrats concerned to bolster the viability of their nation-states. But when a Sunni ruler, for example, uses anti-Shi'ite tropes to incite his population against the enemy in an Iranian proxy war, liberals can do little to stop him, and will meanwhile face awkward questions from local Shi'ites who decry the chauvinist strand in establishment discourse.

## THE CULTURE OF LAWFULNESS APPROACH BEGINS TO SPREAD

Promoting each of the above values — tolerance, critical thinking, and personal responsibility to uphold rule of law principles — makes its own contribution to a culture supportive of liberal institutions. Among them, the culture of lawfulness agenda, when pursued through the combination of media, schools, and centers of spiritual and moral authority, has the potential to bolster such institutions the most directly. As noted earlier, the culture of lawfulness agenda fosters integrity among police officers and judges while building public solidarity and support for their work. It cleanses bureaucracy and boosts the economy by stigmatizing nepotism and corruption. It also turns the public against criminal and extremist groups that aim to erode a country's institutions. Yet in most Arab countries, liberal actors have devoted considerably less attention to it in their advocacy for reform.

The situation has begun to change, however. To begin with, the UAE's Bureau for the Culture of Lawfulness has served to catalyze interest in the same methodology elsewhere in the Gulf. The Association of Kuwaiti Lawyers, for example, convened a

conference in September 2018 — "The Culture of Lawfulness in Educational Institutions and its Role in Civil Society" — that lifted much of its language from the UAE bureau's literature. "For too long the law has been a matter for legal specialists alone," the conference prospectus states. "It is incumbent on these specialists to spread a culture of lawfulness … through proactive efforts in institutions of civil society that will take on this important mission."[29] Omani reformists called for a similar project in their country six months later[30] — and by the following October, activists in Oman had begun to create educational videos adopting the concept. Witness the online lecture by Omani liberal intellectual Muhammad al-Hashimi, "Law and the Power of Knowledge: the Culture of Lawfulness." He declares, "We must make the principle of respect for the law a sacred matter in the public conscience."[31] In Arab countries beyond the Gulf as well, equivalent efforts manifest in each of the three sectors which proponents of the "cultural approach" regard as crucial. In a mosque in Baghdad in 2015, Shi'ite cleric Zaman al-Hasnawi gave a sermon arguing that the culture of lawfulness enjoys an Islamic legal pedigree, and cited Qur'anic proof texts.[32] In a coordinated media campaign in Morocco in 2019, broadcasters strove to persuade motorists to adopt the culture of lawfulness to reduce fatalities on the road.[33] New educational initiatives in Algeria,[34] Egypt,[35] Jordan,[36] and Libya[37] have adopted the same rubric.

In assessing this spread of nascent initiatives, some distinctions may be drawn. According to Salah al-Ghoul, director of the UAE's Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness, the Kuwaiti and Omani ventures stemmed directly from his own organization. "It was always our aspiration to introduce a model that other countries in our neighborhood would want to import," he said. "We convened workshops and conferences about the culture of lawfulness with nearly all the GCC states, and the Kuwaiti and Omani efforts are the direct result of that." As to the efforts in

Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Libya, Ghoul had no operational ties with them and could not speak to their origins.[38] Scrutiny of their literature, however, indicates that some arose from research into how liberals outside the Arab world had used the cultural approach to support their own institutional reforms. Other ventures appear to have born purely of their initiators' creative thinking and reasoning. That is, they did not emulate someone else's "culture of lawfulness approach" so much as they discovered it on their own. In sum, this distinctive methodology has begun to proliferate in Arab lands in three different ways: institutional transfer, appropriation through research, and independent formulation.

Each of these three means of adoption bears a lesson. First, those Arab liberals who "discovered" the culture of lawfulness without institutional support or knowledge of precedent attest to the universality of rule of law principles and the intuitive nature of the cultural approach. Like the culture of lawfulness movements of Sicily, Bogota, and Hong Kong, which developed along parallel lines without coordination or even mutual awareness, the more preliminary Arab efforts show that the same approach can be as indigenous to the Middle East or North Africa as any other part of the world. In this sense, they serve to refute the portrayal of proponents of these techniques as somehow "foreign" in nature or inorganic to the region. Second, the transfer of the culture of lawfulness methodology from a bureau in the UAE to liberals in Kuwait and Oman speaks to the value of organized, proactive efforts to spread it. Third, given that the UAE bureau arose because an American-led effort to spread the culture of lawfulness in Arab lands found a receptive ear, its staying power in the UAE and positive influence beyond its borders testify to the value of American expeditionary diplomacy in the region.

7

# A SAFER SPACE AND GROWING BASE FOR LIBERAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

*For most observers, prospects for Arab liberal movement building remain a pipe dream — yet a handful of liberal activists have begun to defy their many skeptics.*

As Arab media, schools, and religious leadership can harmonize their efforts to grow support for liberal principles and institutions, a separate trio of sectors have the potential to expand liberalism's operational base: private philanthropy, political parties, and the security sector. Their connection will at first seem less obvious.

To perceive it in context, consider the historically negative interplay among the three. For decades, Arab security sectors enforced rulers' policy of excluding liberals and their ideas from the public space while effectively ceding mosques and madrasas to Islamist movements. Non-Islamist political actors could serve either as stalwarts of the ruler or legally sanctioned opposition parties under severe restriction. No base of private philanthropy for liberal political movement building could emerge in such an environment. Islamists in the oil-rich Gulf countries, on the

other hand, enjoyed financial support from the state, and their equivalents in oil-poor Arab countries enjoyed funding from the Gulf's transnational petro-endowments. Both also received donations from individual benefactors, wealthy and poor alike, through the ancient framework of mandatory Islamic alms (Zakat). Free to act and flush with cash, the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and, in some environments, Iran-backed movements used their wealth to serve the needy, forging a deep and lasting bond with the population. Non-Islamist parties sanctioned by the state, for their part, remained largely detached from the population.[1]

This configuration has begun to change, however. The prior chapter observed that, as part of the counterrevolutionary trend following the Arab Spring, numerous Arab rulers set out to undermine Islamist movements, while granting some liberals space to make a public case for social, albeit not political, change. Working through their respective security sectors, moreover, autocrats moved to dismantle the social welfare mechanisms which Islamists built over generations, as well as deny them alms and petro-largesse. This process created a vacuum in social services to the needy, and perhaps an opportunity for liberal actors to help fill it. To do so would of course require that liberals find their own benefactors, as well as work to ensure that the government not block the effort. If they could do so, they could also forge a meaningful connection to Arab majorities, attracting new supporters in an effort to grow a popular movement. In strategically vital parts of the Arab region, several attempts have already been made to do so: creative liberal actors won tacit approval from the security sector and found their own sources of philanthropic support. Their efforts saw gains as well as reversals, but point to the possibility of further progress and a role for Americans to play in fostering it.

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Consider the political climate in Egypt, where the suggestion that local liberals could emerge as credible political players will prompt understandable skepticism. They performed very poorly, to begin with, in the country's first free parliamentary election following the 2011-'12 Arab Spring revolutions. The final tally saw three quarters of parliamentary seats go to the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis, and most of the remainder to 13 parties that defied a collective label other than "non-Islamist."[2] Among these, several hailed from earlier protest movements — against Israel, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and the Mubarak government — that spawned the first demonstrations at Tahrir Square. Most, however, identified with older ideological legacies: the post-colonial Egyptian nationalism of the country's oldest party, the Wafd; the pan-Arab socialism of President Gamal Abdel Nasser; and a range of communist and other leftist strains.[3]

Such was the natural outcome of President Hosni Mubarak's three decades in power. His statecraft neatly embodied the regional trend described above: he granted space to the Brotherhood and Salafi groups to serve the population's charitable needs and propagate their ideological vision, while blocking any non-Islamist force from developing into a potential rival to the political establishment. Non-Islamist parties, writes Egypt scholar Eric Trager, kept to "headquarters [that] felt more like social clubs than political nerve centers … [and] hung around talking politics, usually reminiscing about the past."[4] Under Islamist government in 2012, the same parties all but opted out of the political process, citing the ruling majority's maximalist agenda. Under Sisi in 2013, they again came together unanimously — to rally around his crackdown on the Brotherhood.

After the Sisi coup, all non-Brotherhood actors in Egypt faced a new crisis of responsibility. The killing or jailing of thousands of Brotherhood figures had left a void in aid and social services to the poor and vulnerable. Who would move to fill it? Much of the burden was managed by the government: the army, Ministry of

Social Solidarity, and Ministry of Supply and Domestic Trade received a cash injection from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE to acquire and disburse civilian aid en masse. The strongest non-government organizations to play a role were established Islamic groups unaffiliated with the Brotherhood. Al-Gam'iya al-Shar'iya (the Islamic Legitimacy Association), a charity with Salafi leanings, provided free medical services. Egypt for Good (Misr al-Khayr), an establishment alms foundation run by former Egyptian Mufti and Brotherhood opponent 'Ali Gomaa, was tapped by the UAE government to distribute a gift of 100,000 head of cattle. It is unclear whether the UAE would have considered conferring the task of distribution on a liberal organization — but the question was moot, as no network of liberal actors in Egypt had the organizational muscle to move that much cattle around the country.[5]

Yet some liberal politicians hit the streets too, despite their historical disadvantage, and began to build their own bond with the population. They appealed to unlikely donors, and improvised techniques to sustain their charitable work. They did not overtly proselytize for liberalism among the citizens they served, but did find subtle ways to highlight the practicality of their ideals. They also took to the airwaves, on the strength of the moral clout they had earned, to broadcast a political message to a larger audience.

Witness Mohamed Fouad, a native of Giza with a doctorate in International Business and Organizational Behavior from Sadat University. In 2011, at age 34, he waged an independent campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood machine in a mostly poor section of Giza called Omraniya. Its schools hosted 90 students to a classroom. Its streets flowed with sewage. Toilets did not work. Fouad lost.[6]

Four years later, with the Brotherhood banned, he ran again — this time as a member of the New Wafd party — and won. His platform called for open markets, respect for private property

rights, an end to rote learning in schools, a new secular family law to level the gender gap, and above all, the nourishment and renewal of his district. Omraniya had not changed much, except for the post-Brotherhood hole in the social safety net. Fouad made a series of "listening tours" of the district to determine the granularities of its needs, and set up a 24-hour phone hotline for constituents.[7]

To help revitalize the district, he established a charitable foundation called AKY (an Arabic acronym meaning "Let good prevail"), and raised money from a combination of international and local donors. Though Egyptian law prohibited foreign funding of civic endeavors, Fouad said, a loophole allowed multinational companies with a local presence to donate more easily. He attracted the "Corporate Social Responsibility" divisions of British Petroleum, Pepsi, and the UAE telecommunications company Etisalat, among others. In addition to monies, some granted high-end furniture which outgoing expat workers had left behind, so that Fouad could sell them. "I can marry off 20 kids with one BP dining room," he said. Over his first three years in parliament, he raised an average of $250,000 annually, of which gifts from multinationals constituted 30 percent. The rest came from Egyptian small- and medium-sized enterprises. In successfully appealing to the latter, Fouad felt that he was helping to foster a culture of secular philanthropy in Egypt. To 'Omraniya, he delivered new housing, sewage repair, food, and medicine. He bailed women out of debtors' prison. Over two years, he organized seven job fairs, attracting 12,000 job seekers. As of June 2017, 1,800 had found work.[8]

It was easy to follow Fouad's activity and goings on in the district, because after the 2015 campaign, he retained a media team to produce dozens of slick, sometimes moving 90-second videos. "We Are the Street," reads the chyron on one clip from February 2017. Captioned photos flash over a riveting, superhero-style soundtrack: thousands at prayer during the festival of

'Eid al-Fitr; a graduation ceremony for adults who have learned to read, courtesy of the "stamping out illiteracy" program; crowded town hall meetings with Fouad on stage; Fouad's walking tours of the poorest neighborhoods; a massive street turnout to watch the Africa World Cup on a public screen. "Our future is ahead of us," the video concludes.[9] In a separate series of clips called, "There is no hope," the same riveting theme song runs under the words, "They told us there's no hope. But we're determined to keep going and be joyous about our victories, even if they're small."[10] Front-page headlines about Fouad's work in parliament follow. One reports that after Fouad submitted evidence of corruption and contaminated blood at a local blood bank, the director was fired and referred for prosecution. Another recounts how Fouad shamed the Minister of Local Development for gross mismanagement of public sanitation in Giza, pressuring him to take action.[11]

These "small victories" did not make international headlines. To the people of 'Omraniya, however, they were not small at all. The videos, mixing Fouad's story with the population's struggles, introduced a new narrative about political leadership in 'Omraniya, wiped clean of demagoguery. In focusing on local problems, it recognizes domestic corruption rather than deflecting blame onto perceived foreign threats. In also highlighting the potential for civic participation to solve problems, it challenges the culture of passivity and defeatism and promotes a sense of agency.

Fouad, appointed spokesman for the New Wafd party in 2015, also became a ubiquitous presence on national TV talk shows. But as in his Web videos, he declined to discuss regional politics, and criticized the habit of invoking foreign bogeymen. "I don't want to join the blame game," he said. "I want to talk about the fundamental root causes of issues." In May 2017, he appeared on Dream TV's popular 10 pm talk show to talk about Tariq Amir, the governor of Egypt's central bank. He criticized Amir for

blaming "greedy merchants" for high inflation rates — a trope with an odious history. Amir should take personal responsibility for his own role in the country's economic woes, Fouad said, because "the policies of the Central Bank are part of the crisis."[12] He added that Amir's claims that Egypt's financial crisis had ended and the Egyptian pound would soon gain dramatically against the dollar were nonsensical and irresponsible.[13] Fouad's broadside against the senior official indicated that at least some space had been opened to criticize the government, several ranks below the top.

Initially, Egypt's robust security sector did not interfere in Fouad's rapid rise in renown and esteem. He responded forthrightly to meeting requests with security officials in his district, describing his plans and negotiating the space in which to act. "I found overall that they wanted me to succeed and did not attempt to block me or my strategy to improve the district," he said.[14]

Fouad's political prospects suffered a major setback in 2018 with his removal from the Wafd party, engineered by party Chair Baha Abu Shaqqa. Fouad maintained his relationship with the public, though not public service, through writing, publishing, and media appearances. In spring 2023, a new Wafd Chair called for reinstating him.[15]

Another liberal, Ehab El-Kharrat, cofounded the Social Democratic Party in 2011 and won his seat in parliament in that year's election. Prior to the revolution, he had already drawn public attention for his work in drug addiction rehabilitation — a service which the Muslim Brotherhood never provided, in a country of more than seven million addicts.[16] Having entered politics, he became a TV talk show host as well, and began to use his airtime to promote tolerance and social justice. Some aspects of his career and media work bear considering.

A Presbyterian, Kharrat met a turning point in his life in 1985, after taking the son of a fellow church member into his care and

improvising a treatment for the young man's heroin addiction. The boy relapsed and died from an overdose. Kharrat made a vow to bring professional rehabilitation practices to Egypt. At the time, only one government care center, in the poor Cairo neighborhood of Ataba, offered counseling for addicts. But according to ex-heroin addict–turned–addiction-activist Ghattas Iskander, who used to frequent the center, "it was more a place for addicts to go to learn about the best deals on their favorite drugs." Neither churches nor mosques offered modern programs to help people with drug problems; approached for help, priests and imams generally counseled prayer.[17]

Kharrat earned a PhD in the "Philosophy of Treatment" at Kent University in the UK, then traveled in Europe and the United States to study the workings of rehab facilities. He returned to Egypt a few years later with seed funding from the British church group Tearfund to start an organization of his own. By the time of the 2011 revolution, Kharrat had built recovery centers in Cairo, Alexandria, and Wadi Natrun — a valley of ancient monasteries — serving Egyptians of any faith. Poor addicts received free care; they were effectively financed by the families of addicts of middle class backgrounds who paid for their loved ones' treatment. Local and international Christian endowments continued to support the facilities, though most of the money now came from Egyptians. Kharrat imparted his skills at institution building and management to others — from Egypt and other countries — among them, numerous ex-addicts aspiring to establish facilities of their own. Beginning in 2011, he also trained young Social Democrats to manage their offices and staffs.

Kharrat made deft use of Egyptian media, beginning around 2005, to raise awareness of Egypt's drug problem, demystify addiction, and foster empathy and support for the addicts themselves. He appeared 30 times on religious and public affairs programs, and offered TV journalists access to recovering addicts

for human interest stories on the evening news. Between 2008 and 2010, Amr Khalid, a popular Muslim televangelist in Egypt, hosted Kharrat over several episodes. "He was doggedly determined to wear down the taboo on talking about addiction," observed Nabil al-Qat, a therapist at the Shams Psychology Center in Cairo. "He was the only person doing it, and I would say he was stunningly successful. By the time of the revolution, we had gone from blanket silence on the topic to an honest, nationwide discussion."[18] In other words, Kharrat had adopted the "cultural approach" to achieve social change. In doing so, moreover, he developed his own persona as a moral voice in Egypt, thereby paving the way for his subsequent advocacy of liberal political ideals.

After 2011, Kharrat began to use his media skills to challenge other, more controversial taboos. One two-minute Web video he coproduced — "Would you accept the presence of a Buddhist cultural center in Egypt?" — found a snappy way to shame the culture of Muslim supremacism. In the familiar "man-on-the-street" format, a voice off-camera poses a question to "Mervat," a veiled woman on a Cairo street corner: "Would you accept the presence of an Islamic cultural center in Japan?" She nods and smiles. "There must be [Islamic centers] in any place in the world," she says, "so people can be aware of and acculturated to our religion." The same question is then posed to Ehab El-Kharrat. "Sure I agree," he says. Returning to Mervat, the interviewer asks, "Would you accept the presence of a Buddhist cultural center in Egypt?" She shakes her head vigorously and replies,

> We're a Muslim country. Islam must fill the world. Nothing else. … [Buddhists] are wrong. Nothing is right except for Islam. Absolutely nothing else. Anything else, Satan stands with them. And it is Satan who guided them to their beliefs. They think they're right. However much you try to convince them that they're wrong, they won't understand.

Kharrat, asked the same question, says that he would certainly accept a Buddhist cultural center in Egypt:

> "If we travel, say, to India or China, you see that they permit us to build mosques and churches. It doesn't make sense that when they come here, they can't have their houses of worship. … Remember the holy [Qur'anic] verse: 'Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.'[19] In other words, we grant freedom of worship. And we're not afraid that if they come here they'll seduce us away from our own religion. Let's respect the freedom of worship for everyone."

The narrator caps the video by asking the viewer, "Who are you with — Mervat or Dr. Ehab?" — with an invitation to click in and vote.

The video garnered over 25,000 views on YouTube within a month of its release, and Kharrat won the contest by a factor of ten to one. Among the 197 comments on YouTube, mostly by viewers with Muslim names, one wrote, "That's hardcore duplicity, Miss Mervat." Another: "I'm on Team Ehab. There's no comparison whatsoever. Unfortunately, most young women are like her, and they turn out twisted generations [of children]."[20]

In 2012, Kharrat joined the lineup on *Sat-7* — a Christian Arabic TV network founded by British Protestant minister Terry Ascott — as host of a public affairs talk show called *Bridges* (Jusur). Claiming a region-wide audience of 20 million mostly Muslim viewers, the network had launched to serve a dual mission: Dispel widespread myths commonly used to incite against churches and their flocks, and cover sociopolitical issues affecting Arabs of all faiths through the prism of Christian values.[21] In 2012, the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights credited *Sat-7*'s Cairo operation for providing "the most balanced coverage of the parliamentary elections in Egypt."

Kharrat's program has featured interviews with clerics, civic

actors, intellectuals, and government officials. Uniformly softball, they are choreographed to relay a controversial message. An August 2015 segment, for example, explored the stigma of homosexuality in Egypt. Awsam Wasfi, an Anglican minister, relayed scientific evidence to challenge the belief that homosexuality is a mental illness. Father Rafiq Graish, spokesman for the Catholic Church in Egypt, quoted remarks by Pope Francis in 2013: "'If a person is gay and seeks out the Lord and is willing, who am I to judge that person?'"[22] In another episode, Kharrat addressed the phenomenon of atheism in Egypt, counseling dialogue rather than persecution of Egyptians who do not believe in God.[23]

Kharrat has also explored anti-Semitism in Egypt, and its relationship with other forms of bigotry. Witness his June 2015 interview with Magda Harun, head of Egypt's Jewish community — a community of seven, she explained, since her sister died in 2014. With supportive cues from Kharrat, Harun recalled that Jews had numbered 100,000 on the eve of the 1952 coup; that their history in Egypt dated back millennia; and that they had contributed formidably to the country's governance, economy, and culture. "You're proud of what Jews did for Egypt," he observed. "It's Egyptian history, not just Jewish history," she replied. "So what saddens you about the end of the Jewish presence?" he asked. "It's sad to feel you're like a dinosaur, about to go extinct," she said. "And I'm worried for what we'll be leaving behind: synagogues, cemeteries, books." Rather than indulge the prevalent view that blame for Egyptian anti-Semitism rests squarely with the state of Israel, Kharrat repeatedly punctured it. For example, he asked Haroun about anti-Jewish stereotypes in old-time Egyptian comedy, and recalled the "demonization campaigns" initiated by Nasser with the Arab-Israeli wars of 1956 and 1967.

Midway into the program, Kharrat screened another "man-on-the-street" segment: an Egyptian teen, asked about Jews in Egypt, describing them as "filth" and called for the eviction of any

who were left. Kharrat asked Harun, "What do you think about what he said?" She replied, "That is someone who grew up in a society without diversity." This brought Kharrat to the most poignant question of the program: "How would you advise present-day minorities in Egypt — and what would you advise the majority — about how we can hold onto our diversity?" Haroun: "First of all, to the minorities, stick it out no matter what. Don't reach a state of desperation and leave your country, ever. … Our country is beautiful. … I could go, but I'll stay here and be buried next to my father and sister. As to the majority, know that your wealth is in your diversity."[24]

It bears highlighting that Kharrat managed to build his charitable institution, and a national reputation, under Mubarak — a rare instance of a liberal-leaning figure granted the space to develop an infrastructure under that national security state. Part of the reason, he suggested, was that as a Christian, he was deemed non-threatening; there would always be limits, in a traditional, Muslim-majority society, to the extent he might advance as a civic leader. Even so, he had to wait until after the Arab Spring to found a political party. Having done so, however, he proved that a Christian citizen with a track record of public service could win a Muslim support base after all. As to the security sector, it did block his organization from renovating a church near the Wadi Natrun rehab facility — but made no particular effort to restrict his political party building.[25]

A skeptical view might cast the qualified successes of Mohamed Fouad and Ehab El-Kharrat as anomalous in Egypt, rather than indicative of an opportunity awaiting scores more liberal politicians with equivalent gumption and wit. U.S.-based Egyptian scholar Samuel Tadros, however, holds that the country and its system allow for considerably more such actors to emerge. He hypothesizes, by way of example, that if a liberal ran for parliament in any of Egypt's rural agricultural districts, he could win on a simple platform: end government restrictions on

the farmers' right to choose what crops they plant and build on land they own. Such a position, grounded in the classical liberal principle of respect for property ownership, would in Tadros's view draw considerable support based on farmers' economic self-interest. Nor would it draw more fire from the government than a politician could sustain, because the restrictions in question do not benefit an entrenched interest high enough in the country's leadership as to invite a decision to quash him.[26] The cases of Fouad and Kharrat indicate that barring such a decision, the politician would not face harassment by the authorities, as the security sector no longer cracks down on local liberals reflexively.

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WHY WOULD an Arab security sector begin to walk back its traditional function of cordoning off liberal political parties from the general population? In some U.S.-allied Arab states, a gradual process dating back two decades has seen some encouraging changes in the institutional culture of Arab police, intelligence services, and armed forces which lend themselves to a more permissive stance toward liberal activism.

An interesting example is Saudi Arabia — again, an unusual place to spotlight in this context given its enduring, all-out ban on political parties.[27] Since its founding, the modern Saudi state has regarded parties as "bid'ah" — a disparaged form of innovation, "Haram" according to Salafi readings of Islam.[28] Nor has Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman moved to lift the ban, even as he worked to undermine clerics' domination of the public space.[29] Yet with respect to the workings and mission of the security sector, meaningful changes have been in the works since the reign of the late King Abdullah.

The roots of the shift relate to the Kingdom's gradual turn

against Salafi jihadist terrorism, dating from the rude awakening of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the lethal Saudi residential compound bombings, also perpetrated by Al-Qaeda, two years later. As jihadist ideals promulgated in schools and mosques inspired Saudi youth to wage terror attacks, it fell on the Saudi equivalent of the FBI, known as the *Mabahith al-Ammah* ("General Investigations Directorate"), to hunt down the perpetrators — and on the Saudi corrections system to grapple with the challenge of reprogramming them before their eventual release from prison.[30] Thus the country's security sector was intimately familiar with the militant mindset and the dangers of the institutions of indoctrination that bred it. Within the Ministry of Interior, one could find officers who harbored ideas about how to roll back these teachings, long before the leadership granted the green light to pursue them.[31] Though it will likely be some time before the Saudi leadership licenses genuine political party-building efforts, the evolving role and outlook of its security sector provides a striking case study with bearing on several of the Kingdom's more permissive Arab allies. Furthermore, Saudi security officers' sympathy for the cause of reform suggests that U.S. efforts to help accelerate Saudi political development will encounter some receptivity within the state.

One gained a sense of the kind of reforms which some security officials aspired to promote on a visit to Al-Ha'ir, a maximum-security prison 25 miles south of Riyadh which I visited in spring 2014. In addition to its 2,680 inmates, the facility harbored a library of books, available to prisoners, that had been banned from Saudi public schools. Gone from the library were titles by the ideological giants of twentieth-century Islamism. In their stead one found, for example, books by Al-Jahiz, a ninth-century intellectual of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad who channeled Aristotelian philosophy into animal fables and parsed the pleasures of life; and Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, the empire's great compiler of Arabic poetry.[32] One also found modern

studies of philosophy and psychology and Arabic translations of American authors, including Dale Carnegie's *Lifetime Plan for Success*. In its own way, each of these volumes poses a challenge to the stringent interpretation of Islam, favored by Saudi hardline clerics, that helped breed al-Qaeda and ISIS: Prisoners who read could gain a broader understanding of their religion and culture and a more charitable view of non-Muslims.[33]

The collection was part of a studied approach to counterterrorism that fused hard-nosed security measures with a campaign to alter the jihadist mindset. Corrections officers tried to signal the state's goodwill by granting conjugal visits to inmates and their wives and providing decent medical care and recreational facilities. A subset of the prisoners went on to spend three months at the Muhammad bin Nayef Center for Counseling and Advice, a jihadist halfway house that has hosted all Saudi returnees from the Guantánamo Bay detention camp. Clinical Psychologist Abdullah al-Garni, one of the architects of the program, who also directed the psycho-oncology department at the Saudi National Guard, said he had drawn from the "Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles," an inmate rehabilitation methodology taught at Texas Christian University,[34] and broader psychotherapy techniques to address the pathological aspect of terrorism. A pliant Saudi preacher, for his part, used the Center's pulpit to argue against the ideology jihadists had embraced. (He made his case narrowly, to be sure, on the Sunni Islamic legal principle that only the *Wali al-Amr*, or head of state, has the right to declare war.)[35]

In my visits to *Al-Ha'ir*, the Mohammed bin Nayef Center, and the training academy of the *Mabahith* in 2014, Al-Garni and his peers did not mince words in pointing the finger at the clerical establishment: "Look at Europe in the Dark Ages when the Pope and the Church controlled everything," he said, "and you can understand what's going on here now."[36] The surprising candor of Garni's remark was an indication that some Saudi officials

were opposed to the longtime political bargain with clerical elites, and enjoyed the latitude to express their views, even to a foreign researcher.

For the Saudi armed forces, national guard, and intelligence services, the leadership was keen to inoculate recruits in every way possible from vulnerability to jihadist overtures. The brunt of this responsibility was born by trainers — in teaching strict command and control, grounded in the time-honored principle that only the *Wali al-Amr* (head of state) has the authority to make war.[37]

The Saudi intelligence services have meanwhile developed their own tools to promote a more variegated understanding of Islam. Beginning in the early 1990s, Saudi researchers who were not themselves clerics were tapped to generate their own compilations of Islamic history to support a mindset in which faithful service to the security sector, rather than obedience to a cleric, was the pinnacle of devotion to Islam. The 1990 book *Intelligence and the Islamic State* ("Al-Mukhabarat fi 'l-Dawla al-Islamiya") is a collection of accounts of medieval Muslim espionage practices, from Islam's founding years to the Ottoman period, culled together with interstitial narration that directly addresses new recruits to the Saudi intelligence community. It tells the recruit that he stands at the cutting edge of a continuum of service to Islam stretching 1,400 years.[38] In tone and argumentation, it differs markedly from Salafi Saudi discourse: In Salafism's emphasis on the purity of the history of the prophet and his first three immediate successors during the seventh and eighth centuries, the ideology portrays the political history of the empires that followed as impure, unworthy of attention, and for the most part un-Islamic. In much the way the prison library implicitly challenged Salafi religious norms by featuring Arabic poetry and belles lettres from the ninth century to the present, *Intelligence and the Islamic State* signaled that the modern Saudi

state can indeed model itself on government practices other than those of the first Islamic century.[39]

It was meaningful, given the Saudi clerical establishment's domination of the religious sphere, that the security sector had prepared a cadre of educators to refute clerics' ideological contentions through their own version of Islamic scholarship. Following King Abdullah's death, as Mohammed bin Salman inaugurated an aggressive departure from generations of clerical hegemony, he enjoyed, within his security sector, the benefit of an institutional mindset that had gradually reformed itself.

Similar security sector reform efforts, also underway over the past two decades, stood to ease the conditions for liberals to advance as an organized movement. In Morocco, such work began in earnest in 2004, when King Mohammed VI established an Equity and Reconciliation Commission to acknowledge and compensate victims of brutality by the security apparatus of the monarch's late father. The effort was joined by a wave of programs to instill respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civil society among security officers and cadets, and coincided with the proliferation of hundreds of indigenous NGOs with an anti-Islamist orientation. Security sector reform initiatives included a new effort to promote transparency. In that context, I was welcomed as a researcher, in 2007, to embed in a plain-clothes detective unit of the Moroccan police. The period of my residency there, four years after triple suicide bombings rocked Casablanca, also saw a multifaceted struggle to counter extremism, uproot its human infrastructure, and empower liberal civil society organizations to help underserved communities. Young police officers with whom I became acquainted showed awareness and appreciation of this campaign, as well as literacy in human and civil rights.[40]

Both Morocco and the UAE, in turn, have also adopted practices that aim to demystify the security sector and bring citizens and police closer together. Between 2015 and 2020, in a project

sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Moroccan cities of Tangier and Tetouan adopted American-style "community policing" to build bonds of trust between police and the society.[41] A homegrown community policing initiative in Abu Dhabi, adapted from American precedents, launched as well in 2005.[42] Viewed together with the previously described Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness, which the UAE Ministry of Interior also sponsors, the approach reflects a departure from the days in which Arab security sectors more often disrupted Arab civic participation than joined in it. One Moroccan detective captured the shift in mentality when he told me, "We're not just police; we're guardians of the social fabric."[43] To be sure, this pattern of thinking construes the state, rather than society itself, as guarantor of social cohesion. In so doing, it may appear to outside observers more like a vision of a "kinder, gentler autocracy" than a step forward for liberally-minded civic action. At the same time, the conceptual shift in emphasis of the police's role — from servants of the ruler to servants of the population— has introduced a new vocabulary to the discussion. Community policing, for its part, has also helped acculturate security officers to the principle of solidarity with the population. As the same Arab security sectors meanwhile serve the mission to upend Islamist domination of the public space, a new attitude of permissiveness toward grassroots liberal movement building appears to be emerging.

Recall, by way of example, the candor with which Egyptian liberal MP Mohamed Fouad responded to this researcher's question about how he funds his social welfare activities. Thirty percent of his operating budget, he said, came from multinational companies such as BP and Pepsi, which provided a combination of cash gifts and furniture to sell. Now consider that in 2012, Egyptian security forces arrested dozens of local liberals and charged them, inter alia, with receiving foreign funding. Fouad's nonchalance reflected confidence that he enjoyed the latitude to

build his own patronage mechanism, outside the realm of the state, and use it to advance liberal principles. This confidence, as noted earlier, seemed also to have liberated him to criticize government malfeasance, albeit up to a certain level only. As mentioned previously, Fouad's kind is rare in Egypt, but his story suggests that the country allows for more of his kind to emerge.

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Fouad's success at garnering financial support requires a special kind of salesmanship, however. The Western multinationals that donate modestly to his operation make decisions about giving through differing conceptual frameworks — none of which is to build a grassroots liberal political movement, and all of which pose challenges to one who aims to do so. By way of example, as noted earlier, some of Fouad's donors provide assistance in the name of "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR), a concept of business self-regulation in which the donor aims to show the public that it serves the common good.[44] In a conservative society, however, the goal of winning over public opinion can become a reason not to support a liberal politician if a substantial portion of the population dislikes him. Other companies offer "impact investment," a public service model structured like a business, whereby a local venture receives "capital" on the expectation of a "return" which is defined and measured in terms of intrinsic worth.[45] Fouad has found ways to structure his requests for support along these lines. For example, the 1,800 Egyptian citizens for whom he found work through his job fairs provided a quantifiable "return" to the company that financed them. But for any projects or measures Fouad might take that entail confrontation with senior political elites or hardline elements in the society, he would garner no such assistance.

Yet foreign support is essential to Arab liberals, particularly in

the oil-poor states — not only as a crucial source in its own right but also due to its influence on patterns of indigenous Arab philanthropy. As noted earlier, the twentieth century saw Islamists subvert the ancient tradition of Islamic alms to fund their movements, often with the acquiescence or complicity of Arab governments. When a culture of secular philanthropy more recently began to emerge in Arab lands, it took its cues from Western donors. For example, a small but growing number of Arab companies, such as the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation and Aramex, have adopted the same rubrics of CSR and impact investing that foreign multinationals employ. As for nonprofit secular philanthropy, the small number of indigenous Arab foundations, primarily in the Gulf states, drew models and criteria from the handful of international trusts with offices in the Middle East, such as the Ford Foundation and German Heinrich Böll Foundation.[46]

Western foundations have also helped mainstream a number of new consensus goals for giving in the region that are also in keeping with liberal principles. Consider the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), now standard criteria for Arab foundations. The SDGs are advantageous to liberals because they adopt social principles which Islamist and other conservative elements oppose, such as gender equality and liberal universalist definitions of social justice and quality education.[47] Arab liberals can also benefit from funding for less controversial SDGs — such as eradicating hunger and poverty — and more modern ones, such as "sustainable institutions" and "industry, innovation, and infrastructure," for which Arab opponents of liberalism have failed to deliver viable strategies, let alone results.

The advent of these new modalities of giving in the region stems from a combination of tragic circumstances and proactive effort. A recent study of philanthropy in the region traced the importation of nontraditional philanthropy to the first decade of the twenty-first century. It also found that the Arab Spring revo-

lutions introduced the concept of funding goals of a more political nature, such as democracy, equity, and social justice. The subsequent wave of counterrevolutionary crackdowns impeded local giving for the latter causes. The same period's accompanying catastrophes, however — civil war, mass refugee waves, and so on — enhanced the case for private giving in general, because Arab governments showed their inability to ameliorate the suffering on their own.[48]

As noted earlier, the counterrevolutionary crackdowns also disrupted Islamist social relief mechanisms and shut down or stigmatized religious charities with suspected ties to terrorism. In other words, just as individual Arab donors were feeling a heightened motivation to contribute, they found the sphere of available religious charities to be shrinking — an opening, in sum, for secular philanthropy with a more liberal orientation to begin to supplant the Islamist alternative. Meanwhile, nonreligious Gulf establishment foundations, such as the Emirates Foundation, grew in equity and prominence.[49] The period also saw Arab diaspora communities organize to help their brethren back home. In particular, Syrian expats in the United States and Europe built new financial structures to help victims of the war and improvised operational channels through which to move medicine and supplies.[50] In 2016, Saudi Arabia's newly released "Vision 2030" emphasized private philanthropy as essential to development goals. A year later, the UAE government designated a "year of giving." Viewed together, these developments, while born of great suffering, provide the beginnings of a base of indigenous support for those Arab liberals who, like Fouad, adopt an incrementalist rather than a revolutionary approach to change.

For this confluence of factors to substantially boost private giving, it will be necessary for Arab countries to introduce new regulatory mechanisms, as well as a more permissive legal structure for outside contributions to find their way in. Most Arab governments heavily restrict foreign funding for nonprofit

causes on the one hand, while offering no legal framework for indigenous philanthropists to create new charities or protect existing ones on the other. Few countries in the region offer even tax incentives to businesses or individuals to make a charitable donation.[51] Political engagement by foreign allies and Arab actors alike will be necessary to persuade Arab governments to address these problems. Public information campaigns will also be necessary within Arab societies to boost awareness and esteem for forms of philanthropy other than alms and lift the taboo on international assistance.

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In sum, recent years have seen greater leniency by some Arab security forces toward liberalism and its advocates, as well as new patterns of giving to liberal causes in the region by Arab and non-Arab philanthropists. As a result, a small number of Arab liberal politicians have won the latitude to raise their heads, cultivate grassroots support, and court benefactors. The examples cited above also show that American citizens and institutions have been among the elements that fostered these trends. They include PepsiCo, which helped liberal MP Mohamed Fouad deliver value to his electoral district in Egypt, as well as the Ford Foundation, which helped introduce secular philanthropic models to the region which some Arab donor groups went on to adopt. Americans of Syrian origin, for their part, gave money and supplies to save lives in their ancestral homeland. In doing so, they innovated new conduits for international civilian assistance, as well as weakened the longstanding Arab taboo on financial support from Western countries. Additionally, when Egypt's Ehab El-Kharrat made his sojourn to the West to acquire expertise and funding to build a drug rehab facility, he found some assistance in American institutions. This support helped Kharrat build notoriety and

moral clout in Egypt, which he proceeded to parlay into co-founding a liberal political party.

These meaningful American contributions notwithstanding, the United States has missed larger opportunities to support Arab liberal parties, reduce interference by Arab security sectors, and expand liberals' extremely small base of financial support. It missed these opportunities principally due to the enduring American policy of neutrality, described in the introduction, toward domestic politics in Arab lands. Consider the example of American support for political capacity building in the region. As noted previously, since the end of the Cold War, Arab branch offices of the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and other institutions have sought to impart the tools and techniques of liberal governance without spreading the underpinning values and ideals, let alone invest substantially in the locals who believe in them.[52] The training and education programming which these organizations convened for local activists, open to the spectrum of political streams in a given country, provided a modest benefit to Islamist and other participants who already enjoyed firm backing from elsewhere. For liberals, however, it provided little they could meaningfully use given only marginal material support and the state's repression of their activities. One can understand how this net outcome fostered the perception by Arab governments that the U.S. had adopted a policy of support for Islamists. The 2012 decision by Egyptian authorities to shut down branch offices of the NDI and IRI and arrest dozens of local staff reflects not only Cairo's penchant for scapegoating foreign actors, but also the authorities' misperception of American intent.

Consider as well the relationship between Arab armies and domestic security agencies on the one hand and their American counterparts on the other. The United States works closely with Saudi, Gulf, Egyptian, Moroccan, and other Arab security sectors, both bilaterally and through the North Atlantic Treaty Organiza-

tion (NATO). This activity mainly consists of joint military exercises and training, counterterrorism operations, intelligence coordination, and the sharing of equipment and weapons. In other words, it does not exceed the limited overlap between a democratic security sector, mandated purely to administer hard power and gather intelligence, and authoritarian security sectors, which also have their hand in education, religious indoctrination, media, the arts, and politics. Why should the United States not construe engagement with Arab security sectors as a larger opportunity to influence their work in each of these realms? The simplest answer is that it is not the job of American security officers to do so. But why not address this limitation by bringing American civilian expertise to bear for the sake of broadening the cooperation?

As to the question of funding for liberal movements, in other contexts, Washington has decisively applied its leverage to influence aspects of Arab financial governance. Witness the robust American campaign to enlist Arab states in an international clampdown on terror financing after the September 11, 2001 attacks. The effort included pressure and incentives that led those governments to change their laws and practices with regard to state and non-state support for designated terrorist organizations. It also featured the introduction of a financial "scarlet letter" — Section 311 of the Patriot Act — whereby banks which the U.S. Treasury Department deemed a "primary money-laundering concern" effectively forfeited the opportunity to do business with any American bank.[53] These measures reflect the resolve of the U.S. government, backed by American public opinion and international solidarity, to counter the scourge of terrorism after one of the darkest moments in the country's history. As the introduction also noted, the war on Al-Qaeda did not include a campaign to empower an Arab political alternative to the Al-Qaeda vision. To do so would have called for a flip side to the financial facet of the war on terror: demand new Arab laws

and regulatory structures to enable international support for Arab liberal parties and encourage indigenous philanthropy for the same groups. Such a campaign would have negated American development endowments' policy of neutrality in Arab domestic politics. But it also would have helped brave liberal actors spread hope and a galvanizing vision — after decades of extremism and authoritarian domination and amid new waves of war and suffering.

If the United States is to reverse the long trend of missed opportunity in these three sectors — as in all of the nine sectors examined in this study — the highest levels of American leadership must resolve to do so. Simply put, White House and Congressional leadership must designate support for Arab liberals an American policy priority. Such a determination would initiate a demand signal that serves, for example, to compel the National Endowment for Democracy, which funds overseas political development initiatives, to adopt a new focus on Arab liberal empowerment. This determination should also mandate the American security sector to broaden its engagement with Arab armies, intelligence services, and police to help clear the cultural and political impediments to Arab liberal movement building. The same demand signal would be heard as well by the Senate and House appropriations committees, American lending institutions, and economic and trade representations in the region. Each of these bodies can help press for the Arab legal, regulatory, and tax reforms that boost financial support for Arab liberals and their causes by fostering indigenous liberal philanthropy and clearing obstacles to international funding.

At the same time, this study has shown that while only the U.S. government can set in motion these crucial aspects of the effort, it falls on American civilians and non-government institu-

tions to manage the brunt of the engagement — through sustained effort with their Arab counterparts, forged and nurtured sector by sector. Such connectivity would need to reach a considerably greater magnitude than its current level. It would hearken back to a time in American statecraft, still within living memory, when the line between government and civil sectors was perforated for the sake of the mission — and divides within American society were bridged for the sake of victory.

# CONCLUSION

This book opened by making the case for a new American strategy to address the conflicts and challenges facing Arab societies in their quest for security, stability, and peace. The case rests on the presence of a critical mass of Arab civic actors, spanning the region, who embrace liberal principles and aspire to spread and consolidate them in state and society alike. They share the view that the values of equity, tolerance, and civil deliberation, together with rule of law principles, need to be instilled in their respective environments. In pursuit of their ambitions, Arab liberals seek international assistance and partnership from foreign peers in their respective fields. Americans in a range of sectors have the opportunity to respond to this demand by providing the help and advantages Arab liberals seek, thereby serving to empower them. A concerted American commitment to doing so, entailing sustained coordination between the U.S. government and American civil sectors, would amount to a revival of "competitive soft power" as a key facet of American foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa.

The seven chapters that followed presented research to support the launch of such a venture: an overview of the field of

opportunity for competitive engagement in Arab lands, sector by sector and across the region. The research identified some of the major trends in Arab liberal activity, the differing types of efforts now underway to promote change, their prospects and challenges, the extent of American involvement thus far, and opportunities for Americans to play a more expansive role.

The findings may be summarized as follows:

## INTERFAITH INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE RECONCILIATION AND TOLERANCE IN THE FACE OF EXTREMISM

Arab countries presently harbor hundreds of inter-religious dialogue ventures, both large and small, sharing the aspiration to advance tolerance and acceptance of the "other." Some receive establishment backing, others face government-led campaigns to suppress them, and the rest simply toil in isolation, neither suffering interference nor enjoying support. These diverse initiatives emerged from a patchwork of advantages bestowed by ruling elites, conferred by religious institutions, or blazed by brave individuals. They include networks of reform-minded Muslim clerics that formed under the patronage of Arab republican presidents but lost their support after the rulers lost their thrones. They also include new religious dialogue initiatives backed by Gulf monarchs and princes whose power and influence have grown. Collectively, the ventures have the potential to mitigate identity-based conflict, whether within a fractured country or among feuding states. In fostering a public mindset of coexistence, moreover, they can help insulate the region's young people from extremist overtures.

The United States and its people have already helped advance a number of these indigenous efforts. Among their contributions thus far, Americans helped conceptualize a religious dialogue initiative in Amman which the monarchy itself went on to

formally adopt and enshrine. Americans have helped safeguard Lebanese interfaith efforts in the face of Iranian ideological pressure to weaken them. On the government-to-government level, American diplomatic engagement with Saudi officials helped persuade Riyadh to build its own center for national and religious dialogue after the September 11, 2001 attacks. In these and other efforts, American civil society's own models of inter-religious engagement — from the Jewish-Catholic dialogue initiatives of the 1960s to the Muslim-Jewish-Christian initiatives of the 1990s — have provided a template for Americans as they sought to chart a course for similar work in the Arab region. They also provided inspiration to homegrown Arab efforts in which Americans played no direct role.

The potential to build on these beginnings remains vastly underutilized. To help strengthen the region's faith-based dialogue initiatives more deeply and prolifically, Americans need to map the landscape, seek out and befriend the most promising actors, build bridges between interfaith practitioners within the United States and their counterparts in the region, and, where called for, tap the power of state-to-state diplomacy to overcome impediments to people-to-people engagement.

## ORGANIZED LABOR AS A BULWARK OF EGALITARIANISM

Another substantial group of liberal actors drive some of the region's more independent labor unions. They aspire to advance economic justice and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of gender or sect. In 2018 and 2019, hundreds of these figures emerged to lead mass demonstrations in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan. Their movements received considerably less attention in the West than the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011-'12, yet delivered more positive outcomes. In Algeria and Sudan, for example, labor protestors not only forced the resignation of long-

reigning autocrats but also espoused an inclusive, liberal vision for the future, in marked contrast to the Islamist groups that dominated the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Among the demonstrators in Iraq and Lebanon, unionists denounced economic inequality and corruption on the one hand and Iranian proxy domination of their countries on the other, drawing an explicit link between the two. Adopting reasonable economic goals, a constructive social agenda, and a political outlook that overlaps considerably with consensus U.S. foreign policy goals, these figures present an excellent opportunity for partnership.

American labor, for its part, boasts a distinguished history of support for trade unions, their ideals, and their political struggles overseas — including in Arab countries, notably amid the struggle against European colonialism by the peoples of the Maghreb. Over the past 25 years, however, this commitment has atrophied. The Left flank of the American union movement moreover, has stigmatized the idea of foreign interventionism as a matter of principle. Thus the unions no longer invest their own resources in foreign engagement to any substantial degree. The remnants of the movement's overseas activity, now housed in a Washington nonprofit funded mainly by the U.S. government, avoid political action, adopting a primary focus on countering "the unchecked power of multinational corporations." Yet regardless of this shift, the willingness on the part of Arab liberal unionists to partner with outsiders in campaigns of political action continues to grow. This writer experienced their enthusiasm firsthand in 2020, when working with young veterans of the 2018 anti-Bashir demonstrations to build grassroots civil support for a Sudanese-Israeli peace accord.

Whereas growing American support for Arab inter-religious dialogue is a matter of further investment in a promising trend, the return of American labor support for its Arab counterparts' political struggles would entail the *reversal* of a decades-old trend. American labor would need to recover its interventionist spirit,

reimagine its own foreign policy toward the region, and vigorously pursue the new policy. Such a shift would require enormous political will within the American labor community.

## EDUCATION REFORM TO ADVANCE CRITICAL THINKING AND A MINDSET OF RAPPROCHEMENT

A third major field of opportunity for Americans to engage Arab reformists lies in the education sector. From North Africa to the Gulf, indigenous liberals share the aspiration to overcome the legacy of authoritarian pedagogy — that is, generations of rote learning that instilled quiescence and sowed division. Liberals' agenda calls for teaching children the high-level skills of analysis, evaluation, and critical thinking, as well as replacing old, bigoted curricula with a message of pluralism and coexistence. Since the 1990s, national school systems in some of the largest Arab countries proved resistant to successive efforts at such reform. As a result, reform-minded establishment figures in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and elsewhere created nongovernment initiatives aiming to begin to improve the caliber of teaching more indirectly, through pilot partnerships with government schools. Maverick educational entrepreneurs, meanwhile, created online platforms designed to circumvent the public school system and reach young Arab learners directly. These efforts, while promising, remain diffuse, and some of the most creative efforts to catalyze reform have not garnered Arab establishment support.

In 2020, the U.S.-brokered Arab-Israeli "Abraham Accords" opened the possibility of a new departure in Arab education reform, at least with respect to the three Arab countries that joined the framework in signing treaties with Israel. In support of a "peace between peoples," the UAE has already revised curricula about Jews and Israel and moved to broker partnerships with Israeli educational institutions. In doing so, it has paved the way for Israeli education specialists who have spent decades moni-

toring Arab textbook content to engage their Arab counterparts programmatically for the first time.

Whereas some Arab establishments have been moving toward liberal education reform, others, such as Algeria, have responded to the pressure of domestic unrest by introducing new, counter-revolutionary education programs that double down on militaristic pedagogy. In doing so, they have also moved to suppress liberalizing trends. Yet in Iraq, liberals have dared to challenge the chauvinist messaging of Iranian Shi'ite militias by publishing new, humanistic textbooks about Iraq's multi-denominational past.

The involvement of an American rabbi in one of the Iraqi educational reform initiatives reflects the potential of American civil society to help bridge gaps in connectivity among the region's educators. On a civil level, Americans can spread the tools and techniques of their country's own liberal education reform initiatives in consort with Arab liberals. They can support and empower the most promising independent Arab ventures, and broker new relationships between them and U.S.-allied Arab establishments. They can also play a bridge-building role in helping to connect Israeli voices to Arab reformists beyond the circle of "Abraham Accords" states, working together to overcome generations of Arab pedagogy rooted in the use of Israel, its people, and Jews generally as a foil.

## ARAB THINK TANKS AS AN ENGINE OF DEVELOPMENT

A fourth burgeoning civil sector — the realm of Arab think tanks — presents its own potential for engagement and progress. As with their equivalents in any part of the world, Arab think tanks can serve as a hub for "track two" discussions to resolve the region's conflicts. They can inform local policies, raise public awareness of national challenges and potential solutions, and

professionalize young researchers who may go on to serve in government. They can also provide a perch for Americans who seek to map an Arab country's field of competitive engagement in other sectors. Alas, most Arab think tanks are starved for funding. They lack analytical autonomy in most authoritarian environments and strain to operate safely in countries wracked by civil war. Among the ones that overcome these challenges to operate with a modicum of continuity and intellectual latitude, their scope of inquiry remains limited, for the most part, to defense and international affairs. Environmental policy, social policy, and other important areas of study lack investment and focus.

To engage this field, American think tank professionals will need to overcome a legacy of distrust within the region, in addition to various imbalances in the present relationship between their own institutions and Arab counterparts. Several Arab governments still promulgate conspiracy theories about American and other Western powers, in which think tanks appear often as an alleged tool of Western hegemony in the region. Add to this problem the claim of exploitation: some Arab think tanks accuse Western institutions of farming out "wholesale research" for little pay, while investing little in Arab think tanks' development. Indeed, operational funding for Arab think tanks has been assigned a very low priority in most American grant-making institutions that support development projects in Arab countries. To the contrary, the flow of financial capital has gone primarily in the opposite direction: tens of millions of dollars in support for Washington think tanks, emanating from the region's oil-rich states, does more to enrich the American side of the industry than empower its Arab equivalent.

To chart a new course in American engagement of Arab think tanks, Americans can challenge conspiratorial rhetoric on the subject in Arab lands by coordinating with local advocates of partnership. In talks with Gulf donors to American think tanks,

they can offer to expand the relationship to include capacity building for policy institutions within the region. Meanwhile, greater American appreciation for the role Arab think tanks can play in fostering indigenous reform and development can inspire American grant-making institutions to assign the field a higher priority.

## ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR NEW NORMS

A separate realm in which Arab liberals have been working to catalyze social change — entertainment media — has shown potential to spread universal values and norms to a mass audience through storytelling on stage and screen. In Saudi Arabia, the television and radio juggernaut MBC has enabled reform-minded writers and actors to stigmatize extremism through comedy and drama. In Egypt, new TV miniseries serve to resurrect memories of the country's departed Jewish community, take aim at government corruption and malfeasance, and erode support for Islamist groups. Whereas these two countries' entertainment industries reach audiences region-wide, their equivalents in other Arab countries reach primarily domestic audiences. With respect to social messaging, this narrower purview has enabled local media to engage the specific ills of those societies more intimately. Thus a celebrated Bahraini remake of *Romeo and Juliet* starred Sunni and Shi'ite star-crossed lovers, reflecting the screenwriter's yearning to reconcile the two communities within the country. In Algeria, liberal filmmakers seek to enrich historical memory about the country's liberation war and subsequent civil war, to foster introspection and a mindset of reconciliation — between Algeria and its former French occupiers, and among feuding factions within the country.

A rising school of thought in the United States calls for supporting and expanding such initiatives through American-

Arab media partnerships. The theory holds that American assistance to indigenous, purpose-driven media offers a more cost-effective and sustainable path to engage Arab public discussions than the long-reigning alternative: U.S.-funded Arabic broadcasting. America Abroad Media in Washington, a leading proponent of the "partnership approach," has co-produced programming on some of the largest Arab networks and connected seasoned Hollywood talent to aspiring Arab writers and producers through mentorship programs. Through a nascent investment arm, the organization's principals have begun to invest in Arab feature films. Despite its successes, however, the partnership approach wins only a fraction of the U.S. government's allocations for "public diplomacy" in the Arab world. The field of engagement for those the approach's chief actors, moreover, remains limited to the region's more open, globalized societies.

To overcome these constraints, American proponents of the partnership approach will need to lobby Congress to allocate more of its existing public diplomacy expenditures to such ventures. They will need to grow their professional network of Arab liberal entertainment talent, deepening their relationship with the region's entertainment capitals and widening their reach into countries with more niche audiences. In most Arab countries, restrictions on foreign partnership with local media and bureaucratic hassles for film production remain a hindrance. The U.S. government can lobby its Arab counterparts to ameliorate these problems.

## A CULTURAL APPROACH TO PROMOTE THE RULE OF LAW

Three of the five sectors described thus far — media, education, and religious leadership — jointly amount, in the minds of some Arab liberals, to the foundation of a holistic "cultural approach"

to reform. These actors share a view, also espoused by a movement of reformists in the U.S., southern Europe, Latin America, and Hong Kong, that liberal institutional building requires a culture supportive of the underpinning values, and organized efforts to foster such a culture have the potential to succeed. A prominent example of such work which has gained traction on three continents, called the "culture of lawfulness," aims to persuade the majority of a given population to embrace, advocate, and model rule of law principles. The concept of the culture of lawfulness was altogether absent from Arab public discussions only 15 years ago. Today, a standing "Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness" in the UAE drives media, educational, and religious initiatives in support of the rule of law countrywide. Smaller projects adopting the same concept and approach have launched in Kuwait, Oman, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, and Libya.

This writer attests, from personal experience, not only to the resonance of the culture of lawfulness methodology in Arab countries, but also to the role an American effort has played in advancing it. The UAE's Bureau of the Culture of Lawfulness owes its inception to a series of Arab educational seminars organized by a Washington-based nonprofit, the National Strategy Information Center, for which the author managed Middle East operations. The leader of the UAE bureau, in turn, draws a direct line of causality from his own efforts to spread the methodology in Kuwait and Oman to the start of culture of lawfulness ventures in those countries. Thus the U.S. initiative can point to an ongoing ripple effect of its work. Growing such an effort, however, comes with numerous dilemmas and tradeoffs which reflect the inherent difficulty of promoting liberalism in Arab authoritarian environments. On the one hand, the region's more benign autocrats welcome some essential principles of the rule of law — and an effort to inculcate the population to embrace them — as a means to lessen the burden on police and courts and reduce corrupt practices that weaken the national economy. On

the other, they reject the proposition that citizens should have the power to amend laws through an elected legislature, as that would enable the population to lawfully weaken or even cancel the ruler's authority.

The tension between the advantages and disadvantages of engaging autocrats in such an effort defines the divide in Arab countries between "liberal incrementalists," who favor gradual progress in consort with the authorities, and other liberals who adopt the revolutionary option. Americans, in weighing the two approaches, may be similarly divided. But it is better for different schools of engagement to emerge and pursue their respective strategies than to allow ambivalence to inhibit action.

## A SAFER SPACE AND GROWING BASE FOR LIBERAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

In some Arab environments, a separate trio of sectors which historically collided to liberals' detriment shows promise of realigning to liberals' advantage: political parties, security sectors, and philanthropy. Where it has long been the job of Arab intelligence services and police to throttle liberal activism, in some Arab countries the same institutions have begun to foster a social and security environment that enables it. In a region where local donors generously supported Islamists through alms while liberals faced calumny and retribution for receiving scraps of foreign funding, the first sprouts of liberal philanthropy have begun to emerge, and the stigma of Western funding is eroding. This opening arrives in the face of urgent need: cascading humanitarian emergencies have arrived just as some Arab states have dismantled Islamist social welfare structures that used to provide for millions of poor people across the region. In this unprecedented situation, liberals enjoy an opportunity to displace these structures with their own parties and movements, and in so doing forge a new relationship with Arab majorities. A

small number of liberal actors have seized the opportunity, courted patrons, and delivered value to the population.

Assorted American actors played a role in fostering this progress. Multinational companies fueled several of the public service initiatives liberals waged. These companies, in addition to some American foundations, brought new concepts of secular philanthropy to the region, grounded in liberal universalist principles, which several nascent Arab foundations emulated. Meanwhile, on the grassroots level, Syrian Americans labored to alleviate the suffering of their ravaged and displaced brethren back home. They forged unlikely partnerships to channel money and supplies into Syria, and brought a new, benevolent meaning to the concept of "foreign funding," so long reviled in the region. Despite these heartening trends, however, greater needs which the U.S. government and civil sectors are uniquely positioned to fill remain unaddressed. American-Arab security cooperation has not done little to enhance the state's opening toward liberals as a tolerated non-state actor, though much is needed. American institutions mandated to promote political development overseas, though committed to liberal principles, have seldom sponsored liberal actors. Nor has the leverage of American lending, appropriations, or international financial regulation been brought to bear in clearing obstacles to foreign funding or incentivizing indigenous liberal philanthropy.

The daunting mission to address these shortcomings reflects the larger problem at issue for all of the sectors examined in this study: the dormancy of American competitive engagement in Arab lands.

In sum, opportunities for meaningful engagement abound, and some Americans have already begun to assist Arab liberals in each of the major fields in which they work. But to scale the

assistance enough to strengthen the impact of Arab liberals seismically, four major shifts will be required on the American side. First, the U.S. government must designate support for Arab liberals a strategic policy priority. Second, it must dust off, reimagine, and revive its distinguished tradition of expeditionary diplomacy in ideologically contested foreign environments. These two shifts will require enormous political will, sustained by successive administrations and supported by staunch advocacy on the part of American opinion leaders and policy voices.

Third, an organized process of outreach and engagement with American civil society will be necessary. Part of this effort involves raising awareness of America's remarkable history of competitive engagement overseas — particularly among today's students and young professionals — and inspiring them to take part in the revival. This educational campaign would also address the intellectual stigma disparaging competitive engagement as a form of "cultural imperialism," and refute the misrepresentation of Arab liberals as "inauthentic" or unwanted in their region.[1]

Finally, having fostered a new wave of American enthusiasm for the practice, supporters of a competitive soft power revival will need to prepare a generation of Americans to actually do it. "Preparation" means cultural, linguistic, and operational training; an organizational framework for the effort; and a sustained financial commitment to match the trainees' determination.

## REIMAGINING EXPEDITIONARY DIPLOMACY IN ARAB ENVIRONMENTS

As noted in the introduction, the term "expeditionary diplomacy" refers here to the craft of deploying to a foreign environment, seeking out like-minded local actors, and finding ways to strengthen their hand. Expeditionary diplomats are network builders who identify an opportunity to promote positive change, devise a plan to do so, and stitch together its component parts —

only to move on to a new opportunity and a new set of actors. Bilingual and bicultural, they are idealistic yet shrewd; tethered to their cause yet agile in its service.[2]

In a government context, expeditionary diplomats have served with distinction in vulnerable countries torn by war. The term has often been used to refer to a discrete, field-level diplomatic effort conjoined to military intervention. One remarkable example, the late U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, deployed to Libya in 2011 as the Obama Administration's liaison to the country's anti-Qadhafi rebels. Leveraging money, supplies, and bonds of trust, he managed to unite the country's fractious opposition into the ground force that proceeded to fight, under NATO air cover, and bring down the regime. Perhaps the quintessential example of an expeditionary diplomat in the military realm, British government operative T.E. Lawrence, deployed to the Hijaz region of present-day Saudi Arabia during the First World War. As liaison to the Arab forces of the nascent Arab Kingdom of Hejaz, he helped unify, train, and equip the fighting forces in their war of independence from the Ottoman Empire. Through this work, he contributed to the founding of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Lawrence, like Stevens, was a charismatic, highly intelligent official with a generalist background. In an atomized society torn by civil strife, such a person could bring disparate elements of the population together on the strength of his skills as a connector and negotiator among locals. Lawrence, like others of his kind, built fighting coalitions to achieve political outcomes.

Though the effort to forge civil engagement for the sake of liberal reform differs considerably, many of the dangers Lawrence faced apply in the region's war-torn environments today. To build a new cadre of expeditionary diplomats, the U.S. government must not only train them but also create a career path for them. That is, it must offer them continuity of mission, space and resources in each of the region's embassies, and oppor-

tunities for promotion alongside peers who practice the more common forms of diplomacy. The objective of promoting incremental liberal reform in established, largely urban autocracies — as opposed to a militarily contested environment — requires not only expeditionary diplomatic skills but also experience in the civil sectors where American-Arab partnership is called for.

### *CONCEPTUAL ADJUSTMENTS: DIVIDING THE EXPEDITIONARY FUNCTION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT OFFICERS AND CIVILIANS*

Expeditionary diplomats employed by the U.S. government and attached to U.S. embassies across the Arab region can play a crucial role in much of the sector-by-sector cooperation prescribed above. Myriad opportunities for reform involve accommodations with Arab governments. To achieve such concessions, state-to-state engagement and cooperation will prove essential. For example, only U.S. government officials can broker the expansion of cooperation with an Arab security sector beyond kinetic operations and terrorism investigations into the realm of social policy. Meanwhile, in various civil sectors which fall mostly under the authority of government ministries — school systems, for example — the U.S. government brings added clout. To pursue this example, some Arab education ministries benefit directly from American foreign aid. Expeditionary diplomats seeking to strengthen educational reformists within government schools can apply this leverage to the process.

In other sectors, however, a new generation of expeditionary diplomats would serve more effectively in a civilian rather than a government capacity, under the rubric of social entrepreneurship rather than diplomacy. Call them "expeditionary entrepreneurs." The principal reason is the paranoia associated with any partnership between locals in an Arab country and officials of a foreign government. While an American civilian seeking to partner with

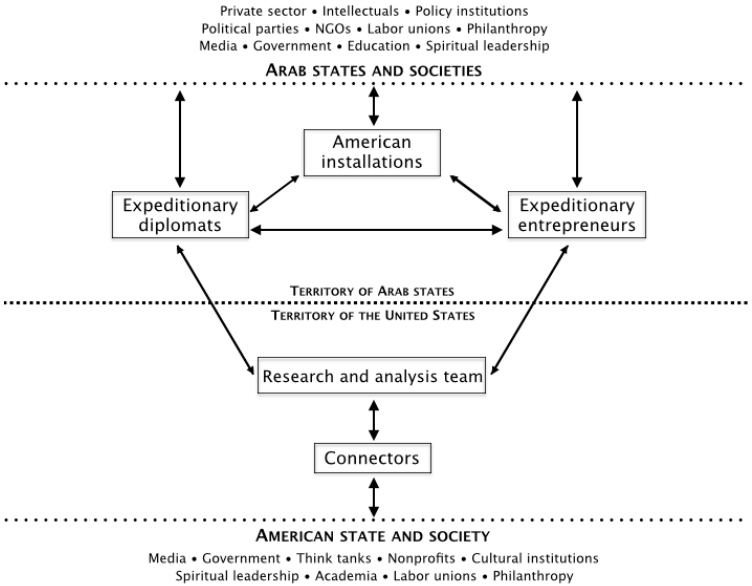
Arab counterparts will inevitably provoke some suspicion as well, the ability to honestly represent herself forthrightly as a non-state actor is a significant mitigating factor. Given the differing potential roles of government as well as non-government workers, moreover, the two naturally complement one another and should coordinate their work. Both varieties can also boost their strengths by coordinating with American nongovernment installations in a given Arab country — notably, American companies and NGOs — in addition to the U.S. Embassy.

### *ORGANIZATIONAL ADJUSTMENTS: A STANDING AMERICAN HUB FOR RESEARCH, MAPPING, AND CONNECTIVITY*

Both the diplomat and the entrepreneur require assistance from home. A standing bilingual research and analysis team, likely based in the United States, would maintain contact with them, in part to debrief them on the opportunities they are discovering in the field. This team would also play the vital role of tapping American institutions that can provide assistance, advice, or personnel to on-the-ground efforts. By way of example, drawing from personal experience, in 2014 I encountered an official in an Arab education ministry who had been tasked to design a curriculum for mixed-sect classrooms. The course would help the children identify and acknowledge the chauvinist strain in their upbringing, trace its effects on the society, and discover the means to overcome it. The official spoke no English and had little access to foreign models from which to draw ideas. Such are the circumstances in which the chance to promote change in an Arab country may suddenly — and briefly — appear. A curriculum along similar lines had been developed by an American nonprofit, specifically for mixed-race public schools. Were an expeditionary diplomat or entrepreneur to encounter the Arab education ministry official, it would fall on the research and analysis

team to forge a connection with the relevant American institution, and facilitate the channeling of its expertise into the region.

The following conceptual diagram outlines the envisioned spread of actors and their interrelationships:




The research cadre can play an additional vital role. Through its contact with expeditionary diplomats and expeditionary entrepreneurs across the region, it can trace the impact of their projects, the synergies among them, and the potential for replication of a given success. Once one Arab country has successfully introduced coursework on sectarian reconciliation in a given school or school district, the question becomes where and how to export it to other countries. The chapter on Arab education systems, for example, described how YouTube videos on critical thinking posted by Egypt's "Tahrir Academy" had inspired the Saudi project "Asfar" — demonstrating that such cross-border emulations sometimes occur spontaneously. A deliberate,

systematic effort to forge such connections would accelerate the spread of successful models.

To reiterate, with respect to the professional profile of the "expeditionary diplomat" — or his non-government counterpart — there is an important place for the nimble generalist, adept at thinking across disciplines and cultures. But in a sophisticated urban environment, special skills are also necessary. To effectively engage Arab entertainment media, for example, an expeditionary entrepreneur would need to understand the nature and business of media production — as well as the nature of Arab entertainment content and its red lines — well enough to contribute to a brainstorming session with Arab screenwriters and producers. The need for specialists in addition to generalists makes it necessary to exert special efforts to recruit and train Americans from the gamut of civil sectors to join the effort.

### *INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENTS: NEGOTIATING A SPACE FOR EXPEDITIONARY DIPLOMATS AND ENTREPRENEURS TO OPERATE FREELY ON ARAB TERRITORY*

The study has highlighted the inherent difficulty of engaging institutions and liberal actors on the ground in any Arab country. For example, the challenge of functioning freely was underscored by the eviction of 19 American NGOs from Cairo in 2012, and the media conditioning of Algerians to distrust foreigners generally. But with some U.S.-allied Arab governments, it may nonetheless be possible to negotiate access to sectors of society and state, on the basis of shared domestic and regional goals and a clearly delineated agenda of support for incremental, rather than revolutionary, reform. At a time of heightened concern in U.S.-allied Arab capitals that the United States will continue to reduce its military and economic commitments to the region, Americans enjoy greater leverage with these governments. In some cases,

moreover, the potential value of the soft power engagement is itself a form of leverage. Consider that Cairo's quest for foreign investment in its film industry presents the opening to a bilateral discussion about what changes in Egypt would be needed in order to attract such investment. These include anti-corruption measures and and a serious effort to instill rule of law principles so as to safeguard foreign investment.

As noted in the introduction, during the Cold War, American expeditionary diplomats enjoyed the latitude to operate freely on the soil of America's European allies, due to the mutual understanding that such American political action served a common interest. Despite the comparatively fraught nature of U.S.-Arab relations, both sides similarly share common goals. It is possible, through shrewd American diplomacy, to negotiate a space in the region for American expeditionary diplomats and expeditionary entrepreneurs to operate without obstruction, on the basis of an agreed-upon, clearly delineated mandate.

As American power must be applied to negotiate freedom of action for its own citizens in the region, it must also serve to protect the Arab liberals with whom Americans partner. There is a further means by which the United States can do so: elevate Arab liberals in the United States. Where an Arab liberal, ensconced within the country's institutions and supportive of incremental reform, has tangibly benefited her society, Americans should work especially hard to confer recognition of her achievements — and adopt a preference for her as an interlocutor and sounding board on matters that concern her country. Doing so raises her stature and sends a message to the ruler. Liberal incrementalists are rarely as well known to outsiders as the more strident opposition figures who run afoul of the authorities. One must proactively seek them out and amplify their voices both at home and abroad.

## ENLISTING AMERICAN CIVILIANS IN THE CAUSE

As suggested in the introduction, the case for a competitive soft power revival in the United States has not been made widely, yet holds the promise of winning broad support. As a form of intervention, it costs pennies on the dollar relative to foreign military entanglement and incurs a vastly lower toll in human life. Though its effects take considerable time to manifest, its purpose and potential — improve Arab political outcomes so as to reduce the likelihood of future conflict, or enhance the political conditions for a future American victory — can win support across the American political spectrum. As long as the U.S. effectively cedes the Arab sociopolitical sphere to hostile powers, it will continuously face the need to send soldiers back into harm's way. This ongoing trend should matter to most Americans, as they and successive U.S. administrations have shown a desire to reduce military commitments overseas.

Making the case for adopting competitive soft power as a strategic policy priority means promoting a new set of ideas to a mass American audience. It is a substantial undertaking, aiming for nothing less than a change in conventional thinking about foreign policy and a transformation in Americans' outlook toward the world. In some ways, the "cultural approach" which chapter six described — coordinated effort among schools, media, and moral and spiritual leaders to instill a set of values — applies as much to this challenge within the United States as to reform efforts in the Arab region. New American educational curricula must be developed in high school, college, and graduate programs about the history of expeditionary diplomacy and its important role in the country's foreign policy. Pundits, columnists, talkshow hosts, and screenwriters must be enlisted to reinforce the same ideas through their work. Faith leaders in churches, synagogues, and mosques must make the moral case for

Americans to contribute personally to the betterment of Arab societies.

This process of inculcation would develop over a generation. In the meantime, supporters of a competitive soft power revival need not and must not wait to begin deploying expeditionary diplomats and entrepreneurs to the field. American society already harbors enough qualified, motivated young and mid-career professionals to form the beginnings of an expeditionary cadre for the Arab region. Recruiting, training, and deploying them as swiftly as possible will mark only the beginning of a longterm process, but will do triple duty in advancing it. First, such a cadre can bring home early success stories, to be shared with media, educators, and spiritual and moral leaders. In doing so, they can show the public that competitive engagement is not an abstract theory, nor the relic of a bygone age, but an existing practice with demonstrable results. Second, their success can grow support within government for the new practice. As with any innovation in the civil service, it will encounter resistance which must be overcome, in part, by piloting the practice and proving its value. Third, the nascent cadre provides an opportunity to hone the practice, on a relatively small scale, ahead of a more substantial and costly enterprise.

In seeking out recruits to undertake such an effort, supporters of a competitive soft power revival will find a spread of American social trends that have engendered suitable candidates. Through increased immigration from the Middle East and North Africa in the late twentieth century, a generation of Arab Americans have come of age between the ethos of Arab expats and the ambient American culture. Those among them who learned some Arabic from their parents then improved it in college now harbor the bilingual, bicultural expertise which the mission calls for. Nor were they alone in studying the language. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, enrollment in Arabic and Islamic studies increased dramatically nationwide. Among the subset of these

students who went on to travel in the region and acquire fluency in the language, some still use it in government, academic, policy, or business careers, while others have pursued other paths unrelated to the region. For the former category, expeditionary diplomacy or entrepreneurship amounts to an intriguing lateral move within their field. For the latter category, the combination of language and area knowledge on the one hand and a separate professional skill set on the other provides an excellent basis to partner with Arab counterparts in their respective civil sectors.

Nor are Arab Americans the only ethnic strand with a special affinity, proclivity, and capacity to engage the region. Young Jewish Americans, including many with roots in Arab countries, are coming of age amid a historic shift in the region toward acceptance of their ethnicity and faith. As Israelis now enjoy the freedom to travel and forge partnerships in "Abraham Accords states," Jewish Americans, unrestricted by the travel ban on Israelis that persists in most Arab countries, can spend time and make friends almost anywhere.

In addition to American Arabs and Jews, consider the many American citizens who identify with a Christian missionary tradition, whether by family legacy or purely in spirit. Among Evangelicals in the United States, hundreds now staff charitable and relief organizations, such as Samaritan's Purse, which are active across the Arab region. Through their experiences on the ground, they have already acquired many of the skills an expeditionary diplomat or entrepreneur will need. Recall as well the multigenerational American Protestant missionary movement in the Levant and Egypt, to which Arabs owe some of the most important universities and hospitals in the region. A small number of Americans trace their roots to that storied community and have carried the torch through work in foreign policy, academia, and other realms. A larger number connect to it in other ways. For example, as noted in chapters one and four, the legacy of institutions such as the American University of Beirut and

American University of Cairo includes a vast network of alumni, faculty, and administrators who have joined the same continuum of engagement. And when in the 1990s, dozens of African American churches joined in the struggle against slavery in Sudan, they added a new, operational facet to the feeling of kinship with the peoples of Africa: a sense of mission to right present-day wrongs. Add to these African American Christians those African American converts to Islam — together with their offspring — who have cultivated an attachment to the region rooted in faith.

## AN ORGANIZATIONAL HUB

Viewed together, the above prescriptions amount to an endeavor spanning continents, disciplines, institutions, and myriad lines of effort. In the Middle East and North Africa, they call for new priorities in American diplomacy and considerably greater connectivity between American citizens and Arab peoples. But for these shifts even to become feasible requires efforts no less daunting within the United States. The envisioned public outreach campaign, from publishing to broadcasting to public service announcements, entails organizing experts to develop foundational content and apply it to current affairs, and enlisting media and advertising specialists to break down the ideas and market them to many outlets. The envisioned shifts in government, from new laws to new executive policies, means lobbying officials at Foggy Bottom, the White House, and the halls of Congress. Scholars, teachers, and teacher trainers must work together to develop the requisite curricula and coursework, then persuade learning institutions, from high schools to graduate schools, to adopt them, amid pushback. Recruitment and training for expeditionary diplomats and entrepreneurs necessitates preparation, public outreach, and its own educational endeavor. The envisioned research and analysis team, for their part, will need to build a living map of the competitive landscape for soft

power in Arab countries. Doing so, in consort with scouts across the region, may also require technological innovation. Guidance for all this work, in turn, calls for the participation of seasoned expeditionary diplomats from the Cold War years, as well as younger figures with Middle East expertise to learn from these senior practitioners and adapt their lessons for a very different time and place. The many staffers which these ventures call for require funding.

Supporters of such an effort may be found in each of the sectors and institutions referred to above. Some presently-serving diplomats have served in an expeditionary capacity, or fondly remember those who did. Others who have departed government have since voiced support for competitive soft power in their writings and statements.[3] At the National Endowment for Democracy, the National Democratic Institute, and International Republican Institute, some share the view that the reigning stance of neutrality toward Arab domestic politics serves neither American nor Arab interests whereas a new strategy of support for the region's liberals would serve both. In the academy, though many scholars deride competitive engagement as a form of cultural imperialism, a rising tide among their peers views this critique as crude, censorious, and part of a larger movement of dogma that stifles diverging points of view.

As to the halls of Congress, the 2012 death of J. Christopher Stevens in Benghazi provoked diverse responses in the highly partisan hearing about the tragedy that followed. On the one hand, some voices adopted a "safety first" response, calling for heightened security for U.S. embassies in Arab lands and severe curtailments on the movement of diplomats beyond their walls. In doing so, an observer wrote, they also questioned "whether we should, in fact, even be in 'those places.'"[4] But others welcomed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remark at the hearing that "retreat from the world is not an option."[5] Following the discussion, moreover, veteran policymaker Anthony Cordesman

responded by publishing a strong case for more expeditionary diplomats to follow in Stevens's footsteps. "It is time we come to grips with the world we actually live in," he wrote.

> We can't deal with the political upheavals in a single Arab country, the impact of transition in Afghanistan, the internal struggle for the future of Islam, [or] energy and trade security … by speeches in the U.S., quick visits by senior U.S. officials, outside radio and TV programs, and empty rhetoric about taking stronger stands or exporting U.S. values. … We need men and women on the scene who accept the realities on the ground in the countries they operate in. … The cost of properly funded expeditionary diplomacy — people, military and civil aid funds, and fully funded security efforts — is going to be cheaper even on a global level than losing contact and U.S. influence in a single country like Egypt, or being unprepared to deal with the flow of events in a nation like Syria or Iraq.[6]

Thus proponents of competitive engagement do not lack for sympathy. These pockets of support are outnumbered and diffuse, however, and have not come together as a purpose-driven community. To mount a concerted push against groupthink within their respective institutions, they would require a sustenance of effort fueled by mutual reinforcement and outside support.

These circumstances call for the creation of a dedicated institutional home — an "action tank," beyond the realm of government, to coordinate and grow the campaign. Its staffers, spanning disciplines, would develop the foundational content for American educational and media activity and wage outreach to the range of civil sectors addressed in this study. They would lobby and educate decision-makers — in civil sectors as well as government — about the opportunities to promote liberal reform that await them in the region. They would train expeditionary talent

and raise money to help them pilot their practice in Arab lands. They would also host the research and analysis unit, and build and maintain the "living map."

The difficulty of realizing these goals, while enormous, is exceeded by the opportunities awaiting the United States should it pursue them — and the necessity of doing so, for the sake of American and international security and the betterment of a troubled region.

# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

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## 6. A CULTURAL APPROACH TO PROMOTE THE RULE OF LAW

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## 7. A SAFER SPACE AND GROWING BASE FOR LIBERAL MOVEMENT BUILDING

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## CONCLUSION

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