# Faith in Dialogue

## Bridging the Arab World's Interreligious Divides

Hundreds of interreligious engagement efforts have formed in Arab countries — including in wartorn lands, where sectarian fissures are the most in need of mending. The U.S. can and should do more to empower them.

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# Executive Summary

Arab countries now 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. 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.

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

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[1]Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pps. 1-18; Bassam Tibi, *Islam and Islamism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pps. 54-94

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 of 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

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[2] Saad Salloum, "Confronting Violence Through Dialogue: Iraq in the Post-ISIS Era," *Center for Peace Communications* website, June 1, 2020, https://www.peacecomms.org/interfaith-dialogue-1 (accessed May 10, 2020).

[3] "Al-Bayan al-Ta'sisi [Founding Statement]," *Masarat*, date unlisted, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3bzX0Du

[4] Saad Salloum (founder and president, Masarat) in discussion with author, Baghdad, May 6, 2020

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

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[5] For example, see this Masarat-organized workshop: "Mumathilu al-Aqaliyat al-Diniyyah Yutalibun Min Baghdad Bi-Damman Hurriyat al-Din Wal-Mu'taqad [Representatives of Religious Minorities Call on Baghdad to Guarantee Freedom of Religion and Conscience]", November 15, 2016, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3cuz45D

[6] Saad Salloum, "Confronting Violence Through Dialogue", *Ibid*.

[7] "Saad Salloum Awarded an International Prize for Religious Freedoms", *Masarat*, date not given, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2AkbtpW

[8] Saad Salloum in discussion with author, May 6, 2020

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

[9] Hyam Maccoby, "Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages" (New York: Liverpool University Press, 1993)

[10] Rabbi Josef Soloveitchik, "Crisis and Confrontation", *Tradition*, Issue 6.2 ( Spring-Summer 1964), accessed online: https://traditiononline.org/confrontation/, pps. 21-25

[11] *Al-Zaitounah,* June 6, 1992.

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

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[12] Yassine Mansouri (director, Direction Générale des Etudes et de la Documentation), in discussion with author, Nov. 21, 2007.

[13] Mansour Al-Nogaidan in conversation with the author, November 21, 2012.

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

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[14] Joseph Braude, "The UAE's Brotherhood Problem", *Al-Mesbar*, December 1, 2016, accessed online: https://mesbar.org/the-uaes-brotherhood-problem/

[15], "Middle East Failing to Protect Domestic Workers," *Human Rights Watch*, October 28, 2013, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2xW4lPI

[16] GulfAtheist. "Limadha Nahnu Mulhidun [Why We Are Atheists]." YouTube video, 10:40. March 23, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M85uFc55LAI; "Arabs and Atheism: Religious Discussions in the Arab Twittersphere", accessed online: https://arxiv.org/pdf/1908.07811.pdf

[17] https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/The_Rise_of_Muslim_Foreign_Fighters.pdf

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

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[18] "Risalat Amman: at-Tariq Nahu al-Hubb wat-Tasamuh [Amman message: The path to love and tolerance]," Al-Rai, Sept. 27, 2013, accessed online: https://goo.gl/tcwBDN

[19] "A Common Word between Us and You," *A Common Word*, October 13, 2007, accessed online: https://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/

[20] "In Jordan, pope backs efforts for 'alliance of civilizations'", *Catholic Review,* January 19, 2012, accessed online: https://www.archbalt.org/in-jordan-pope-backs-efforts-for-alliance-of-civilizations/; "Speech of His Majesty King Abdullah II At the European People's Party Summit", *King Abdullah II's Official Website,* accessed online: https://kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches/european-peoples-party-summit

[21] Mansour Alnogaidan (Director, Al-Mesbar Center for Research and Studies), in conversation with the author, Dubai, September 28, 2014).

[22] Sarah Markiewicz, "World Peace through Christian-Muslim Understanding" (Berlin: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016) pps. 83-84

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

[23] Interview with Abdulrahman Al-Rashed (Gulf affairs editor, Al-Majalla magazine) on November 15, 2016

[24] Joseph Braude, "Saudi Arabia in the Crucible: A Conversation with Abdulrahman Al-Rashed", *Hudson Institute*, December 7, 2016, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2Z18InK

[25] Interview with Joseph Lumbard on October 28, 2007

[26] Interview with then-Department of Defense Levant Country Director David Schenker, December 2006

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,

[27] Interview with Dennis Ross (counselor and senior fellow, The Washington Institute), Aug. 28, 2018

[28] KAICIID, home page, accessed online: https://www.kaiciid.org/

[29] Interview with Rabbi David Rosen (International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee), February 13, 2014.

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

[30] Robert Satloff, "Historic Holocaust Awareness," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy,* Jan. 26, 2018, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2Wt0G5t

[31] Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman vows crack down on Islamist terrorists", *Financial Review*, November 27, 2017, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3dIdt9S

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

[32] Interview with Major Dana al-Marzouqi, March 2, 2020

[33] Interview with David Andrew Weinberg (ADL Washington Director for International Affairs), March 2, 2020

[34] Interview with Dana al-Marzouqi, March 2, 2020

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 —

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, home page, https://iafsc.org/media-center (accessed May 10, 2020)

[37] Ibid., "Regional Workshops" page, https://iafsc.org/events/child-dignity/regional-workshops (accessed May 10, 2020)

[38] Ibid., "World Economic Forum" page, https://iafsc.org/events/child-dignity/world-economic-forum (accessed May 10, 2020)

[39] Interview with Major Dana al-Marzouqi, March 2, 2020

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

[40] DICID, "Anshitah Thiqafiyyah [Cultural Activities Page]": https://bit.ly/3dFjJzg (accessed May 10, 2020)

[41] David Kirkpatrick, "Qatar's Support of Islamists Alienates Allies Near and Far", *New York Times,* September 7, 2014, accessed online: https://nyti.ms/3bvUoGo (accessed May 10, 2020); Eric Trager, "The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the Qatar Crisis" *The Atlantic,* July 2, 2017, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3bw4SWp

[42] Interview with Jason Isaacson (AJCA executive director for policy and managing director of government and international affairs) following his declining to attend a Qatari embassy function, August 28, 2018

[43] In January 2021, the Saudi government brokered a reconciliation agreement after a three-year rift between the itself, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar on the other. It called for an end to the former alliance's blockade of Qatar air, land and sea routes; an end to Qatari legal proceedings against its neighbors, specifically over the blocking of air travel; and an end to campaigns of mutual incitement in the countries' respective media outlets. The agreement did not address the ideological component of the rift, however — that is, Qatar undertook no commitment regarding its support for the Brotherhood — leaving the essential longstanding political conflict in place.

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,

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[44] Mansour Alnogaidan (Director, Al-Mesbar Center for Research and Studies), in conversation with the author, Dubai, September 28, 2014).

[45] Vivien Fuad, "Al-Azhar and Egypt's Copts: From Defensive Relations to Constructive Dialogue," Al-Mesbar Center, January 18, 2015: http://bit.ly/3hZ0rs1 (accessed January 10, 2020).

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

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[46] The assassination of Egyptian writer-intellectual Farag Fouda in 1992 provides a more distant example. The jailing of Egyptian liberal intellectual Islam al-Buhairi in 2015 provides a more recent example and bears recalling. It began on an Egyptian television discussion about the role of Islam in modern life, between Buhairi and a young Azharite cleric. Buhairi argued that modern Muslims, revering the Qur'an and prophetic traditions, should have the right to circumvent the four tenth-century canonical schools of Sunni law and interpret the sacred texts in a manner supportive of contemporary cosmopolitan mores. The Azhari cleric promptly denounced him as an infidel. The following day, Al-Azhar's Fatwa committee jointly affirmed the young man's view that Buhairi was an apostate. He was arrested, accused of blasphemy, convicted, and sentenced to five years in prison. A court later reduced his sentence to one year, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi eventually pardoned him.

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

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[47] Kenneth Pollack, "Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness," (NewYork, Oxford University Press, 2019)

[48] Douglas H. Johnson, "The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Old Wars and New Wars," (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2003)

[49] Britannica Editors, "Syria's Emergency Law Lifted After 48 Years (Ask an Editor)," *Brittanica Blogs,* accessed online: http://blogs.britannica.com/2011/04/syrias-emergency-law-lifted-48-years-editor/; Ruth Sherlock, "Bashar al-Assad's militias 'cleansing' Homs of Sunni Muslims," *Telegraph,* July 22, 2013, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2ArNyF3

[50] Franck Salameh. "Al-Nubuwwa al-Lubnaniya [The Lebanese Prophecy]." *Al-Majalla*, July 2014, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2WXOOrf

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

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[51] Yara al-Wazir. "Brain Drain: why a quarter of young Arabs want to leave their countries." Alarabiya, April 25, 2014, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2WwQs46

[52] Lafif Lakhdar, "Moving from Salafi to Rationalist Education", *MERIA Journal*, (Issue 9:1, March 2005), accessed online: https://bit.ly/2y5u3l3

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]

[53] Another example is Iraqi cleric Abd al-Latif al-Humayyim, a scholar of Sunni Islamic law whom Saddam Hussein tapped in 1999 to establish a pan-Islamic body to rival the Saudi-controlled Organization of the Islamic Conference. Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Humayyim established himself in Jordan and began to write books articulating a nuanced reformist Islamic agenda. He has established a popular satellite television channel, and found his way back into Iraq to serve a senior position in the Ministry of Islamic endowments.

[54] Interview with Khalid Duran (former professor of Islamic studies at Freie University of Berlin), January 2013

[55] "Iqbal Kabir Ala Kutub Mu'asis al-Hizb al-Jumhuri Bi-Ma'ridh al-Khartoum [High Interest in the Books of Republican Party Founder at Khartoum Exhibition]", *Sudan Times,* October 1, 2019, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2TbhdsC

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]

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[56] "Itlaq al-Lajna al-Shababiya li Da'm Shibli Mallat li Ri'asat al-Jumhuriya [The Launch of the Youth Committee to Support Chibli Mallat for President of the Republic." Chibli Mallat's Electoral Platform, accessed online: http://www.mallat.com/books/PresTalk2Chap.pdf. 90

[57] Chibli Mallat, "A New 'White Arabism' Would Help Generate Liberal Societies." The Daily Star, March 8, 2015, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3bDF9v8

[58] Adyan Foundation, home page, accessed online: https://adyanfoundation.org/

[59] Saad Salloum, "Confronting Violence through Policies of Dialogue", in Eds. Cyrus Rohani, Behrooz Sabet, "Winds of Change: The Challenge of Modernity in the Middle East and North Africa", (London: Saqi Books, 2019)

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

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Adyan Foundation, "Partners" page, accessed online: https://adyanfoundation.org/about/partners/

[62] Amply treated in Robert Kaplan, "The Arabists: The Romance of an American Elite", (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993)

[63] William Harris, "Lebanon: A History, 600 - 2011", (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

[64] Interview with Norman Stillman (Professor Emeritus of Judaic History at the University of Oklahoma), November 11, 2013

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

[65] "Moreshet Yehudei Teyman [Heritage of the Jews of Yemen]" Facebook page, accessed online: https://www.facebook.com/groups/117695739114879

[66] Interview with Raphael Luzon, August 10, 2018

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"

[67] Ahmad Urfah Ahmad Yusaf, "Al-Tasamuh al-Islami Wa-Dawruhu fil-Ta'ayhush al-Silmi Bayna Abna al-Watan [Islamic Tolerance and Its Role in Peaceful Coexistence Between Compatriots]" (Alexandria: Dar al-Ta'lim al-Jami'i, 2020)

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 Interfaith 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 partnership against bigotry. Among prominent examples, the Muslim-Jewish

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[68] Robert McKenzie, "Want new ideas for managing the Syrian refugee crisis? Engage Syrian Americans", *Markaz Blog,* June 13, 2016, accessed online: https://brook.gs/2y5dRjE; Linda Gradstein, "A closer look at Israel's Operation Good Neighbor on the Syrian border", *Jerusalem Post,* August 10, 2018, accessed online: https://www.jpost.com/jerusalem-report/operation-good-neighbor-564579

[69] "Abolitionists call on U.S. to help end African slave trade", *Religion News Service*, January 1, 1996 https://religionnews.com/1996/01/01/news-story-abolitionists-call-on-us-to-help-end-african-slave-trade/, (accessed May 10, 2020)

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

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[70] Muslim Jewish Advocacy Advisory Council, "About Us" page, https://www.muslimjewishadvocacy.org/about-us/, (accessed May 10, 2020)

[71] "UAE Cabinet approves list of designated terrorist organisations, groups", *Emirati News Agency*, November 16, 2014, http://wam.ae/en/details/1395272478814, (accessed May 10, 2020)

[72] Basma Azizi, "AIC's Ambassadors for Peace Teaches Mediation for Peace in Iraq", American Islamic Congress website, April 24, 2015, accessed online: https://bit.ly/3cC8Ga0;
"Tunisia's Youth Drive Positive Change Through AIC Program", American Islamic Congress website, October 3, 2013, accessed online: https://bit.ly/2WYSBEK

[73] Interview with Rabbi David Rosen (International Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee), February 13, 2014

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.

[74] "Bahrain At The Simon Wiesenthal Center: A Call To Religious Tolerance", *Cision News Wire*, September 12, 2017, accessed online: https://prn.to/3fSi1fU