CARNEGIE EUROPE

FROM TRANSFORMATION TO MEDIATION
The Arab Spring Reframed

Richard Youngs

**CARNEGIE
EUROPE**

FROM TRANSFORMATION TO MEDIATION
The Arab Spring Reframed

Richard Youngs

Contents

About the Author

Richard Youngs is a senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Program. He is also a professor of international relations at Warwick University. Prior to joining Carnegie in July 2013, he was director of the Madrid and Brussels-based think tank FRIDE. He also held positions in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and as an EU Marie Curie fellow. He was senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington DC from 2012 to 2013. His seventh book, *The Uncertain Legacy of Crisis: European Foreign Policy Faces the Future*, was published in January 2014.

Summary

Politics in the Middle East are increasingly polarized and fragmented. The Arab Spring's citizen-led spirit of reform is still alive, but societies are increasingly torn apart by bitter tensions between Sunni and Shia, secular liberals and Islamists, and governments and civil society. As polarization has deepened, the concern with engaging in dialogue to bridge differences has intensified. The relationship between these mediation efforts and support for systemic reform will be a pivotal factor in the Middle East's future political trajectory.

Key Themes

- The spirit of unity forged in the early days of the Arab Spring has faded and polarization has deepened across the Middle East. It has become apparent that many societies lack consensus on basic political rules of the game.

- Nearly all Middle Eastern states have some form of national dialogue to help build consensus, and many international actors stress the need for an inclusive process of mutual compromise to lay the groundwork for political reform.

- Strategic approaches to the Arab Spring need reframing to reflect the fact that the fate of political reform hinges upon successful consensus building and dialogue on political rules.

- Admirably, the European Union (EU) has increased the emphasis on consensus building in its diplomatic efforts and its funding initiatives across the Middle East.

- The necessary focus on mediation and dialogue must not supplant support for political reform. Reform and dialogue need to progress in parallel and be mutually reinforcing.

Striking the Right Balance

National dialogues differ considerably across countries. They are all designed to foster agreement between a wide range of political actors on reform options, but their formats and remits vary significantly—as have their effects on political reform.

The way in which political reform and consensus building interact varies across countries. Inclusive dialogue can facilitate political reform, and in some countries it has been necessary to keep reform momentum on track. But in other countries, some degree of political reform is needed to level the playing field and establish conditions conducive to successful mediation.

International actors like the EU must effectively balance mediation and reform promotion. Mediation should not become a substitute for reform initiatives. The EU must not tilt too far toward elite-centered deal making that undercuts the spirit of political reform that marked the Arab Spring's origins. It needs to be more aware of the potential drawbacks of mediation that is not accompanied by a broader upgrade of reform efforts across the Middle East.

Introduction

Even if the Arab Spring has not definitively run aground, the dominant Western policy narrative surrounding it has fundamentally changed. What Western observers initially saw as a process in which reformist civil society pitted itself against authoritarian regimes today seems to be primarily about managing myriad levels of polarization within societies. A simple narrative only of political reform looks increasingly inadequate.

Pervasive polarization now defines much domestic political debate in the Middle East as well as the framework through which the European Union (EU) crafts its strategy in the region. As the focus has shifted toward building consensus in fragmented societies, the EU has developed a more prominent focus on high-level diplomatic mediation. While still running many traditional political reform initiatives, the EU gives greater priority to efforts that build inclusive dialogue. The EU offers itself as a facilitator—a mediator between adversaries.

The focus on mediation to bring about consensus reflects a welcome recognition that democratic transitions are rarely sustainable when they are not underpinned by broad agreement on the political "rules of the game." But Europeans should avoid thinking that "inclusive forums" and national dialogue processes are a panacea for the Middle East's ills. One of the defining questions for the Middle East's future resides in the relationship between the "mediation lens" and the "reform lens." This relationship is more complicated than often assumed. Patterns of polarization vary across different Middle Eastern states, and different types of reconciliation processes are afoot. A mutually reinforcing balance between mediation and reform that accounts for these complications must be sought.

The EU's current strategy runs a risk of being off balance. There are many strong points in the EU's approach to dialogue and mediation, and generating consensus is undoubtedly important. But the EU should not neglect targeted reform efforts that are needed to make mediation work. Dangers lurk where a focus on consensus is taken to justify an apolitical approach to change in the Middle East. Mediation must not become a coda for passivity and hands-off neutrality. Successful mediation is often the outcome of reform, not merely its antechamber. It should be pursued as a complement not an alternative to support for political liberalization.

Pervasive polarization now defines much domestic political debate in the Middle East as well as the framework through which the European Union crafts its strategy in the region.

Polarized Societies

In the three years since the Tunisian revolution, the momentum of Arab reform has stuttered. While the degree of social mobilization remains higher than it was before 2011 and democracy is still on the agenda, tangible democratic advances are becoming rare and the region's social and political context is increasingly brittle. In some countries, hard-won gains in democratic rights are in danger of being reversed. In others, regimes have comfortably contained pressures for reform. And in several, violent conflict increasingly predominates. Among the many reasons for such disappointment, the widening of internal divisions stands out as key.

Democracy's bumpy ride across the Arab world holds little surprise. Nobody who knew the region predicted that a rapid process of democratization would seep smoothly across the Middle East in the wake of the initial Tunisian and Egyptian popular uprisings. Indeed, all democratic transitions take time. All are subject to reversals of greater or lesser longevity. All engender forces keen to limit reform. All open a Pandora's box of rivalries between reform-minded factions.

However, the Middle East's acute degree of division is especially striking. Managing internal division is becoming the region's defining feature. The best transitions move within a reasonable time span into a phase where more technical issues of reform predominate. But much of the Middle East has still to agree on some very basic rules of the game. Mitigating polarization has become of almost existential import.

As a result, debates are today not merely about specific obstacles to particular reforms. Rather, the whole analytical prism through which the Middle East is viewed has gradually shifted to a broader framework. Zooming out from the intricate detail that dominates attention in each individual country, a common pattern can be discerned: the emerging view is that the region's primordial affliction is a lack of consensus on basic political rules.

The region's primordial affliction is a lack of consensus on basic political rules.

Much analytical coverage of the Middle East now has the feel and lexicon of writings on conflict mitigation, at least as much as it conforms to standard work on the tactics of political transitions. The metric applied to the region is not merely or primarily how far states are along a path of democratic reform. Increasingly, its salient feature is the divisive nature of internal politics.

Many domestic and external efforts are now focused on tempering polarization—which in most states is reaching dangerous levels. Distrust between different political actors continues to intensify. The pertinent questions are not simply about whether democracy is advancing or stalled, whether the Arab Spring is "alive" or "dead." It is, more subtly, about the way that change is taking place—the type of process through which it is facilitated and inhibited.

The Middle East must be seen through this lens of fractured politics and social identities—not merely that of how far democracy is progressing.

A number of types of polarization have intensified over the course of the Arab Spring. Sectarian, secular-Islamist, regime–civil society, and regional tensions have all increased.

Sharper sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia communities now dominate domestic and regional politics. In particular, the Syrian conflict, in which a ruling Alawite class is pitted against a mostly Sunni opposition, has impacted sectarian tensions across the region. Sunni-Shia violence increasingly spread across Syria's borders during 2012 and 2013. Tensions have intensified as Lebanon's Hezbollah has extended its incursions into Syria, helping the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gain an upper hand in the conflict. This, in turn, has left Sunni communities in many parts of the region more nervous. Sunni radicalization grows out of a fear of Shia assertiveness. Sunni regimes across the region use the specter of a new Shia threat as justification for delays to reform.

In addition to these sectarian tensions, the cleavage between secular liberals and Islamist movements breeds increasingly fractious politics. In 2011, Islamists and secularists joined forces to confront authoritarian regimes across the region. That moment of apparent, if superficial, convergence has given way to divergent understandings of what type of reforms is most desirable. The emergence of such differences was not necessarily a surprise, but the vehemence with which these two camps today confront each other is striking—as is the extent to which this division now hinders stable coalition building in many Arab states. Many of the pre–Arab Spring attempts at building common platforms between Islamists and secularists now lie in tatters. A July 2013 coup that removed Egypt's Islamist president has sharpened divisions across the region as regimes, secularists, and Islamists have all adopted more uncompromising positions in its tumultuous aftermath.[1]

Another divide has widened between the civil society and government spheres, including in relatively reformist regimes. Prior to 2011, reformers within regimes at times sought to engage with civil society actors to forge agreements on modest reform programs. This is a common dynamic that drives measured reform steps in many transition processes across the world. But in the Middle East, the channels of trust and convergence between civil society and regime "soft-liners" appear to have narrowed not improved since 2011. Some regime structures themselves have become more malleable, but this has not helped with the construction of broader constituencies of reform that include both "insiders" and "outsiders."

Alliances and coalitions have shifted across borders, too, as regional rivalries have sharpened. Sectarian- and identity-based cleavages play out alongside the rise of traditional statist power projection in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, and even smaller players like Qatar have vied for regional

influence, and Turkey's activist foreign policy adds another complicating factor, as many observers see Ankara's approach as animated by a desire to shore up Sunni leadership in the region. Meanwhile, ethnic cleavages involving Berbers, Kurds, and others have sharpened, and these actors' territorial divisions lie both across and within state boundaries.

Looking in finer granularity, these complex dynamics of polarization color debate in two opposing ways.

On the one hand, in many states internal division has worked against reform. Many actors across the Middle East hold to damagingly "absolutist" positions that preclude compromise. This is true of different sectarian factions, of Islamists, and of liberal secularists. Hostilities often appear almost viscerally rooted in clashing identities. Actors commonly hold to such absolutist positions in the name of progress, not in opposition to change; yet the result of stubborn discord is the derailment of reform efforts.

On the other hand, domestic politics in some states has been dominated by the search for consensus. In an attempt to mitigate centripetal trends, the focus has been on identifying areas of agreement. Many actors genuinely concerned with advancing democratic reform hold that all-inclusive dialogue is now the most urgent imperative. The Arab Spring's initial illusions of democratic change and systemic overhauls have taken several steps backward: today, the need seems to be for preliminary dialogue on basic political values not the fine-tuning of reforms that habitually characterizes the latter stages of political liberalization.

> **Today, the need seems to be for preliminary dialogue on basic political values not the fine-tuning of reforms that habitually characterizes the latter stages of political liberalization.**

These negative and positive dynamics are two sides of the same coin. The predominance of internal divisions puts a premium on consensus-seeking dialogue. In some states, fragmentation is clearly ascendant; dialogue and consensus are widely advocated but have not taken root firmly. In others, efforts to embed formal national dialogue forums have advanced further and increasingly define domestic politics.

In short, consensus seeking either dominates domestic politics or is the most strongly advocated route forward in those contexts where polarization wreaks its most untrammeled havoc. Fragmentation and polarization are now prominent political issues in nearly all Arab countries.

Differing Reconciliation Efforts

Most countries affected by the Arab Spring have instigated some form of national dialogue—of greater or lesser formality—aimed at narrowing internal divisions. A small number of these dialogues have made some progress, and others have encountered formidable obstacles.

Dialogue has varied with regard to type and grade. Differences stem from both the depth of polarization with which a country has to contend and the formality or strength of commitment to inclusive dialogue.

There have clearly been cases where dialogue has led to reform. In a small number of states, dialogue-generated consensus has facilitated some degree of political liberalization. Even in these relatively successful cases, reform has been delayed and diluted, internal divisions are wider today than at the start of the Arab Spring, and consensus has been possible only on the most general principles of political and constitutional change. Yemen and Tunisia fit into this category.

In Yemen, a high-level and formal process of national dialogue has generated some limited reform. After an uprising that led President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down in November 2011, a national unity government was sworn in. Elections in February 2012 confirmed the consensus candidate Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi as president.

The agreement transferring power from Saleh to the unity government stipulated that the new regime would hold a national dialogue. In March 2013, Hadi launched the National Dialogue Conference to deliberate on detailed reform options. In the hopes of establishing a new, durable political framework, these high-level talks brought together Yemen's main political forces—including powerful tribes, some southern separatists, and Houthi rebels, members of a Shia minority from the north—as well as previously marginalized groups such as women, youth, and minorities.

The dialogue formally concluded on January 21, 2014, with an agreement regarding the country's future constitution. The agreement stipulates that until elections take place later in 2014, Hadi must increase southern and Houthi representation in the consultative upper house of parliament.[2]

Progress has been painfully slow, and unrest simmers. After the initial unity agreement was signed, it took two and a half years for the National Dialogue Conference to begin in earnest. Saleh's family still wields much power and retains control of the security forces, and it has frustrated attempts at deeper reform. The longtime ruling party under Saleh, the General People's Congress, remains dominant in the parliament. Not all factions of the Southern Movement, an umbrella organization for the country's southern separatists, participated in the conference, and the dialogue was beset by ongoing controversies over questions of representation, boycotts, and withdrawals.[3] Yet it prevented the country from descending into out-and-out civil war and provided Saleh with a face-saving exit from power.[4]

Tunisia is the clearest example of a consensus-led reform process. After a revolution in 2011 that ousted then president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisians elected a widely inclusive coalition led by the Islamist Ennahda party. This coalition has worked to draw up a new, democratic constitution, a goal that was tested in 2013 as instability rocked Tunisia. In the span of a year, the

country saw two political assassinations, a suicide blast, and multiple confrontations between various political factions.

Through it all, the ruling coalition made a considerable effort to maintain the inclusive ethos of the country's transition. After the assassination of a prominent leftist opposition leader in February 2013, the government appointed a technocratic cabinet in order to keep opposition forces engaged. In September 2013, Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh of Ennahda stepped down, bowing to pressure from the opposition. Ennahda also called for new elections and created a formalized national dialogue to engage all actors in finalizing the new constitution, which was passed on January 27, 2014.

Consensus was aided in Tunisia by the fact that the ruling Islamists did not feel their party had the local strength or the roots to confront other actors in a zero-sum fashion. In particular, Ennahda hesitated to disregard the country's relatively influential trade union movement.

Relations between Islamists and secularists in Tunisia remain fractious. And debates still rage about the balance between universal human rights and Islamist values in the constitution—the document is ambivalent about how far the state's role may extend in "protecting the sacred." However, the consensual model has taken Tunisia further down the road of democratic reform than other Arab states.

Some in the current Libyan administration are trying to emulate the Tunisian example, albeit without tangible success so far. After the fall of long-time Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi in October 2011, the new regime envisaged the election of a broadly inclusive forum to draw up a new constitution. The aim to maintain such an inclusive process constitutes the guiding tenet of Libyan domestic politics.

But the country is facing rising tensions in the political arena and a number of increasingly autonomous militias that threaten Libya's democratic transition. Elections in 2012 did not seem to provide the country's legislative authority, the General National Congress, with sufficient legitimacy to make progress on reform issues. More radical Islamist forces have gradually gained power in the congress and have forced punitive measures against "liberals" associated with the previous regime.

To address this increasingly unstable situation, in August 2013 the interim government launched plans for a formal national dialogue. This is currently in its preparatory stages, and it is due to begin in April and last for six months on the basis of an agreed charter. Its prospects remain decidedly unclear as of this writing.

In other states, it is clearer that dialogue has taken place without leading to any reform. Some countries have made a notable commitment to dialogue but have prioritized stability and consensus in a way that is to the detriment of political reform. In these places, regimes sponsor dialogues but continue to be very restrictive and authoritarian.

Bahrain, for example, has prioritized holding a national dialogue but has not achieved the sort of reform seen in Tunisia or Yemen. The Bahraini regime convened this dialogue after violent protests in 2011. Two of the main legal opposition groups, the Shia al-Wefaq and the secular Waad, initially agreed to participate but later withdrew their support and accused the government of orchestrating the dialogue as a public relations exercise without any intention of reform.

In February 2013, a renewed dialogue was initiated, but debates have remained stuck on procedural questions.[5] The government suspended the talks in early January 2014 only to begin a new dialogue under a revised format. All major political groups have agreed to resume the talks, hoping for discussion of further-reaching institutional reforms.[6] However, both opposition actors and outside observers remain skeptical of the government's willingness to reform and fear that hardliners within the regime are simply playing for time.[7]

Like the rulers in Bahrain, the Jordanian regime has also come under fire for its efforts. The Islamist Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's political party in Jordan, as well as groups of Palestinian origin and tribal leaders have all been critical of Jordanian King Abdullah II's attempts to forge a consensus on a reform program. In March 2011, the king established a National Dialogue Committee comprising representatives from various political and civil society groups who were tasked with arriving at a consensus on legislation concerning various political reforms. These actions are now widely seen as disingenuous because reform promises remain unfulfilled. Here, too, social harmony has splintered since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

Attempts at dialogue have produced little tangible impact in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime began an annual national dialogue in 2003, but these talks have not unlocked reforms or prevented the country from suffering instability since the beginning of the Arab Spring, particularly in the form of rising sectarian tensions and calls for democratic change among the country's youth.

In Lebanon, the balance between polarization and dialogue is precariously poised. On the one hand, instability and sporadic violence plague the country. Due in part to the destabilizing influence of the ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria, Lebanon hovers in a state of virtual conflict. Low-level violence and bomb attacks have become frequent.

On the other hand, the political elite has gone to notable lengths to retain consensus—a commitment that has in some senses been striking given events in Lebanon's immediate neighborhood. The country has a National Dialogue Committee that brings together representatives from Lebanon's main political factions, uniting parliamentarians from the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition and the pro-Western March 14 coalition. The committee, however, has not met regularly since September 2012 because of the increasing political tensions between these factions, which stand on opposite sides when it comes to major regional issues like the Syrian conflict.[8]

Lebanon's apparent saving grace is that Sunni, Shia, and Christians share a consensual aversion to taking the country back to civil war, having emerged from one in 1990. This aversion remains even as trust between the factions has frayed and there is little positive effort to develop a common project for Lebanon's future.

In still other countries, dialogue has failed and authoritarianism has resurged. There are now more vociferous calls for dialogue and consensus in these countries, but differences remain over the terms of any such dialogue and over what kind of political reform, if any, is most desirable to mend current instability. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria are examples of this trend. Here, the failure of dialogue has clearly held back democratization and justified a return of authoritarian dynamics.

Egypt seemed to be making significant headway on the path to reform. But today, the country's main players—the army, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the liberal secularists—are further apart on many issues than they were in 2011.

A popular uprising led to the overthrow of strongman Hosni Mubarak in 2011, but nationwide elections for a new government took place before broad agreement was reached on a new constitution and democratic "rules of the game." In May 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood–backed candidate, as president. The country's political divisions widened appreciably under Morsi's rule, with secular groups and supporters of the military opposing the ruling Islamists.

Initially, Morsi proposed an inclusive framework for preparing a new constitution, but this framework became increasingly exclusionary, a process that culminated in the president issuing a decree in November 2012 that afforded him greater power over the drafting process. Secular opposition groups banded together to form the National Salvation Front in response to this decree. The front orchestrated widespread protests against the government, eventually leading to a military-backed coup that removed Morsi from power in July 2013.

The army then repeated the same divisive process of pushing through a constitution that was drawn up by an exclusionary committee—in this case, the Muslim Brotherhood was excluded. Consensus was not crafted on the document, and many who spoke out against it were arrested. Its approval in a January 2014 referendum will likely aggravate tensions. The new government has banned religious-based political activity, which is likely to perpetuate polarization and result in the reappearance of jihadist violence.

Two particularly dramatic cases of violent polarization are Syria and Iraq. In Syria, attempts have been made to reach a negotiated settlement to the country's ongoing civil war, as hopes have faded that Assad can be definitively pushed from power. The abrupt curtailment of the second round of the Geneva process, a dialogue between the government and the opposition, raises doubts over whether this approach now has any future. Intersectarian tolerance

has weakened even at a micro, communal level, while the regime has leaned even more heavily on its core supporters in an increasingly narrow Alawite and non-Muslim constituency.[9] Tensions have grown between different opposition groups, which now spend most of their time fighting each other. The conflict is no longer a dichotomous one between regime and anti-regime forces, as the opposition has splintered into a large and confusingly fluid number of groupings. The international community has staked much on the leadership of the Free Syrian Army, once considered the main armed opposition force, as the vehicle for reaching some kind of negotiated settlement, but this group has lost standing within the constellation of Syrian forces. While, again, the depth of authoritarian resilience has brought mediation center stage, in Syria this is yet to gain any purchase.

Iraq has remained largely outside the purview of the Arab Spring and subject to unique dynamics. After the U.S. invasion of the country in 2003 toppled Saddam Hussein, a process of dialogue to lay the groundwork for a democratic system was attempted in the form of the Iraqi National Conference, held in August 2004. This conference gathered more than 1,100 representatives of Iraq's political parties, regions, tribes, and civil society organizations who were tasked with selecting the members of a 100-seat national assembly to serve as the country's interim legislature. They were also tasked with agreeing on ways to curb the insurgency that had begun after the U.S. invasion and to temper polarization.[10]

Divisions were too wide for the conference to gain broad legitimacy, and Sunni insurgents did not recognize the conference as legitimate.[11] Several Sunni, Shia, and secularist parties opposing the U.S. occupation of Iraq refused to take part. The conference remained under the control of a core group of political parties without broader consultations or societal buy-in.[12]

Political tensions continued to plague the country through the U.S. withdrawal, which was complete at the end of 2011. In March 2012, Iraq's main factions tentatively agreed to hold another national conference. This again failed, as Kurdish and Sunni opposition groups were reluctant to accept that the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had any genuine intent of reversing its drift toward repressive authoritarianism.[13]

In sum, there is much variation in patterns of national dialogue and, crucially, these do not relate in any straightforward fashion to countries' differing degrees of political reform. The focus on dialogue and consensus adds a very diffuse variable to the analytical framework of the Arab Spring. A clear typology of dialogue processes and reform is hard to discern.

In political science terminology, an eclectic mix now prevails: the Arab Spring's initial flavor of civic-led "ruptured" transitions has morphed into an elite-controlled "pacted" transition dynamic. This is mixed with heavy doses of authoritarian resilience and conflict-management power sharing interspersed in different combinations across different parts of the region.

European Concerns

These trends in the internal politics of Arab states are reflected in the evolving approaches of some external actors. In particular, European policies toward the Arab Spring have undergone a subtle change: a narrative of narrowing polarization is now superimposed on the original narrative of tempering authoritarianism.

The EU has increasingly, and in particular, positioned itself as a kind of impartial mediator. Diplomats routinely cite this as the EU's comparative advantage in the region. The success that the current EU foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, had in brokering an interim deal with Iran over its nuclear program in November 2013 is highlighted as the epitome and most convincing vindication of this "neutral broker" approach.

The EU has attached priority to supporting national dialogues in Yemen, Tunisia, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, and Lebanon. It has exerted diplomatic pressure to cajole reluctant governments to commit to such inclusive dialogue. It has used its democracy and human rights funds to support numerous dialogue forums aimed at bringing together different parts of the political spectrum. The EU-orchestrated task forces held in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia in 2011 and 2012 are another key manifestation of this "everyone inside the tent" approach: these roundtables gathered as broad a range of participants as possible to discuss very practical development and investment goals for each country.

The EU formalized its focus on mediation and created a Mediation Support Team within the European External Action Service, the EU's foreign policy arm. This commits the EU to strengthening institutions and mechanisms specifically designed to improve national capacities for dialogue within conflict-prone states.[14] According to guidelines of the External Action Service, national dialogues are to be actively supported to the extent that they are locally legitimate, inclusive in their composition, effective, and underpinned by democratic values. They are to be based on an analysis of the local context to ensure the dialogues are legitimate and effective in practice. External EU support will take care not to undermine local legitimacy.[15]

As one of its first activities, the Mediation Support Team conducted training sessions on mediation for diplomats and officials working in Syria and Yemen. The unit has also been heavily involved in Lebanon and Libya. It has begun trying to carve out access points in Egypt as well, in cooperation with the EU special representative for the Southern Mediterranean region, who has developed a particular niche focus on bridge-building dialogue.

In Egypt since the July 2013 ouster of Mohamed Morsi, the EU has pushed strongly for the Muslim Brotherhood to be included in a national dialogue. Diplomats argue that the effort to make the Brotherhood part of an inclusive formal dialogue is a more accepted form of international involvement than pushing for deeper democratization to happen immediately.

The EU has exerted negligible pressure on the interim administration led by the Egyptian military to speed up democratic reforms. Most European government and External Action Service reactions to Egypt's January 2014 constitutional referendum were positive and hopeful that the approval of the constitution would open possibilities for new dialogue. For instance, Ashton stated that: "The constitutional process—both before and following the referendum—could offer a chance for a new political dialogue and interaction leading to democratic elections."[16] To that end, the EU has recently placed particular priority on calling for "the establishment of a higher commission for national reconciliation," and Ashton has made numerous trips to Cairo to facilitate dialogue between Egypt's different factions.[17] She is the only high-level international figure to have engaged in this way with the full spectrum of Egyptian actors.

Ashton has also fulsomely supported Bahrain's national dialogue, stating that "the dialogue between the parties is the best way to rebuild trust and to achieve genuine national reconciliation by tackling outstanding issues and socioeconomic grievances, thereby preparing the ground for sustainable reforms."[18] In Libya, the EU has—controversially—sought to ensure that former regime members are engaged in the transition process. As the formal national dialogue atrophies, the local representatives of Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, and the United Nations (UN) have coordinated to maintain contacts with different Libyan factions in an effort to entice all players into some form of consultation; this focus has essentially taken over from long-term institution building, for which political conditions have not proven conducive. In Iraq, while the United States has focused on counterterrorism assistance for the Maliki government, the EU has pressed Baghdad to engage in more structured dialogue on consensual power sharing.

The EU has strongly supported the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen. In 2012, the Council of Europe urged "all Yemeni stakeholders to support and participate in this process in a constructive manner and without preconditions to ensure that it is fully inclusive, balanced, and transparent, adequately representing all strands of the Yemeni society and reflecting the important role of youth and women."[19] Several EU member states are currently supporting the imposition of UN sanctions against those actors who undermine the next phase of Yemen's dialogue-based reforms.

In Syria, European governments have become more favorable toward some form of dialogue and mediation between the regime and the opposition. A variety of European funding has supported the respected organization Search for Common Ground in its attempts to mediate between different communities at a local level. The Syrian regime reportedly asked the Dutch and Norwegian governments to support initiatives aimed at intercommunal dialogue. In 2012, the French government backed a unity administration to be headed by defectors from the regime. European governments pushed for an

incremental broadening of the opposition alliance into the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, formed in late 2012. The United Kingdom and France have stepped back from offering such significant support to the rebels as those countries originally indicated they would provide. London and Paris are now more reluctant to link themselves so firmly to one faction in the conflict.

European ministers talk of sponsoring a "mutually agreed settlement" in Syria; they still insist that this would entail Assad's departure, but as prelude to an accord with other parts of the regime. The European aim has decidedly shifted to resuscitating a mediation process sponsored by the UN. After the August 2013 chemical weapons attacks near Damascus, Ashton responded by calling not for democracy but for mediation and for the Geneva dialogue process to be reconvened. While European rhetoric remains fiercely critical of Assad, the pragmatic policy focus is now on the kind of dialogue process that can be set up between regime and opposition forces—and to what degree jihadist groups could and should be included.

Balancing Mediation and Political Reform

The European focus on mediation, consensus building, and alleviating polarization would appear instinctively sensible in today's Middle East. It is indeed necessary and unsurprising—ignoring such imperatives is hardly an option in current circumstances.

The case for mediation is that consensus is a necessary precondition for democratic reform. Indeed, efforts to support inclusive bargaining must take root before there is any hope for successful political reform or economic improvement.[20] Many would concur that the painstaking and delicate crafting of a consensual democracy is a path uniquely desirable in such a sect-riven region. Cultivating some sense of national citizenship that prevails over combative sectarian identities is a prerequisite to sustainable political reform.

> **Cultivating some sense of national citizenship that prevails over combative sectarian identities is a prerequisite to sustainable political reform.**

Yet there are important nuances to this argument. Dialogue and consensus are hardly controversial in themselves, particularly where polarization currently tears societies apart. The nub of the matter is how the aim of tempering conflict and tension through mediation relates to that of fostering democratic reform. The right balance between making pacts and popular mobilization is an issue that continues to engender debate between the most prominent experts on democratic transition.[21] What advocacy of inclusive national dialogue sometimes implies is that political reform should be limited or delayed until dialogue forums reach more formal agreement on how to advance democratic transitions. But consensus is not necessarily best achieved through forms of dialogue that heavily restrict political reform.

An overly primary focus on mediation harbors risks. Where accorded too much centrality, mediation can be an excuse for inaction. International actors that are primarily concerned with consensus building can slip into a conveniently comfortable passivity. They can develop a weak agnosticism about whether democratic reform is even a good thing. They can come close to a de facto preference for semi-democracy or managed reform—well-intentioned but out of tune with changing social dynamics across the region that press for more participative governance not rebalanced elite deals. Mediation is hardly ever as neutral or balanced as it purports to be, and it habitually empowers figures that further down the road act as inveterate spoilers to peace and liberal reform.

Actors promoting this approach can also fail to appreciate how some degree of political liberalization is itself needed to set the conditions for successful consensus-building mediation. Mediation cannot be seen only as an apolitical ground-clearing strategy. In fact, quite the opposite is the case—its prospects are themselves conditioned by political structures. True democratic change needs some degree of prior consensus, but meaningful consensus also needs space and channels for the people to debate their political options openly.

For all these reasons, the focus on mediating divisions must be kept within proper proportion, as one important but not overly dominant element of a rounded policy. Mediation without structural change is likely to be untenable. Some degree of liberalization of the political system is necessary to ensure that all actors have a voice in the consensus-building mediation process.

In Egypt, for example, the EU has rightly striven to encourage dialogue, but most opposition groups complain that the increasingly repressive conditions exclude key forces and make it unlikely that talks can produce tangible results. Popular hostility has grown toward the army because its heavy-handed tactics have undercut the broad support it enjoyed after ousting Morsi, but antipathy remains strong toward the Muslim Brotherhood among other parts of the opposition. One thing the army and the Muslim Brotherhood appear to converge on is a penchant for repressive leadership styles. Many talk about the need for dialogue and consensus, but all actors are not provided equal access to such dialogue. Some prior reform is needed to pave the way for a more inclusive process.

The focus on mediating divisions must be kept within proper proportion, as one important but not overly dominant element of a rounded policy.

In Syria, too, the tension between dialogue aims and the amount of political space for opposing voices is increasingly problematic. The European focus has shifted from wholesale regime-exit to the sponsorship of a process that is at least partially open-ended. But mutual mistrust and the lack of a structure that allows for open channels of communication between all sides have hindered dialogue. Many Free Syrian Army members are held back in laying down their arms by the fact that they do not trust the regime to stick to any promised amnesty accords. Negotiating an agreement will first require the regime to loosen its grip and reform to a degree.

In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front has sharply criticized the EU for pressing it to engage in a national dialogue that it dismisses as based on an entirely disingenuous reform commitment from the king. This is an example of how opposition forces can often see in external actors' support for impartial and generic dialogue a covert form of support for a regime's stalling tactics. For example, the EU justifies projects that support government-organized non-governmental organizations in Jordan as part of its bridge-building approach, but local reformers commonly despise these groups. Rather than reducing friction, external support to these organizations heightens local tension. To move forward, the EU will have to promote more genuine and tangible political reform to flank and help sustain the process of national dialogue.

To move forward, the EU will have to promote more genuine and tangible political reform to flank and help sustain the process of national dialogue.

Even in the relative success story of Tunisia, the EU's altered approach now sometimes attracts criticism for diluting democratic reforms. For example, Tunisia's constitution remains ambivalent on many issues of personal freedom. But rather than undertaking projects to promote these basic rights that would guarantee the kind of open debate needed to generate consensus, the EU has focused on celebrating the inclusive process that produced the document.

The critical responses from the region warn that the EU's support for mediation is becoming too much of an end in itself rather than one integral part of a holistic policy of democracy support. Indeed, officials in the EU's Mediation Support Team acknowledge that they have eschewed any significant focus on democracy support and that democracy promotion is not in any way linked to their activities. There is ongoing debate in the External Action Service over the competing merits of "mediation" relative to "political dialogue," and whether the balance of effort needs to shift toward the longer-term parameters implied by the latter concept. And a commissioned review of the Mediation Support Team concluded that the EU's approach is ad hoc rather than comprehensive and oriented to short-term engagements in moments of acute crisis in a way that is poorly linked to more underlying and ongoing policy engagements.[22]

The EU tends to favor very formal mediation at a track-one level over looser dialogue efforts that embrace more reform-oriented "track-three" civil society actors.[23] This focus is in part a product of geopolitics. To some extent, the EU now sees the challenge of dealing with a polarized Middle East as about keeping its Southern neighborhood at bay. It prioritizes very traditional, old-style diplomatic mediation to achieve that aim. This is quite different from the early optimism of the Arab Spring, when the EU talked of democratization opening the doors to deeper cooperation and even institutionalized integration between European and Arab states. The risk is that the EU will come to expect too much of mediation on its own.

EU representatives increasingly recognize the need for fine-tuning. They acknowledge that differences have widened too much in Egypt for their dialogue efforts to gain traction and that for now the aim needs to be to protect very basic rights in the country. EU officials insist they are aware of the risks of rehabilitating discredited elites through national dialogues. Dialogue is needed, they aver, but built on the foundations of pluralism rather than regime-engineered parameters. So far, the Mediation Support Team has focused on trying to bring together various EU instruments so as to leverage political influence over dialogue processes—rather than actually leading mediation per se. And another recognized challenge is to iron out inconsistencies, for example the widely held perception that the EU has pressed to include insurgents in dialogue processes far more in Syria than it did in Iraq. This area of policy is in fluid evolution, as it seeks the right balances in each Middle Eastern state.

Going Forward: A Balanced Framework

Democratic reform in the Middle East requires a balanced combination of consensual dialogue and pluralistic competition. The focus on mediating division and generating consensus is well-conceived. But, there are signs that the EU—collectively and through member state governments' national diplomacy—is pursuing it in an imbalanced fashion and that this is eclipsing necessary concerns about core reforms.

The concept of inclusive processes of dialogue aimed at generating consensus on basic political rules would appear to be uncontroversial. It is difficult to oppose such a reasonable notion. And it seems rather obvious that democratization is unlikely where major tensions persist over core questions of identity and statehood.

Care must be taken that national dialogues do not become so entrenched that they turn into sources of policymaking that bypass representative bodies.

However, operationalizing that sensible principle is far from easy—and efforts to do so often engender new types of tension in their wake. What "inclusion" means in practice can frequently be less than straightforward. And where efforts are not rooted in ongoing processes of reform, national dialogues can inadvertently deepen polarization if mutually satisfactory win-win outcomes are not possible.[24] Care must be taken that national dialogues do not become so entrenched that they turn into sources of policymaking that bypass representative bodies.

Simply advocating "inclusive dialogue" does not in itself address the structural reasons why a country lacks a normal, peaceable process of consultation. Some structural issues make it impossible for actors to participate in dialogue on equal footing. In countries like Egypt, a tightening of political space clearly gives some actors more power than others. If those political problems are not addressed, any mediation process is unlikely to produce results that the whole of society can accept.

Under these conditions, dialogue cannot be a benignly neutral approach to policy. It has to be supplemented with efforts to balance underlying power relations. Often, a more level playing field is required to make dialogue and consensus seeking legitimate. More radical groups are again on the rise precisely because they feel shut out from formal institutional avenues.[25] Once again, it is, in part, the paucity of reform that is driving divergent and polarizing political identities.

This is not to argue that the focus on tempering polarization is mistaken. But the international community must do more than simply herd clashing factions into set-piece dialogues. It must also seek to understand and fashion the kind of conditions that enable mediation to result in sustainable convergence between adversarial political actors. After all, if opinions were such that a little dialogue sufficed to produce consensus, an effort to engineer formal forums would almost by definition be superfluous.

The EU needs to be more than a provider of good offices. European actors justify the focus on mediation in pursuit of locally generated consensus as a kind of liberal neutrality, but if not combined with other elements of policy, it can cloak very illiberal outcomes. Liberal neutrality can easily become its own travesty. The current quasi-neutrality can, in at least some circumstances, look like a *displacement* of proper strategy. It can reflect a reluctance to strategize, more than representing comprehensive strategy in itself.

Some aspects of European governments' policy now replicate the dire historical and colonial experiences of allying with local notables in places like Iraq, Algeria, and Syria—a startling inability to learn from a recent history that so blighted the European image across parts of the region. They risk conferring status on such figures in a way that widens their disconnection from local society. Attempts to engineer fraught and precise power balances, rather than core political principles, can easily seduce outside actors into extremely harmful forms of engagement.

Pacted transitions have many advantages, but the spirit of the Arab Spring was essentially about a stirring, fear-busting, civic-led activism. Too much elite-driven negotiating is likely to deviate too far from this ethos and reproduce the very factors that sparked the first revolts in 2010 and 2011.

A very fine and blurred line exists between admirable negotiated transition and the kind of consensus that enables vested interests to suffocate reforms. Arguably, there are signs that the EU is insufficiently seized of the latter danger.

The challenge is to find a mutually sustaining equilibrium. There must be consensual dialogue of a type that supports reform momentum but also enough reform momentum for the seeds of consensus to germinate. It is in this relationship between mediation and reform aims that a new framework for assessing external actors' role in today's divided Middle East is most required.

Notes

1   Anouar Boukhars, Nathan J. Brown, Michele Dunne, Raphaël Lefèvre, Marwan Muasher, Frederic Wehrey, Katherine Wilkens, and Scott Williamson, "The Egypt Effect: Sharpened Tensions, Reshuffled Alliances," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/02/13/egypt-effect-sharpened-tensions-reshuffled-alliances/h0tb.

2   "Yemen's National Dialogue Conference Concludes With Agreement," BBC News, January 21, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25835721.

3   Stefan Wolff, "Managing Expectations: Yemen's National Dialogue Conference," *World Politics Review,* July 23, 2013, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13104/managing-expectations-yemen-s-national-dialogue-conference.

4   Tim O. Petschulat, "Political Change With Pitfall: An Interim Report on the Yemeni Transition Process," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Yemen, September 2012, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09355.pdf.

5   Toby Matthiesen, "EU Foreign Policy Toward Bahrain in the Aftermath of the Uprising," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Ana Echague (Madrid: FRIDE, 2013).

6   "Bahrain National Dialogue Resumes—In Revamped Format," Monitor Global Outlook, January 16, 2014, http://monitorfrontiermarkets.com/news-story/bahrain-national-dialogue-resumes-in-revamped-format.

7   Bill Law, "Time Running Out as Bahrain Tries to Revive National Dialogue," BBC News, January 30, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25918628.

8   Peter Seeberg, "Lebanon, Dual Legitimacy, and the Syrian Crisis," Op-Med, German Marshall Fund of the United States, November 2013.

9   S. Heyderman, "Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 4 (October 2013): 61 and 65.

10   Roy McCarthy, "U.S. Opponents to Boycott Iraqi National Conference," *Guardian,* July 10, 2004, www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jul/10/iraq.rorymccarthy.

11   Sharon Otterman, "Iraq: The National Conference," Council on Foreign Relations, August 17, 2004, www.cfr.org/iraq/iraq-national-conference/p7638.

12   Katia Papagianni, "National Conferences in Transitional Periods: The Case of Iraq," *International Peacekeeping* 13, no. 3 (2006).

13   Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: Politics, Governance and Human Rights*, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, December 17, 2013.

14   The EU Council in 2009 agreed on a "Concept on Strengthening EU Mediation and Dialogue Capacities," Council of the European Union, Brussels, November 10, 2009; EEAS, "Strengthening National Capacities for Mediation and Dialogue: National Dialogue Platforms and Infrastructures for Peace," European Union External Action, Factsheet—EEAS Mediation Support Project: Knowledge Product, November 2012, 1.

15   EEAS, "Strengthening National Capacities for Mediation and Dialogue," 2.

16   "Statement by the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Situation in Egypt Ahead of the Constitutional Referendum," European Union External Action, 140111/01, Brussels, January 11, 2014, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140111_01_en.pdf.

17   EU General Affairs council conclusions, February 10, 2014.

18   "Statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Launch of National Dialogue in Bahrain," European Union External Action, A 75/13, Brussels, February 11, 2013, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/135387.pdf.

19   Council of the European Union, "Council Conclusions on Yemen," 3199th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Brussels, November 19, 2012, www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/133570.pdf.

20   Michele Dunne, "Storms of the Arab Spring," *Current History* 112, no. 758 (December 2013).

21   Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Donald L. Horowitz, and Marc F. Plattner, "Reconsidering the 'Transition Paradigm,'" *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 1 (January 2014): 86–100.

22   A. Sherriff, V. Hauck, and C. Rocca, "Glass Half Full: Study on EU Lessons Learnt in Mediation and Dialogue," study submitted to the European External Action Service by ECDPM through the AETS Consortium—Cardno (Maastricht: ECDPM, 2013).

23   V. Hauck and A. Sherriff, "EEAS Mediation Support Pilot Project Evaluatory Review," study submitted to EEAS by ECDPM through the AETS Consortium—Cardno (Maastricht: ECDPM, 2013).

24   "The Role of Political Dialogue in Peacebuilding and Statebuilding: An Interpretation of Current Experience," Working Paper 1, in *The Road to the New Deal*, 2010–2011 Internal Dialogue Working Groups, International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 10–11.

25   Anouar Boukhars, "North Africa: Back to the Future?" in *Challenges for European Foreign Policy 2014: The EU's Extended Neighbourhood*, eds. G. Grevi and D. Keohane (Madrid: FRIDE, 2014), 29.

Carnegie Europe

Founded in 2007, **Carnegie Europe** is the European center of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. From its newly expanded presence in Brussels, Carnegie Europe combines the work of its research platform with the fresh perspectives of Carnegie's centers in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, and Beirut, bringing a unique global vision to the European policy community. Through publications, articles, seminars, and private consultations, Carnegie Europe aims to foster new thinking on the daunting international challenges shaping Europe's role in the world.

The **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

BEIJING   BEIRUT   BRUSSELS   MOSCOW   WASHINGTON

THE
GLOBAL
THINK TANK

CARNEGIE EUROPE

CarnegieEurope.eu