

## From Polarization to Pluralism – Healing Societal Divisions in MENA

A message from the Global Agenda Council on the Arab World

- The advent of the uprisings in the **winter** of 2010 in the Arab world raised hopes of a transformation where democracy would gradually take root and provide the basis for more inclusive development.
- Three years after the spark of the Arab uprisings, the MENA region faces unprecedented challenges. Among political turmoil, violence and unresolved legislative questions underlies the *deep societal polarization* of the region, which threatens political progress, economic recovery and regional peace.
- While political polarization is a reality on the ground in many Arab countries, the extent of intolerance to differences of opinion and the lack of clarity on a basic premise of identity in many of these countries are threatening the very fabric of their societies.
- The global relevance of these challenges today and the importance of finding appropriate solutions was clearly illustrated when “Rising Societal Tensions in MENA” ranked #1 trend of 2014, according to the 1600 experts that responded to the *Survey on the Global Agenda* of the World Economic Forum.

### Origins & Factors

- There are various hypotheses regarding the reasons behind the polarization in the region: some link it to pre-existing divisions and their suppression from authoritarian regimes; some assign it to bad policy choices of recent history; while others believe it is an organized plan of external and domestic actors who profit from it.
- Understanding the nature of polarization in the Arab world and its underlying drivers is a necessary first step towards prescribing interventions to heal its rift. We need to study social polarization in the Arab world along religious, ideological, as well as socioeconomic lines.
- We need to understand the “public sphere” and who it belongs to. The role of the mosque and their sermons, how those spread; the role of traditional media; the role of social media, citizen journalism and speed at which ideas are spread and divisions highlighted.

### Moving from Polarization to Pluralism

- The Global Agenda Council on the Arab World **is alarmed by the recent rise in polarization, and sees that a move to more pluralistic cultures and institutions – as defined by a society’s ability to accept differences while allotting equal citizenship to all regardless of these disagreements – is of crucial importance.**
- To foster a rational debate and respect for opposing views, Arab societies must seek for moral leadership, striving to “*widen the center*”, rather than trying to bring together the fringes. We must give voices of reason and inclusion a platform so they can be heard over those of reprisal and incitement.
- There is a need to help create a space in the public sphere for pluralistic ideas, with *fundamental civil rights* being the basic common denominator to unite people. We need to create a language, such as slogans in Arabic, that set these principles in people’s mindsets, with an understanding of how they affect their daily lives.
- Communicators, from religious leaders to television celebrities, need to become public advocates of these principles to help embed these notions deeply in society.
- **Media, both traditional and social, have the ability to create a positive language, but also the power to be vectors of hate speech. We also need to look into how other societies balance the protection of freedom of expression and the regulation of incitements to violence in their laws, and encourage the introduction of such laws in the Arab world, especially as several countries are in the process of revising their constitutions.**

Signed: Global Agenda Council on the Arab World

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