ISE

Middle East Discourses

Overview

The breakdown of order in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) since 2011 is primarily rooted in failures of governance and the inability of states to deliver to their people. While the dynamics and specific circumstances of each country vary, commonalities rooted in state effectiveness must be understood and addressed if we are serious about building regional peace and prosperity.

In 2016, the Institute for State Effectiveness launched its Middle East Discourses program, led by Senior Fellow Mina Al-Oraibi, to focus on the changing role and functions of the state and the social compact in the region.

The program works to advance understanding into the drivers of change, cultivate new ideas and approaches, and re-center the discourse on governance shortcomings as a key cause of instability.

ISE's approach is to focus on opportunities where the Institute is able to add value, fill in gaps, and strengthen effective strategies for change. The Institute seeks to build on existing initiatives, develop partnerships to scale-up promising efforts that stabilize and strengthen accountable states, and provide new research and advice where appropriate. The goal is to enable policymakers, leaders, citizens, and key stakeholders to create a new paradigm – one that addresses challenges and opportunities through problem-solving approaches to state effectiveness and citizen engagement.

Guiding Principles

- States are the fundamental units for order and prosperity in the international system.
- Drivers of change, including globalization, youth bulges and new technologies, have challenged the effectiveness of states.
- Rebuilding regional stability requires sustained investment in governance that is demonstrably effective and responsive to strengthen the relationship between citizen and government.
- Cities may be able to provide opportunities for reforms that respond to local needs and engage citizens, the private sector, and civil society in co-creative processes.
- Improving state effectiveness requires a granular understanding of rules and incentives around core state functions.
- To rebuild social trust, dampen down sectarianism, and envision a new social compact, it is critical to create spaces for dialogue and public discourse where all citizens – irrespective of gender, religion, or ethnicity – can participate in shaping their country's future.
- There is a need to identify and capitalize on opportunities to advance reform, develop platforms for regional stability, and create appropriate frameworks for restoring governance in collapsed states.

Why Now?

Drivers of change have rippled throughout the region, affecting states and citizens alike. Some states have weathered the challenges presented, either with reforms or short-term measures that will need future addressing. Other states have descended into conflict, or been weakened significantly. However, all have experienced a questioning of the social compact. Six years after the Arab uprisings, a central question remains: What form of the state will emerge? Without question, the collapse of state structures, such as what has happened in countries like Syria and Yemen, requires immediate efforts to end violence. But it is also urgent to begin crafting roadmaps for these states' reconstruction that integrate lessons to advance more sustainable governance in WANA and beyond. Yet responses in the region often failed to adequately address the root causes of radicalization, grievance and conflict. There is now an opportunity to support a re-envisioned social compact in the region.

Program and Process

After a review of the important work of international and regional organizations, think tanks, and donors, ISE identified four tracks that can support state effectiveness and citizen engagement:

1. Providing a conceptual platform for 'big ideas' on governance and citizen engagement in the Middle East. Developing ideas and frameworks for citizenship and state effectiveness and functions.
2. Catalyzing public discourse in WANA by information dissemination and fostering productive dialogue.
3. Country-specific analysis and support by working with reform-minded groups, civil society actors, and international partners to create roadmaps and build core functions and competencies.
4. Creating a network of networks to support and scale up promising regional and country initiatives.

Pilot Phase

Since the launch of Middle East Discourses in March of 2016, ISE has convened major stakeholders for discussion and assessments of opportunities and challenges in the region. Highlights of the pilot phase include:

- A review of 60 entities – including international organizations and think tanks – working on issues of governance, state effectiveness, and social compacts in West Asia and North Africa;

- A categorization of the 22 Arab states; where they stand in terms of governance and state structures;

- Presentation of informal policy recommendations to the UK Foreign Office and German Foreign Office, in addition to meetings with US State Department officials and officials from UAE, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Japan;

- Production of a report for the World Bank's Governance Global Practice on the 'Future of Governance in Syria';

- Submission of evidence to the United Kingdom House of Lords on UK policy recommendations for the Middle East region; and

- Presentation of talks and participation in panels at Chatham House, RAND Corporation, the German Foreign Ministry, US Middle East Project, Sandhurst Military Academy, and the World Economic Forum, among others.