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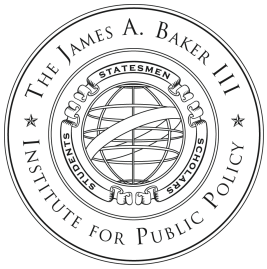
THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY POST-ARAB SPRING

Conference Report
June 2, 2015



James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy
Rice University

Divided Societies, Volatile States: The Politics of Identity Post-Arab Spring

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Center for the Middle East

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Introduction

On March 10, 2015, the Baker Institute's Center for the Middle East convened a conference to shed light on the rise of identity politics and the role it continues to play in reshaping the political and social landscape of the region. The conference began with the keynote address, "Identity Selection in a Changing Middle East," by Shibley Telhami, Ph.D., the Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland at College Park. Following the opening keynote, three discussion panels presented on specific issue areas: 1) sectarianism in the region; 2) gender, identity, and conflict post-Arab Spring; and 3) Palestinians in Israel and the future of the Jewish state. Participants included experts from diverse fields in academia, policymaking, and civil society. This report reviews the key concepts and themes that emerged from the conference proceedings.

Identity Selection in a Changing Middle East

Telhami's keynote address introduced two themes that featured prominently throughout the conference deliberations. First, he noted that collective identity as a subject of debate has a long history in the region due to the fundamental misalignment between local, state, and transnational identities that emerged within modern state systems in the Middle East after World War I. Second, he conceptualized identity as a fundamentally flexible construct that changed significantly over time and depended not just on the individual or community, but often on external factors. According to Telhami, identity selection is the result of the interplay between an individual's use of identity to realize his own aspirations and to defend against perceived threats.

Telhami's framework for identity selection sheds important light on the changing role of identity politics in the region. While the breakdown of national identity in much of the region can be attributed to the uprisings of the Arab Spring, Telhami traced the roots of recent tension and violence to increased perceptions of a threat to Islamic identity following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He presented polling data from his Arab Public Opinion Survey series indicating that intensification of Islamic identity has steadily increased since 2003. As Telhami noted, "People

cannot define themselves in their relationship with us independently from what we do to them. It's an interactive relationship."

Telhami also emphasized the crucial role played by the information revolution across the Arab world that began in the 1990s and is epitomized by regional satellite news stations such as Al-Jazeera. Over 50 percent of respondents to Telhami's 2009 survey stated that Al-Jazeera was their main source of news. In addition, a majority of respondents who did not mention Al-Jazeera as their main source of news nonetheless said they got their news from a channel based outside of their country. Telhami theorized that transnational media unified many in the region on issues of foreign policy, especially regarding the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and reinforced shared Arab and Muslim identities. Indeed, according to Telhami's data, citizens across the region give more weight to their Arab and Muslim identities compared to their national identities.

Despite increased levels of identification as Arabs and Muslims within the region, the strength of these affiliations differs greatly between countries and among groups in society. In Saudi Arabia, for example, Telhami's survey data showed that being a Muslim was far more important than being Saudi or being an Arab. In Lebanon, a country thought to have the most contentious sectarian divisions, survey respondents in fact considered themselves first and foremost as Lebanese, rather than as members of a particular sect, religion, or ethnic group. Telhami added that data on Iraq, a country divided between Sunnis and Shiites, displays similar identification with the state. For the Lebanese and the Iraqis, it seems that association with national rather than sectarian identities may have been stronger due to the perception that national identity was under greater threat.

Defensive identity selection can explain much about the political and social changes that have occurred since the Arab Spring. Understanding the politics of identity helps to shed light on what people expect their government to do and who, in particular, the government is tasked to protect. Sectarianism is not a natural political divide, but the fissures between groups intensify as they come under threat, and can be manipulated by governments in their attempt to "divide and conquer." It is only with the lack of opportunities and rise in inequality that sectarian tensions come to the fore and are adopted as central within society.

Sectarianism in the Region

The first panel discussion, titled "Sectarianism in the Region" was moderated by Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Ph.D., fellow for the Middle East at the Baker Institute. The three speakers were Frederic Wehrey, Ph.D., senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Claire Beaugrand, Ph.D., postdoctoral researcher at the Institut Français du Proche Orient; and Toby Matthiesen, Ph.D., research fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge. Wehrey opened the panel by describing how the politicization of identities in the Persian Gulf produced a set of interlocking dynamics that facilitated the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) in Syria and Iraq. Like Telhami, Wehrey noted that questions of identity have come to the forefront of political and popular debates across the Middle East in response to regional developments over the 12 years since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. He elaborated that these frequently took on sectarian overtones as the perceived empowerment of Shia and Iranian actors in post-Saddam Iraq contributed to the politicization of identities across the region.

Wehrey then outlined how the perception of Shia politicization poses a policy dilemma for the Persian Gulf monarchies owing to their support for the re-empowerment of Sunni communities and the containment of Iranian influence. A sectarian backlash has occurred as flows of militants and funds have contributed to the growth of ISIL as a destabilizing force in Iraq and Syria. This represents a threat not only to internal security in neighboring countries but also for U.S. efforts to address the root causes of sectarian extremism in the Middle East. Developments in Libya, Iraq, and Yemen illustrate the persistence of sectarian narratives in influencing the ways major regional flashpoints are portrayed to policymakers and the public alike.

Following on from Wehrey's broad regional overview, Beaugrand and Matthiesen focused on country case studies to illustrate how sectarianism has played out on local and national levels. Beaugrand argued that elite struggles in Kuwait have generated sectarian tensions as protagonists mobilized different sociopolitical constituencies to build parliamentary coalitions of support. This, she suggested, has contributed to the fragmentation of the political landscape in Kuwait and a rise in societal tension and public anger over the past decade as evidence of political corruption

intersected with factional infighting among sectors of the elite. Beaugrand highlighted the importance of individual agency in determining how and why particular issues and identities get politicized at any given point in time.

Matthiesen shifted the focus to the Shia communities concentrated in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and made the case that identity politics was not latent, but emerged in reaction to developments within Saudi Arabia and across the region. Matthiesen situated the sharpening of identity politics against the backdrop of the regional impact of the Iranian revolution and a shift in the domestic political economy of Saudi Arabia since the late 1970s. These broad factors impacted national debates over belonging and identity, as discourse and policy often conflated questions of Shiite "loyalties" and Iranian "meddling" into one largely amorphous threat. Over time, such perceived ideological threats to internal security have translated into a restriction of the spaces for participation and inclusion open to minority groups in the kingdom.

Gender, Identity, and Conflict Post-Arab Spring

The second panel discussion was titled "Gender, Identity, and Conflict Post-Arab Spring." The participants shed light on the various challenges currently facing women post-Arab Spring, especially amid the escalation of sectarian divisions and violence against women in many parts of the region. Marwa Shalaby, Ph.D., fellow for the Middle East and director of the Women's Rights in the Middle East Program at the Baker Institute, moderated the discussion. She introduced the core issues by noting that "in contrast to the culture of misery that dominated Western discourse and scholarship in regard to women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, this panel seeks to offer a fresh perspective on women's roles after the Arab Spring." She added that the goal of the discussion was to explore recent research that seeks to redefine the dynamics of resistance, self-assertion, power, violence, and agency of Arab women in the context of identity.

The panel's first speaker, May Seikaly, Ph.D., associate professor at Wayne State University, presented her current research on the status of women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. She began by providing the sociopolitical context for women and gender development

in the Gulf pre- and post-Arab Spring. Based on extensive fieldwork, she argued that it is essential to provide an unbiased overview of the conditions for women in the Gulf, observing that most of the information received by Western audiences focused on the material success of the Gulf countries without showing "the real impact of these different facets of globalization on the family, society, and women."

Seikaly said the Arab Spring did bring changes to women across the Gulf. Contrary to popular belief, courageous women played an active part in political demonstrations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and elsewhere. However, women's participation in these events came with a price, as they faced harsh punishment and imprisonment. This backlash created an atmosphere of fear and caution that suppressed all dissent. Referring to the specific case of Bahrain, Seikaly stated that, "Political sectarianism from both sides (societal forces and the regime) has become detrimental to women's rights and the struggle for more permanent conditions ensuring [the] future [of women]."

Maria Holt, Ph.D., reader in politics in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Westminster, followed Seikaly on the panel. Holt first emphasized the importance of contextualizing and reconceptualizing notions of violence and women's agency in conflict areas. She suggested that while many scholars view violence as a foundation only for disempowerment and humiliation, in some cases the reaction to systemic violence contributed, though not necessarily positively, to the creation of a new model of "the female national subject." She stated that "Although the practice of patriotic sacrifice and protection of the nation or the community is usually defined as male, in the Palestinian case, women have at least partially transcended these gender categories and they are providing an example of the equality of sacrifice." Holt added that in terms of gender equality, this notion of sacrifice sets Palestinian women apart from related struggles for women's rights elsewhere.

Holt further explored the concept of sacrifice and its narration. Drawing on the experiences of Palestinian women living in exile in Lebanon and under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, her research has shown that Palestinian women employ several forms of sacrifice as victims, nonviolent resisters, and aggressors. According to Holt, "Violence entered every corner

of Palestinian life, including the home, forcing women to step out of their domestic cocoon and into the unfamiliar terrain of social and political activism." She concluded her presentation by stating that the sacrifices of Palestinian women, as nationalist acts, contribute to the protection and solidarity of the entire community.

The third panel participant, Sherine Hafez, associate professor at the University of California, Riverside, discussed the determinants of women's activism and agency in the region. She opened her presentation by noting the growing gap between secular and religious discourses following the Arab Spring. However, she stated that there are many different forms of identity and many productive ways to understand divergent segments of societies without seeing them as "distinct binaries and opposites." "It's like a one-dimensional lens that we impose on multifaceted individuals," she said. Hafez argued that in order to counter the serious repercussions of powerfully divisive dichotomies, governments must work to achieve the promise of a democratic future where citizens are treated with equality and dignity.

Hafez suggested that civil society organizations play a key role in bridging social divisions and building harmonious national identity. She pointed to the historical example of women's Islamic activism in post-colonial societies, in particular to Women's Islamic Private Voluntary Organizations (P.V.O.) undertaking social reform projects in the villages of Middle Egypt. In contrast to the binary representation of secular and religious, she argued that the structure, activities, and ideals of these organizations reflected a shared, inclusive character of Islamism and liberal secularism. According to Hafez, "It was impossible to witness these women transform these villages, apply these principals of Islamic social reform without seeing how similar what they were doing was to secular modernization projects." Hafez concluded that these groups were the outcome of a complex interplay between national modernizing strategies and individual subjectivities that together produced community narratives that, while identified as Islamic or secular, were firmly embedded within both traditions.

Palestinians in Israel and the Future of the Jewish State

The final discussion panel of the conference was titled "Palestinians in Israel and the Future of the Jewish State." Allen Matusow, Ph.D., the Baker Institute's academic affairs director, moderated a conversation on the role of identity politics in Israel's Palestinian community and the prospects for new policies or initiatives that support conflict transformation and conflict resolution. The two panel participants—As'ad Ghanem, senior lecturer at the University of Haifa School of Political Sciences, and Shuli Dichter, executive director of the Hand-in-Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education in Israel—were invited to address the following questions: How are contested Israeli and Palestinian national identities expressed within the Arab Israeli community? What are the current trends in the Palestinian-Arab perspectives of, and relationship to, the Israeli state? What do the future prospects for Arab Israelis reveal about the likely outcomes and potential solutions to the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

As'ad Ghanem began the panel with a presentation on the increasing challenges and tensions connected to Palestinian identity in Israel in recent years. Ghanem highlighted three key factors in this development: the supremacy of national security considerations in Israel, the collapse of bilateral negotiations toward a two-state solution, and the rise of Palestinian citizens as a stronger voice in Israeli politics. In addition, he pointed to the need to change the existing conflict resolution model whereby the relationship between Arab citizens of Israel and the Israeli state depended on the settlement of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ghanem proposed that this relationship should be reversed, with leaders in Israel working to improve the situation of the Palestinian community in Israel as a model for resolving issues within the West Bank and Gaza.

In the current context, Ghanem expressed his pessimism about the role of identity politics as a force for positive outcomes in Israel. He pointed to the current election cycle as evidence of strengthening identity-based politics and of a more polarized society in Israel. On the one hand, Arab parties in Israel unified as the United Arab List for the first time. On the other hand, Ghanem suggested that demographics among Jewish Israelis give Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu a strong base to continue in his position and perhaps revisit the controversial "Jewish State" bill to enshrine a national Jewish identity in law if the more centrist

parties are left outside the governing coalition. Ghanem concluded by discussing the possibility of a coalition among Palestinians in Israel with some parties on the Israeli left to replace divisive and discriminatory conceptions of citizenship and identity with shared ones.

Shuli Dichter continued the discussion about the confluence of individual identity in Israel and the national identity of the Jewish State. As a civil society activist, Dichter explained his role is to utilize the theoretical work of academics identifying the challenges, and attempt to create and test solutions within society. To address the challenges of identity and the tectonic division in Israel between Jews and Palestinians, he proposed an optimistic vision of inclusive national identity in Israel called "civic Zionism," as opposed to military or territorial Zionism.

Dichter summarized his experience directing the Hand-in-Hand Center for Jewish-Arab Education as a potential method for creating shared living and more inclusive identities. He warned that creating a truly equal experience for students is not easy. Bilingual education in such a divided society requires a comprehensive approach—from an instructional methodology that uses co-teaching (and not translation) by Jewish and Palestinian instructors to a shared academic calendar incorporating Jewish and Muslim holidays. Dichter related the success of his organization in expanding Jewish-Arab interaction from schools to the wider community. While bilingual education receives recognition from policymakers in Israel, Dichter concluded by noting that the bottom-up model is atypical for traditional top-down policymaking in Israel, and shared living organizations such as Hand-in-Hand should be elevated to a national model for social inclusion and civic equality.

Conclusion

To most observers, the Middle East and North Africa region is not a monolithic bloc, but rather a multifaceted and rich political, ethnic, and religious landscape. As the keynote address and all three panels of the conference demonstrated, this diversity also extends to the roots and current manifestations of identity politics in the region. Whether considering the rise of the Islamic State, the civil war in Syria, sectarian tension in the GCC, women's struggle for equal rights, or the seemingly unending Israeli-Palestinian conflict, identity is a critical point of division and tension

with key differences depending on the context. Policymakers attempting to lessen these tensions should first determine the conditions that contributed to their creation before taking steps to address them.

Despite the importance of historical and social contexts when analyzing the determinants and the consequences or repercussions of identity politics, the conference participants agreed that a number of common conclusions could promote to a better understanding of identity across the MENA. First, although much scholarly attention has been paid to identity in the political landscape of the Middle East, the MENA region is not a unique case in a broader study of international relations. Useful academic theories and models from studies of societies in Latin America, Europe, and Asia can be applied to investigate the role of identity politics on the people, communities, and countries of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Second, many of the conference participants emphasized the role played by exogenous factors in the selection of political identity in the Middle East. While an increase in "defensive identity" has roots in regional events from World War I to the 1979 Iranian revolution, recent developments, including the 2003 invasion of Iraq as well as the uprisings and instability of the Arab Spring, have heightened the public perception of national, religious, ethnic, sectarian threats. As mentioned by Shibley Telhami, these events coincided with a revolution in connectivity through satellite television and social media that contributed to the communication of local and national perceptions to a regional and global audience. The rise of ISIL is just the latest and most disturbing example of a defensive identity that has allowed the insurgent group to use identity-rich propaganda to gather support from the region and around the world.

The third and final theme that developed at the conference was the desire to understand identity in the Middle East not only as a formulation or selection process, but also as a means to take action. To date, most of the manifestations of strengthened conceptions of identity in the region have proved divisive and even violent. In many MENA countries, policymakers have exaggerated these perceived threats to particular groups as a way to consolidate power and project strength. However, a few conference panelists suggested that civil society organizations might be used to build shared conceptions of identity. While such groups now operate on the

periphery of most countries, leaders in the region and the international community should strongly consider efforts to develop and support programs in areas such as education, public health, and women's associations, all of which address common challenges and avoid polarizing conceptions of identity.

Acknowledgments

The participants of the Divided Societies, Volatile States conference in 2015 were Shibley Telhami, Frederic Wehrey, Claire Beaugrand, Toby Matthiesen, May Seikaly, Maria Holt, Sherine Hafez, As'ad Ghanem, and Shuli Dichter. Moderators for the three panels were Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Marwa Shalaby, and Allen Matusow. Ben Stevenson and Ariana Marnicio helped to coordinate the conference and contributed to this report.