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# Asfari Forum: The Role of Civil Society in Tackling Sectarian and Interfaith Conflicts in the MENA Region

12 November 2015

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## Introduction

This is a summary of a roundtable discussion held at Chatham House on 12 November 2015.

There were two sessions as part of the event: the first concerning the role of local civil society in interfaith and intrafaith advocacy; and the second focusing on the challenges for the international community in countering sectarian narratives. (In this summary, the discussions are set out by theme, rather than by session.)

The event was held under the Chatham House Rule.<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this summary are those of the participants. This document is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

## Causes of sectarianism

A great deal of the discussion focused on the root causes of sectarianism. On the whole, the discussants agreed that sectarianism is embedded in the cultural fabric of their respective societies and permeates many aspects of day-to-day life. One participant argued that the cause of the problem is not cultural or religious factors, but rather authoritarian regimes. Most, however, claimed that authoritarianism has been just one of the myriad contributors to sectarianism, and largely an exacerbating element rather than a root cause. Referring specifically to Egypt, one discussant emphasized that sectarianism was historically misdiagnosed as merely a symptom of socio-economic underdevelopment. In the last few years, however, civil society workers in the region have begun to recognize sectarianism as a problem distinct from development or security issues. The general consensus was that policy-makers need to face up to the fact that religion is a driver of sectarianism, but equally that it is not the only driver. None the less, one participant stated categorically that the problem of sectarianism in Iraq in particular arose not from religious differences but from struggles for power and the distribution of resources between the parties claiming to represent religious communities.

## Civil and political society

Many of the contributors to the discussion touched on the relationship between civil and political society in this context. One speaker described how Lebanon had previously been a leader in the Middle East in this respect, having established a law permitting the creation of civil society organizations in 1909. Even throughout the civil war, Lebanon had had an active civil society, funded largely by Lebanese citizens living abroad. However, the 1989 Taif Agreement saw civil society lose its leadership role in Lebanon: power was instead handed over to sectarian leaders, who in turn sought to divide and rule civil society for their own ends. The discussant stated that civil society should be imagined as a forum for ‘psychological warfare’ – meaning here that it could be a site for transforming sectarian attitudes into ones conducive to peaceful coexistence.

Generally, participants tended to view political society as working against civil society in tackling interfaith conflict. One participant, for instance, expressed frustration at the European Union’s decision to work collaboratively with the Egyptian government on its funding for civil society groups, arguing that this defies the purpose of helping civil society.

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<sup>11</sup> When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

## Competing identities

It was noted that one key driver of sectarianism is the notion that an individual can possess only one identity, by which it is implied that religious identity and national identity are necessarily in competition with one another. This in turn leads to religious minorities being viewed as outsiders by their compatriots, or not being recognized as citizens at all. One participant asserted, for instance, that the Alawite community in Lebanon are sometimes viewed as not truly Lebanese but rather as ‘puppets’ of the ruling Alawite regime in Syria.

Through their programmes, civil society activists are introducing to the region the idea that an individual can possess multiple identities at the same time. Participants emphasized the need to face up to the reality of religious diversity in their respective countries. One remarked, for instance: ‘if you bring up the subject [of sectarianism] with an Egyptian, they will change the subject or walk away from you’. Further, it was noted that in Lebanon the education system has historically promoted the notion of ‘fusion’ and ‘tolerance’ among citizens. This, it was claimed, has in fact hindered progress, as it has acted as another way of ignoring diversity and sweeping sectarianism under the carpet. The key, according to one speaker, was not to throw religious affiliations aside in the name of embracing humanity, but instead to come together and accept diversity as a value, whether on the personal or the socio-political level.

## Nation-building

Participants also discussed the issue of nationhood, and whether it is appropriate for civil society to seek to create a strong state identity over religious or sub-national identities. It was remarked that in Iraq, for instance, common-interest issues such as healthcare or education are virtually non-existent on the political agenda at national level, with sectarian issues taking absolute precedence. One speaker argued that the problem should be seen not in terms of having too many sub-identities, but rather as the failure to create the kind of space where people can achieve a sense of equality and citizenship. This, it was contended, is due to the fact that citizenship laws in the region are based on bloodlines. Another participant asserted that it is too big a responsibility for civil society to create a state identity, and that sub-national identities will always exist but become a problem only when they turn violent or are placed in a narrative of opposition.

## International funding

Another recurring theme was the funding of civil society groups by international governments and bodies. One participant described how, from 2005 onwards, the US’s anti-state policy in Iraq led it to pouring millions of dollars into Iraqi NGOs, which it saw as a key asset in rebuilding the country. While this project has experienced both successes and failures, the speaker noted that much of the money had gone towards NGOs affiliated to sectarian political parties. Furthermore, it was stated, in the post-withdrawal period Iraq has seen a proliferation of NGOs funded by religious groups from the Gulf region.

Most of the participants who work in the region noted the difficulty of accepting funding from Western organizations. One noted that many civil society groups in Jordan refuse any foreign funding, as they want to build trust within their communities and function as organic grassroots organizations. In Egypt the difficulty stems more from the legal restrictions put in place on accepting foreign funding, which often mean that donors end up feeding money back into the government rather than building the capacity of civil society itself. Another participant noted that the US refused to fund anti-sectarian educational projects in Lebanese schools affiliated with Hezbollah and other Shia groups. Some stated that their

organizations had begun using a mix of funding as a way to bolster their legitimacy, create a 'firewall' between funders and beneficiaries and create a more holistic programme.

## Recommendations

In discussion of which civil society projects work well, and which initiatives international donors should fund in the region, the overwhelming response emphasized the need to invest in educational programmes. One contributor stated that it is important to work not only with traditional religious leaders but also with women and youth, as a means of supporting these groups' legitimacy in talking about religious issues: it is crucial when working with religious figures to get them to draw values of peace and coexistence out of their own spiritual traditions, rather than imposing ideas on them from the outside. One project that worked particularly well in Egypt was the production of a documentary about the Baha'i community, which allowed the group featured to present information without putting the blame on Egyptian citizens or creating a narrative of victimization. Such projects enable civil society to open the conversation about sectarianism in a non-judgmental way, and allow citizens a sense of ownership over changes in their communities rather than feeling that change is simply happening *to* them. One participant emphasized the importance of being creative and initiating a diversity of projects, as governments typically limit the power of civil society by banning the traditional types of activities such organizations employ. Specifically concerning Iraq, one participant stated that international donors should reflect more closely on which projects they are funding, because at present much of the funding ends up in the hands of elitist groups in Baghdad.

## About the MENA Programme at Chatham House

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