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Middle East Platform III

Public report

Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the
notion of citizenship

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Middle East Practitioners Platform III

Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship

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The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) is a Swiss non-governmental non-profit organisation working on peace promotion. The CFG was established in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2002 to foster research and dialogue on peace issues, and to promote exchange between cultures and civilisations in the spirit that prevailed in 10th-century Cordoba. The Andalusian city called the “Capital of Spirit” remains an almost unique model for peaceful coexistence and for the cross-fertilisation of ideas. The CFG focuses on tensions and polarisations in all societies where Muslims live, and aims to enhance theoretical and practical conflict transformation resources in Muslim majority countries.

The Middle East Program, Phase Two, was jointly developed by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) and the RPC (Religion, Politics, Conflict) and the Middle East desks of the Swiss FDFA’s Human Security Division (HSD). The program’s strategic field of interest is to address polarisations and tensions occurring at the intersection of religion and politics. The overall goal of the program is to contribute to non-violent conflict transformation processes with Muslim key actors with different religious references in local contexts of Middle Eastern countries.

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I. Executive Summary

The third meeting of the Middle East Platform was held from October 9 to 10, 2017, in Istanbul at the Mercure Topkapi Hotel. The participants from the first and second Platforms from Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were invited in addition to a small delegation of Syrians. This meeting, as the previous Platforms, was held under the Chatham House Rule.

This third Platform was a success, all the objectives were achieved. It presented the fruits of the seeds that have been planted over the previous one and a half years. The changes in attitude, in individual and group behaviors were striking. Moreover, a diminution in polarizing geopolitical arguments and an increase in trust and serenity among the participants permitted more efficient exchanges that were more focused on the subject. This indicated that the participants took a greater ownership of the space, and were eager to take full advantage of this Platform for exchanging on actions, entry points, challenges and ways to overcome them. It also highlighted the appropriation by the participants of the rules and principles of the space to a point where they could show self-regulation.

The network has been strengthened and broadened. Throughout almost a year of communication through the Whatsapp group, the participants became relatively familiar with each other. The meeting enabled this evolution in their relations to be concretely experienced beyond the virtual space. Moreover, Syrian participants were included and communication channels between the conflicting parties in Bahrain were increased.

Projects that are being implemented as well as projects from outside the Platform circle were discussed. Participants proved to be very participative, making links to their own experience, to the respective context in which they work, bringing ideas to move forward, warning against pitfalls and proposing ways to overcome the challenges.

At the end of this third Platform, the participants have been empowered in this experience. They expressed the will to take more advantage of this network by making it more active throughout the year, whether by direct meetings or through virtual space. They also expressed the will to reach beyond the Platform, as some participants proposed ideas of public activities for the network.

II. Background

The Middle East Platform III, “Promoting Social Cohesion and Interaction through the Notion of Citizenship”, was held in the context of the Middle East Program of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva. This program is conducted in partnership with the Middle East and the Religion-Politics-Conflict (RPC) Desks of the Swiss FDFA’s Human Security Division (HSD) and is dedicated to addressing sectarian intra-Muslim tensions in the Middle East. The CFG maintains that intra-Muslim polarizations and tensions are obstacles to inclusive and peaceful societies in the Middle East. These tensions threaten the social fabric and prevent reforms and smooth transitional paths or reconciliation processes.

Therefore, the overall goal of CFG’s activities in the Middle East is to contribute to non-violent conflict transformation processes with key Muslim actors with different religious references in local contexts by fostering the cohesion and inclusiveness of the social fabric.

This third edition of the Platform, held under the Chatham House Rule, brought together civil society activists, academics, journalists and politicians with different confessional backgrounds and religious references from Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen who are working on practical projects that aim at the promotion of social cohesion beyond the sectarian divide or who are willing to work on this issue in areas relevant for citizenship.

III. Outcomes

This third Platform was a success. It presented the fruits of the seeds that have been planted over one and a half years. Changes in attitude, in individual and group behavior were striking. Moreover, a diminution in polarizing geopolitical arguments and an increase in trust and serenity among the participants permitted more efficient exchanges that were more focused on the subject. This indicated that the participants had taken a greater ownership of the space, were eager to take full advantage of this Platform, and endorsed the rules and principles of the space to a point where they were able to show self-regulation.

More in detail, the main objectives of this third meeting were the following:

- 1) Strengthen and broaden the network of regional experts and influential actors who are willing to engage in addressing these tensions and promoting citizenship and inclusive societies to enable them to take sustainable conflict transformation initiatives both locally and with a regional impact.
- 2) Foster the cross-fertilization of ideas and their implementation.
- 3) Follow-up of the implementation of the projects that have been discussed in the previous meetings.
- 4) Discuss the needs and entry points for further engagement in the post-IS and Gulf crisis context.

1)

In terms of strengthening the network, the results were obvious. Thanks to a continuous communication channel (the Whatsapp group), the participants were eager to meet again. They even asked several times during the year for the CFG to organise a new meeting. Throughout almost a year of communication, the participants had become fairly familiar with each other. This does not mean that the fundamental disagreements in their respective positions have disappeared throughout the year, but that they have experienced a communication that could be sustained beyond these disagreements in a inclusive participation. The results of the exchanges in individual as well as group behavior were patent. The meeting enabled these changes to be concretely experienced by the participants beyond the virtual space.

A few examples can illustrate these changes.

One participant, who in the previous platforms had shown some lack of ease with other group members due to the geopolitical context, had become much more open, both in interacting with the other participants and in his positions. When another participant remarked on this change of attitude during a plenary session, the person concerned answered that meeting after meeting he has got to know them better and therefore at each meeting he has felt more confident to behave more openly.

Such an example shows how much direct meetings are critical for overcoming social tensions. The actual polarized context gives fewer opportunities for different parties of the same society to meet and get to know each other in safe spaces beyond the political or sectarian labels they wear or have been assigned by the context. The promotion of personal meetings around common interest away from any hat should be a priority to enable the social fabric to be more resilient to external and internal pressure.

As for broadening the network, and following the recommendations of the last Platform, a Syrian delegation was invited. This participation was welcome and very constructive. Moreover, two participants who could not come proposed people to replace them. This was also very useful. It brought new experiences within the group and added opportunities to create communication channels among polarized actors.

2)

In the agenda, three sessions were dedicated to the cross-fertilization of ideas. The two first sessions presented the initiatives that are being implemented under the Middle East Program of the CFG in Lebanon and Iraq. The third session brought new material for thoughts as a Syrian and an Iraqi speaker presented activities that brought together Sunni and Alawi or Shia representatives respectively.

A first session focused on the presentation of the Lebanese initiative. The initiative consists in collaborations in the field of humanitarian assistance as a way for conflict transformation. Six Lebanese humanitarian associations from different backgrounds have come together with the objective of promoting inclusive participation and social cohesion in organizing concrete collaborations, be it with humanitarian or cultural projects. The participants showed a real interest. They discussed different challenges that such a collaboration can face. One of them

was the risk of instrumentalization. A participant raised the concern of how to know if all the participants in such an initiative are truly engaged or if it is just a façade for political instrumentalization. Another challenge that was discussed was the fear to do harm in the implementation. Finally, a participant explained that there used to be such humanitarian collaboration in Yemen but the competition among the different associations definitively crippled the initiative. To mitigate the risks, he proposed that such a collaboration should be strengthened by other civil society activities promoting joint actions so that the humanitarian work appears more obviously as a tool in the promotion of collaboration, instead of an objective in itself. Based on his own experience, another participant proposed to have a yearly rotating chairmanship among the member associations.

The following session presented the project that was explored for implementation in Iraq. The project consists in a conflict transformation initiative engaging tribal and religious actors in Iraq as part of the effort to promote national reconciliation. Such a project was said to be very interesting for Yemen. As the participant explained, the Houthis first tried to weaken the tribes. They chased their leaders. Finally, the leaders came together again under the umbrella of a Council. However, the participant warned that the tribes should abide by the law. The deal should be that, while the role given to them allows them to preserve a certain status, they should serve the law. A Syrian participant was interested by the part of the project focusing on religious leaders, that is more relevant for Syria as the influence of the tribes largely depends on the region in Syria. He explained that a huge number of sharia graduated young students, who have influence in their circles, were specifically targeted by IS and Al-Qaida. These religious young leaders can play a role in promoting a common (Sunni-Shia) Islamic identity and the value of coexistence in Islamic history.

During the session preceding the group work, a Syrian participant presented different cultural initiatives all targeting the youth either by conveying international information to the people, providing lectures and skills training or establishing a reader circle. At the beginning of the revolution, a group of ten people from different backgrounds (Sunni, Christians and Ismailis) came together to form the initiative “the Free Translators”. Enthusiastic about the call of freedom, dignity and fairness of the young revolution, they decided to translate the media coverage of the revolution from English, French, etc. into Arabic and vice-versa to allow people to have the information and see what was written on the developments in their country throughout the world. Even when the revolution started to become violent, they continued their work of conveying the information to the people. As the country spiraled into the crisis, young Syrians who had to flee their country lost their opportunity for education. In this context, an initiative called “Your dream is worthy” was launched under the auspices of the Foundation Insan for psychosocial Support in Jordan to promote education and culture among young Syrian refugees. However, after three months, as the young Syrians considered that the project could not open perspectives for the future beyond attending the lectures, they stopped coming. Lastly, an editorial project brought together three editors from different backgrounds. Away from any form of sectarianism, they selected books with only one motto in mind: “Read a book and stay young”. It targeted in particular the disaffiliated youth who feel alienated from any parties, as the project focused on common human values such as freedom and dignity. Such a project

could give free space to everybody in society as people just came together to discuss books. This enabled the production of joint identities bringing together different sub-identities. The Iraqi speaker presented an initiative that was established in response to the increase in sectarianism and sectarian discourse and violence after the bombing of the al-Askari holy shrine in Samarra in 2006. The objective was to avoid Sunni-Shia fights in Basra governorate and promote peaceful coexistence. The initiative, called “Association of the clans of Basra for friendship and peace” and then later “the Council of the Components of Iraqi Society in Basra” brought together five sects (Bahais, Sabeans, Kurds, Sunni and Shia) from different backgrounds (tribal, religious and civil society). The actors involved in the initiative were first threatened, but kept meeting to contribute to managing the city and reducing the criminality as well as the sectarian tensions. The situation considerably improved after the Prime Minister sent forces to stabilize the region. However, the chaotic situation resumed after these forces left Basra to join the fight against IS. The initiative succeeded in counter-balancing the chaos. They could manage security issues as well as tribal issues such as the occupation of proprieties by other clans. All the members work with their own financial capacities. They have good relations with the UN mission in Basra and the Committee for National Reconciliation of the Prime Minister considers the project to be a model which could be multiplied in other places all over the country. In the discussion following the presentation of this initiative, there was a general agreement among Iraqi participants that since 2011 the sectarian discourse has reduced. A participant predicted that such a discourse would not play a role during the 2018 elections as he said there is no market any more among the society for such a discourse in Iraq.

The three sessions showed a good interaction and dynamics. It is an indicator that the participants in the Platform have appropriated the space and they are now taking full advantage of it, bringing and taking ideas, exchanging on challenges, proposing ways to overcome them.

3)

The exchanges in the preceding sessions gave a good stimulus for the group work. Three groups were formed. As the delegations of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were reduced, they decided to form a Gulf group including Yemen. Whereas they had been reminded of the recommendations made in Montreux, they discussed new ideas, such as purification of the education curricula from any incitement to sectarianism and monitoring Friday sermons.

The Syrians joined the Lebanese delegation which had already had the opportunity to discuss the initiative together with the CFG and FDFA team during a side meeting. They discussed ideas to put together their strengths in order to launch a mediation space with Syrian pro- and antigovernment youth within Lebanon and promote exchanges between Lebanese and Syrian youth from different backgrounds. The Iraqis continued to discuss further the project they presented.

This session was also the opportunity to discuss the Platform itself and the Whatsapp group. As for the Platform, they called for more regular meetings, whether direct or virtual. They show willingness to take advantage of this Platform to reach beyond. For example, someone proposed to organize public events, outside the Chatham House rule, to appear as a group that works on addressing extremism and sectarianism. As for the Whatsapp group, its added-value

was highlighted as a communication tool that has enabled them to stay in continuous contact. However, most of the participants have felt frustrated to not use it more effectively. A proposal was to have a stronger management of the group with biweekly or monthly virtual meetings with the chair rotating across the countries.

4)

As for the last objective, it was reached through all the discussions, especially for the post-IS context. The Gulf crisis was not discussed much. However, regarding the Gulf, the recommendation to include Kuwait in the Platform was made as the Gulf participants considered that the Sunni-Shia tensions there have been increasing. As for the post-IS context, the need to target the youth was highlighted, while some participants warned against a “sectarian” generation referring to children growing up in the current situation in Iraq and Syria.

IV. Next Steps

The report of the meeting, finalised according to the participants’ comments, will be published on the CFG’s website both in English and Arabic.

In order to build on the positive results of this network that has shown increased willingness and readiness to engage, it is recommended to think of a new way to enhance its productivity. As several participants showed a willingness to see a stronger steering of the Whatsapp group, the idea of enhancing this tool as a virtual platform for meaningful and constructive exchanges that will contribute to keeping the enthusiasm and the motivation for practical joint actions should be explored.

On the other hand, some participants have proposed to do something as a regional network, go public to promote their experience, positive interaction and social cohesion and address sectarianism and extremism. A close steering of the group could contribute to this, by proposing ideas and expertise.