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Middle East Practitioners Platform II

Public report

Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the
notion of citizenship

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Middle East Practitioners Platform II, 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 One, 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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1. Summary

The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the FDFA's Human Security Division (HSD), conducted this second Middle East Platform as part of the Middle East programme whose aim is to promote peaceful coexistence between groups with different worldviews by reinforcing non-violent conflict transformation mechanisms.

The main assumption of this programme is that the intra-Muslim tensions need to be addressed urgently for the sake of peaceful coexistence in the Middle East. These tensions are considered major obstacles to non-violent conflict transformation in several sites of conflicts in the Middle East as well as to peaceful continuation of political transitions with a democratic and citizenship-based perspective.

Five countries were represented (Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen). Delegations of practitioners (political actors, civil society activists, academics, journalists, human rights activists) of these countries had the opportunity to discuss the different contexts of each country, their different experiences, as well as transversal issues raised by these tensions. The dialogues focused on living together within a national space and were based on the principles of citizenship and respect for pluralism. All the discussions were oriented into practice, as one tried to avoid doctrinal and geopolitical aspects within this space of discussion.

The objectives of this meeting were as follows:

- 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;
- Follow-up of the country-based developments and on-going projects since the first Middle East Platform held in June 2016;
- Identify and discuss entry points for future engagement within the framework of this program;
- Design the next steps.

The meeting was the opportunity for intense and fruitful exchanges among participants. It reached its objectives. More particularly, it resulted in a general agreement to study the reality of religious and sectarian media and to investigate how "hate-speech" can be monitored and countered. Furthermore, specific practical project ideas to promote social cohesion in each of the countries represented were discussed and the participants agreed on the necessity to promote communication and interaction among people with different confessional backgrounds and religious references at a national and a regional level.

This report does not reflect the opinion of CFG and FDFA but reports what was said during the above-mentioned meeting.

2. Introduction

From July 2013 to April 2015, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the FDFA's Human Security Division (HSD), conducted the second phase of the North Africa and West Asia in Transformation (NAWAT) program, which aimed to foster and support inclusive political participation of new political actors, at the national level. In this context, the issue of exacerbated religious identities (in particular between Sunni and Shia in respect with the West Asia region) with its potentially violent impact was raised several times in different contexts. These discussions with key actors and experts in the Middle East, and other stakeholders involved in the promotion of peace, led to the launch of the Middle East program aiming to address this sensitive issue. There are many stakes in this crisis and experts have already highlighted some including: an increase in the militarization of the population of the region, a growing humanitarian crisis with new flows of displaced people, and the dismantling of states.

The overall goal of the program, which was jointly designed with the RPC and Middle East Desks of the HSD of the FDFA, is to contribute to non-violent conflict transformation with Muslim key actors of different religious references, more specifically with Sunni and Shia communities, in Middle Eastern countries, by fostering the cohesion and inclusiveness of the social fabric.

Religious identities are an extremely sensitive and powerful mobilizing driver because they are often lived as a cement of the community and they touch on the deeper self of the person. As such, they can be easily affected and triggered by:

- 1) conflict environments, that push people to increasingly identify themselves along tribal or confessional lines, rather than political ones for example (though these may also be a factor);
- 2) external or internal actors who see an interest in manipulating such feelings to obtain broader support or to counter oppositional forces.

It is the main assumption of the project that the sensitivity and response of religious identities to the regional context and political instrumentalisation are causing polarization in the Middle East and jeopardizing peaceful coexistence and interactions between communities with different religious references. These tensions are considered as major obstacles to non-violent conflict transformation in several breeding grounds of conflicts in the Middle East and to peaceful continuation of the political transitions with a democratic and citizenship-based perspective.

The methodology of a safe mediation space has been seen as the most suitable approach to forestall this tension. Dialogues that were developed within this space tried to avoid doctrinal as well as geopolitical aspects of the Sunni-Shia relations. **They focused on the living together within a national space and be based on the principles of the citizenship and the respect of pluralism. The program focused on concrete engagement in joint initiatives to promote an inclusive citizenship and a sense of common interests in an inclusive society.**

This second meeting built on the discussions and results of the first Middle East Platform. Therefore, a specific focus was put on the regional and national developments since June 2016 and on the country-based follow-up of the activities.

3. Previous work: Middle East Platform I and its follow-up

A first Middle East Platform was held in June 2016. This meeting gathered Sunni and Shia actors open to dialogue from civil society in the Middle East who are working on practical projects that aim at a Sunni-Shia rapprochement or who are willing to work on this issue in areas relevant for citizenship. The participants discussed concrete engagement in practical joint initiatives to promote inclusive citizenship and a sense of common interest in an inclusive society. The delegations were able to work in country-based groups and present a road map for different initiatives to be implemented in their respective countries.

Following this first Platform, two missions have been carried out in Lebanon as well as two workshops on the issues of prisoners and refugees, issues that were discussed during the Middle East Platform I, in order to determine the feasibility of joint initiatives and look for entry-points for such initiatives.

In Saudi Arabia, a WhatsApp group has been created after the first Middle East Platform meeting. This group has remained very active in the sharing of information and opinion pieces.

4. Plenary discussion on the follow-up

The first session was the opportunity to discuss the report of the first Middle East Platform. The aim was to allow the participants to enter again the process and consolidate their ownership of the whole process. As it was explained again about the methodology of the safe mediation space, the organizers assure the framework and facilitate the convening, but the process itself and its content is the responsibility of the participants.

Another point of methodology that was clarified is the participation “ad personam”. Each individual taking part in the process represents unofficially the constituency of the community from which he comes within his society. The individuals can reflect opinions of or within their community. The advantage of an “unofficial representativeness” is that it allows the participants a broader leeway, more flexibility. An “official” representativeness would risk to bring political issues on the forefront and to confine the speaker to the official discourse of his institution. Flexibility is essential as it gives place to creativity, and creativity is an important key within conflict transformation mechanisms. Finally, the approach is dialogue and not debate as all participants within the space engage in understanding and listening to each other and in getting to know each other.

As a very illustrative preamble of the coming discussions, a participant affirmed that one should stop talking about coexistence among different parts of the society, one should go beyond coexistence. “There is no coexistence between the right and the left hand, there is life”.

About the period between the two platforms, a participant noted the lack of communication among the participants at the regional level. He confirmed the need to work at a national basis but stressed the need also to address the issue regionally on the cultural and intellectual level, for example in the media. He proposed to maintain a continuous communication among the participants.

5. Joint actions among people with different inspirations and ideological references: Example of a mediation process among people with different references and ideological affiliations in Morocco

After the presentation of the Moroccan process, the moderator emphasised that such a process gathers “moderates” in the sense of people who are willing to dialogue, whatever their position. The position should not necessarily be moderated, a broader range of positions is even more beneficial as it implies to gather people who might not often have the opportunity to meet and discuss. Being together and working together to lead to joint actions, this process itself builds trust between different parties. Pre-meeting preparation is important to identify the expectations and the concerns of the future participants. Furthermore, such a process needs time for the trust to be built among the participants, so they feel safe and secure, both physically and in their beliefs.

Many participants stressed the lack of familiarity with the others as the main problem. They highlighted the need for opportunity to meet. Meetings allow the deconstruction of prejudices and a lot of people then change their position towards the other as they could know him directly, personally. Some participants mentioned initiatives where they tried to gather Sunni and Shia in a tense situation. There are some obstacles such as the security matters and the reputation and especially the political agendas. A participant noted that one should not exert too much effort with those who have political agendas, therefore there is a need to find a balance between all different people who could help. A participant identified two conditions for success: independence from all foreign influence and freedom of expression and thinking for everybody. The reasons for failure would be a lack of governmental or popular response and a lack of commitment of either side. While a first agreement on concepts was identified as the necessary first step to enter into dialogue, the facilitator corrected this statement in the perspective of the applied methodology: one should expect to disagree with the others and the first motivation to interact should be the common interest to live in peace and the shared interests that all parties have in society. Mutual understanding can depart from fruitful cooperation. Looking for conceptual agreements from the outset is not necessary and might even be counter-productive for a fruitful cooperation.

Two behaviours were condemned. The first is the “sacralisation” of individuals or entities as the main source behind the lack of meeting among people with different backgrounds and behind the escalation of conflicts. Each group has its “holy” entity that becomes its unique reference. These “holy” entities forbid to meet the others, they impose their personal opinion of the others on their followers. The people become closed to any criticism and do not try to get to know by themselves or search for making up their mind for themselves on specific issues. This “immunisation” causes a singular view, and mistrust of any positive thing said about the other. It was noted that they have holy scripture, but not holy people or institutions. They need to be able to criticise, and that implies their own search for information. The second wrong behaviour is the recalling of history to justify and support a particular position. It should stop, one should separate individual or current issues from history and advocate diversity, acceptance, the nation state and citizenship with the same rights for all the citizens.

6. Feedback on the visit of Lausanne Cathedral

The feedback was very positive. The participants appreciated the visit of such a monument as a witness of an important period of history. They could see that confessional fights have happened everywhere and brought nothing. People should not repeat mistakes made by other people before or they will repeat history over and over.

The professionalism and the culture of the pastor as well as his open mind to the present and his knowledge about other cultures were emphasized. The atmosphere of reconciliation and harmony that has been developed in this place away from fanaticism has been considered as a hope for their own countries to overcome doctrinal conflicts.

A participant noted that the barrier of fears between the Catholics and Protestants still exists. The Catholics are still allowed to have their own celebration in the Cathedral only twice a year. It was noted that the most important is that they found a way to deal with the conflict without violence. A peaceful society that lives at peace is not a society that has no conflict, but one where there is no violence and one that deals in a peaceful and healthy way with conflict.

A point that was raised by many participants is the relations between religion and politics. The cathedral is still used for political occasions. The politicians still make their oath in the cathedral. A participant regretted such links, but others found these relations between religion and politics very interesting. They observed that these religious conflicts needed a political solution. There is no exclusion between religion and politics, but a healthy organisation of their connection. A participant noted that in Arab societies this kind of relation is misunderstood with a black or white vision: either exclusion or merging. However, this case shows that each realm, religion and politics, can be present side by side and collaborate, as the political oath in the cathedral proves. A participant noted that they do not ask for the clergy to rule, but a civil state that is established but not at the expense of the Islamic identity.

7. A common space for action

The “secular” space was originally created for religious and non-religious people to work together in a “common space”. The “secular space” is seen as a common space where everyone can come with his own worldview and interact with the others. It works as a mechanism of regulation among the diversity of the inhabitants to enhance coexistence. Some versions of secularism became extreme, such as the French way of living laicity today, but originally secularism was not an enemy of religion.

The Medina Charter, drafted 1400 years ago, created such a space. It took into account the three fundamental aspects of identity and of society: the tribes, the religious and spiritual values and the identity as Medina inhabitants.

A participant noted that Mohammed wanted to bring a new mentality with values. Since the Umayyad caliphate, the Arab world has moved away from the respect of these values and used these religious values to hit others in a “victorious conqueror” mentality.

Two factors were highlighted for the success of this charter: the revelation as reference, and power. A participant observed that the reference was not Mohammed himself but the document, so it could be recognised by people with different religions such as the Jews of Medina. The peaceful mechanisms of conflict resolutions, the preservation of the dignity of the opponent,

the need to defend against external interventions as well as the tolerance and the acceptance of people for who they are, were all elements of the Charter that were raised.

8. Bahrain

The situation in Bahrain:

Despite the troubles and the protests following the abolition of the nationality of Sheikh Issa Qassim, prime religious reference of the Bahraini Shia, and the economic hardship the Bahrainis are going through with the cuts in the subsidies due to the decrease of the price of petrol, some participants highlighted some positive trends. As they reported, there is an opening from the Ministry of media. Al Wasat newspaper was invited to speak on freedom and national unity on a Bahraini TV channel. It is the first time since 2011 that this newspaper has been invited by the official TV and it has been perceived as a real big step forward. The opposition has reviewed its agenda and its opinions. In particular, they no longer ask for the withdrawal of the Prime Minister nor an elected parliament. The issue of corruption has gained a bigger visibility and the financial control authority has increased its efforts to fight it. On the judicial level, some detainees have been released. Finally, the King recently gave a speech talking about sectarianism, citizenship and national unity. The Crown Prince and the Prime Minister had speeches with this same orientation towards national unity. That has been perceived as a positive message by these participants. There are still areas of negativity, as reported by a participant, such as the political stagnation on health, education and social affairs, but most of the participants were hopeful that these general developments have been going in the right direction and that they might soon deal with issues such as reconciliation and the release of detainees. The national current should build on that and work on a new vision for Bahrain.

One participant pointed out the role of the regime in creating the sectarian crisis and condemned the practice of the revocation of citizenship. A sectarian orientation is affecting the distribution of positions in state institutions, housing, state institutions, etc. There is a need to meet with ministers, including the Minister of Justice who tried to stay outside this issue and told the people to find consensus among themselves. The fact-finding report that was mandated in the aftermath of 2011 recommended building on citizenship and avoiding discrimination. Unfortunately, almost none of the recommendations has been implemented. He highlighted that most of the Bahraini people want a civic state. The national conscience is present in all components of the society. The Shia do not want to be part of Iran, nor do they want Saudi policies dominating in Bahrain. They want strong relations with the GCC and good relations with Bahrain's neighbours Iraq and Iran. Wanting good relations does not mean allowing them to enter national politics. The mix of the different components of society should be enhanced everywhere, even in the infrastructure that separates people on sectarian bases.

A participant considered that the information given during the last Platform was not accurate and he wanted to correct the meaning of opposition in Bahrain. For him, people led by an external country cannot be called opposition, they are just a movement, while the opposition works within the parliament.

Concrete fields for actions, entry points:

A few initiatives have been reported by the participants. A project of capacity building in civil society with women's groups started in 2012 and this group is still continuing today, even though the initiative was stopped by the Ministry of Development. That has been a unique experience, and the effects are still ongoing. These workshops restored unity among people. The National Association for Reconciliation is holding monthly meetings with sheikhs from Sunni and Shia sides. This association is targeting all segments of society in order to enhance the idea of one society in one homeland. A participant announced that a meeting gathering all the political forces will be held on December 3. The objective will be to discuss a space for common work.

Then the speaker presented several fields for joint action. A first field could be the humanitarian one. It could focus on families of imprisoned children. Juvenile convicts suffer from a lot of obstacles. Their studies are suspended, or they sometimes have to start again at the 1st level of the preparatory school, which is very unfair. The objective would be to strengthen the solidarity network within Bahraini society without entering into legal or political issues. The project could include the establishment of a group to accompany these families to the Grievances Authority.

Another field of action is confronting hatred discourse. Monitoring mechanisms to detect and denounce it are required, and punishments should be applied for hate discourse. The other participants agreed on the necessity to fight this phenomenon. After the events of 2011, the government did not take suitable care over speeches, even though some were very radical. Consequently, national demands converted into sectarian demands and many entities were pushed to the sectarianism. Over the last two years, the trend was to rationalise the media discourse. Some very radical preachers were banned from making speeches. Now the state tries to keep some kind of balance and watch on this.

Another important field of work is to call for a dialog between the government and the political forces in the country, and then with all elements of society. One should try to keep a healthy balance and way of communication between the three pillars of society: 1) the king and the government; 2) the elites, the NGOs, the political forces; 3) civil society. The principle of dialog should prevail and lead to reconciliation. A timetable of points to be discussed should be established.

A last field that was identified is a focus on the youth. As a participant said, his generation is full of everything that is difficult to name. It will need time for the situation to recover as the outcomes of 2011 are still ongoing. Political associations have not done the work they should have done, and civic institutions have only had a weak role. There is a need to enhance the role of civic and political institutions, to move from fanaticism to building a new situation. The efforts should focus the next generation that will build the country. Therefore, young people should be trained on values of coexistence and the civic state.

A participant from another country asked if music could be the vehicle for gathering people. A Bahraini participant explained that although the Salafi current previously used to forbid the use of music in school for example as haram, they reviewed their position and now consider music in the perspective of national unity to enhance patriotism or national sentiments. Another Bahraini participant backed the idea and affirmed that music and joy will benefit Bahrainis.

Next steps:

All the common actions should be done under the banner of the “homeland”.

The delegation wants to tackle the extreme discourse in the media and by the clergy. For that, they propose to address a recommendation to the Minister of Justice in order to ban any discourse that harms “the others”.

They also want to enhance communication among the different components of society. Politically, they have reviewed the call by the Constitutional National Assembly that is inviting all the political forces in December. They discussed how they could establish a federation among political associations, discuss pressing files that emerge and agree on a joint vision.

They also discussed how to support families whose sons have been arrested.

9. Iraq

The situation in Iraq:

Two main developments were presented by the Iraqi speaker: the liberation of Fallujah from Daesh and the ongoing battle for the liberation of Mosul. The speaker stressed the sufferings of Iraqi people from many problems since 2003 and the tragic aftermath of the liberation of Fallujah. Many massacres were committed such as in Saqlawiyya. The most important were perpetrated by Iraqi Hizbollah as well as the Iranian Revolution Guards. The operations for the liberation of the city provoked more than 90,000 displaced inhabitants and the majority of them are still living in internal displaced persons camps. According to the speaker, Iranian bassidj are orchestrating field operations in Iraq and the Mosul battle will lead to the same atrocities. Before the battle, the statement of the leader of the Iran-backed Asaib Ahl Al-Haq militia, part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, in which he declared that Mosul battle will be a “revenge for Hussein”, augured nothing good but a sectarian motivated battle. Finally, there are fears of a redrawing of the map of northern Iraq as it was reported that Kurdish members of parliament have attempted already to propose a new map and that Kurds have been ordering Sunni Arabs to leave Kirkuk.

Another participant highlighted the urgent need for safe corridors. People in Nineveh do not trust the central Iraqi government. The central government has followed a policy of exclusion and marginalisation of the Sunnis in all state structures, as well as the military. Even in the way it has been handling the operations now, it is excluding the really influential Sunni leaders. Currently people in Nineveh want a civic constitution, and international support for peace and stability. In Mosul, the Iraqi government hid what they knew – in June 2014, they knew that the attack was coming. 1.5 million people are still in Mosul now. They feel trapped as four of the five bridges over the Tigris have been damaged or destroyed since the beginning of the campaign. Much of the infrastructure has been destroyed by IS. Tel Afar, where Sunni, Turkmen and Shia live, is especially a place of great concern. The government promised that only the Iraqi army will come in here, but the popular mobilisation forces are on the outskirts and they are heavily armed. Furthermore, the PKK has provided 5,000 fighters and is controlling official crossings between Iraq and Syria. This will lead to a huge tragedy, especially if the PKK intervene and provoke Turkey’s entry into the battle. Even Sunni tribes have been committing crimes against each other.

A participant stressed the lack of state institutions in Iraq. The Iraqi army withdrew in front of Daesh and the militias came to fill the vacuum of the national army. All parties have violated the rights of others. The need is now to think how to rebuild state institutions, how to build the future Iraq as the post-Daesh period might mean a new beginning. For example, the judiciary which is currently under the government's influence and abused by it needs to be rebuilt and strengthened. The problem is that the political conflicts in Iraq have a sectarian identity. Agreeing with what was just said, another participant stressed that no one is totally innocent and that the Popular Mobilization Forces include Shia, Sunni, Christians etc. The Iraqi army should be given the responsibility to fight both violent extremism, Daesh and within the Shia forces. Until now, it cannot control the militias. After Daesh, it has to stop militias and that will be a real problem. Only the national army should have weapons. Otherwise, in post-Daesh Iraq, the militias leaders will become warlords.

Concrete fields for actions, entry points:

To get out of the current crisis, a participant believes that an agreement for a new political contract is needed as well as a law against sectarianism, to abolish the quota system which is leading to incitement. Another participant, while agreeing that the problem started with the marginalisation of the Sunni, observed that the marginalisation has extended and that the problem now is that the government is out of touch with the Iraqi streets. There is a need for a strategy promoting national society. The Iraqi government needs to be pressured by international actors. A participant mentioned the recently launched initiative of the "historic compromise" of the Iraqi National Alliance leader, Ammar al-Hakim.

A participant stressed the need to work with CSOs and NGOs on both the Sunni and Shia sides. He himself led a project aimed at minorities. They organised football matches, workshops, etc. The results were very positive, the project led to greater acceptance of minorities. He also highlighted the role of women which will be very important in the rebuilding of Iraq. Working with NGOs requires safe zones and safe areas. All the parties in Iraq have NGOs, but there is a lack of safe zones for Sunni NGOs. A suggestion was then to provide safe zones for these NGOs and maybe organise a joint conference for Sunni and Shia CSOs and NGOs. The objectives would be to bring together Iraqis and build alliances or coalitions to unite all these organisations.

Another entry point could be to work with the two real powers in the Iraqi society: tribes and religious groupings. Tribes are stronger than the government and, with the religious leadership, they both agree on the need to live under a civic state. The tribal and religious leaders can be used as a vehicle to build national identity. But they should be approached in safe zones, within their own areas, which might be difficult for some Sunni tribal leaders. Then they should meet and discuss the building of the state. They have to see a specific interest to engage in such an initiative, nothing can be imposed on them.

Next steps:

The Iraqi delegation presented a project idea that aims to target the tribal leaders. Iraq is a tribal society. There is an intermix of tribal and political circles, and between them there is the sectarian conflict. But tribal lines don't follow sectarian lines, that can ease the sectarian reading of tensions. As had already been observed, tribes are stronger than the government. The participants are not aware of any other projects working with them. However, if they can

be provided safe places to exchange, they can be a very fundamental force to talk about the building of the society. To begin with, mechanisms should be established to select the relevant leaders for this project.

As a first step, they are looking for a framework within which they can work and launch a joint action. The participants argued that a formal framework such as an institution or an organisation will be needed as it will be difficult to work on their own. The idea is not to just create for the sake of it. There is an atmosphere of mistrust. If they want to convene people to an event, they should show who they are, and be transparent. Otherwise, people will become suspicious and the initiative might be labelled in a sectarian way. So they first need to establish the framework, discuss a charter for this initiative that will host people from the Sunni and the Shia sides. A participant suggested that they might even use the CFG as the framework. A framework outside Iraq will have more credibility than if in Iraq itself. Another participant added that in the end they want this institution to be in Iraq and have support from wise people in Iraq. But they cannot at this stage influence that level, so they need to influence the level they can reach and step by step look for enlargement.

To establish this common action, the Iraqi delegation will be in contact through a WhatsApp group. One member comes from tribe with both Sunni and Shia, so this will help. They are also thinking of organising sporting, cultural, media or other events to invite parties and mobilise public opinion around this. They agreed to work in the student and university sphere as well.

While a participant from another country asked about the necessity to have political support for their initiative, a member of the Iraqi delegation answered that the problem is that politicians are the reason for the problems in Iraq. Therefore, they decided to work at civil society level or at the popular base.

10. Lebanon

The situation in Lebanon:

The election of the new President and the appointment of the new Prime Minister has led to stability and has eased the tension in Lebanon. The speaker observed that it is the proof that any resolution at the political level has an impact on sectarian issues. While other participants pointed out that the election of Michel Aoun as the new president has raised grievances among some Sunnis and that the appointment of Saad Hariri frustrated also a significant part of the Sunnis as they don't feel represented by him, the speaker noted that the presidential oath has had a deep impact as Michel Aoun's discourse was positive and inclusive. Many who did not want Saad Hariri as Prime Minister accepted his appointment, once they heard the President's acceptance speech. It contained sentiments and hope for the unity of Lebanon. The Jamaa islamiyya and also Ashraf Rifi himself, who founded a group against Saad Hariri's Mustaqbal, have accepted, and Mustaqbal is making changes within the party. According to the speaker, the region needs the role of Lebanon. A sign of that is that many foreign ministers have since visited from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Syria among others. All of them spoke positively to Lebanon, as a meeting place. Of course, the crisis is still not over, but the new government appointment should help. A new parliamentary elections law should be completed at the beginning of next year and parliamentary elections should be held within the next six months. The political understanding should ease the sectarian pressure.

Follow-up of the initiatives:

The leading committee identified for the initiative in favour of the refugees could not meet yet because of a lack of reaction to the emails sent by the local convener. The challenge of communication was discussed and it was agreed that direct phone calls are the most appropriate way to reach people. A participant confirmed that the atmosphere of the workshop in October was good. However, while he could confirm the willingness of some parties to engage directly in a joint action, he still wondered if some stereotypes were still present and preventing other parties from taking practical steps. A critical mass of support might still be needed to convince them. A broader engagement of the Swiss government could be a good asset to motivate them. He explained that external non-Lebanese help might be still needed because of the prevailing mistrust among the different components of Lebanese society and in order to assure the seriousness and impartiality of the initiative.

While participants from other countries asked for further information on the refugee issue, it was explained that the distribution of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is higher in Sunni areas and lower in Shia and Christian areas – the refugee number even exceed the Lebanese in some Sunni areas. The Lebanese government has used refugees in a corrupt way to benefit their own clans, tribes etc. in taking money from the international community rather than to help the refugees. Only the Ministry of Health has been working more seriously, and has provided help for the camps.

While a discussion started among the participants as to whether this initiative could be duplicated in other countries, and especially in Iraq, it was observed that in Iraq they are dealing with internally displaced people and not refugees. An Iraqi participant pointed out that according to the place where the camp is located, some communities are receiving more help than the others.

The committee of the second initiative, focusing on the detainees in the military court, had been able to meet two weeks earlier. They decided to focus the project on enhancing of the rule of law in the Lebanese society. It was observed that the issue should rather be addressed from a legal perspective than a sectarian one if they want to succeed. Indeed, it was observed that the specific sect predominantly targeted has always changed according to the political situation for the last decades.

Next steps:

The refugee initiative:

The initiative will target the Syrian refugees who do not receive support from UN or government. The organisations that participated in the first workshop will gather in-kind assistance, then hold a meeting with the coordinator of the project and will try to enlarge the group, including more Sunni and Shia organisations in the project. The objective of the meeting will be to specify the way to help and to discuss a campaign for collection of donations. The project should be launched in December. The media might be convened to the meeting as well.

The detainee initiative:

The next step is to hold more meetings, and shed light on the Military court. The question of the specific targeting of Sunnis still needs to be discussed. An idea that is still in discussion is

to hold a course in Human Rights. The syndicate of lawyers, as well as journalists, will be convened as their presence might be useful.

New initiatives:

The implementation of two other projects was discussed. The first one would be a media observatory to monitor hate discourse. It might provide a dictionary for vocabulary to be used and not used by the media in order to avoid feeding sectarian tensions. The second one would consist in a collaboration between Sunni and Shia educational institutions, to enhance religious culture (on both sides) that calls for public peace. It might be done through lectures that correct biased understanding, for example presenting 100 questions about the other party.

This last idea raised a lot of comments and approvals among all the participants as the hate speech is seen as a major regional challenge in addressing sectarian tensions. It was recalled that during the first Platform it was agreed that closure of TV channels is not the solution. One should rather look to monitor them and label them as promoting hate discourse. Then social pressure and media coverage could impact them and prevent them from broadcasting such speeches.

As it was recognized that these TV channels come from everywhere, a participant proposed that an external scientific study should be carried out to provide objective information. This study could list the terminology that should be avoided and give the basis for a dictionary with the vocabulary that media should use.

The questions of who will undertake this study and how the people responsible for the monitoring will be trained are still open. A participant asked if the CFG could undertake such a study.

11. Saudi Arabia

The situation in Saudi Arabia:

The Saudi speaker first explained the need to direct their efforts towards citizenship rather than towards coexistence. Coexistence rather limits its meaning to the realisation of peace in a radically diverse political and religious environment. The concept of citizenship goes beyond this grey state and brings to the fore the beneficial partnership, cooperation and exchanges among all in the framework of a state where all live according to a respected system and complete equality. The respect of the state is the common denominator of a healthy citizenship. According to the speaker, the concept of citizenship is present in Saudi Arabia at the level of the ideas, but still almost absent or immature in the practice.

Concretely, the current situation in Saudi Arabia is a state of great anxiety because of extremists from both Sunni and Shia backgrounds. The society disowns all of them, but they are still present in the discussions. From May 2015 to August 2016, 20 terrorist attacks were counted, security apparatus and symbolic religious places were especially targeted. The official treatment follows mostly a security perspective, while no real initiatives come from alternative avenues such as education, the media and endowments. A participant identified foreign intervention as the problem. No one should have loyalty to a foreign power, he said.

There are still positive grounds on which one can build. First there is an almost common agreement that the state, its authorities and security are red lines for most of the components of society. There is also an overlapping among Sunnis and Shia on the idea of a common homeland. Some significant civil society initiatives are ongoing such as mutual visits among intellectual and dignitaries, cultural centers, etc. The National Center for Dialogue is also a great asset. Funded by late King Abdullah, it offers a place for dialogue on tribal, sectarian and social issues. A lot of discussions are held there and recommendations are published. Then the political powers should still implement them.

Follow-up of the group, potential fields of action:

Beside the active exchange on the WhatsApp group, the members on the first Platform cooperate in different activities. A participant invited the other members of the Saudi delegation to take part in a seminar about the strengthening of national unity on the occasion of the National Day, September 23. A participant organised also a broadcasted discussion with another Saudi participant and a Bahraini participant. A next event is already organised at the Thulatha forum.

A participant presented the objective of the WhatsApp group as to bring the centrist voice of Saudi Arabia to the forefront. Their strategy is to promote a national state instead of a religious state, where all people have a shared citizenship and are not segregated according to their sectarian affiliation. A participant clarified this statement and explained that Saudi Arabia is not a religious state: It is a civil state with a religious reference. Another participant point out the need to start with the deconstruction of stereotypes and hatred discourses and especially with the monitoring of the media. A problem is that there are no tools to measure public opinion in Saudi Arabia. Some social media might exaggerate a kind of discourse that is not the official or the prevailing one. Social media has brought to the fore those who were previously unheard, a big part of the society is now hashtagging extreme viewpoints. Social media has become very powerful and has forced the state institutions to listen to the streets. It can pressure the state in its determination of the political orientation. What is interesting is that social media offers also a place of exchange and discussion. Monitoring social media could help in learning more about the orientations of the Saudi people.

The idea of establishing a regional WhatsApp group was discussed with all the participants. Bahrain and Saudi participants confirmed that there are a lot of such groups and also that people gather in salons and talk actively on these issues. The problem to reach beyond these circles, beyond a certain elite, was raised. Indeed, a participant was surprised by all these initiatives in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are always seen in a negative light due to sectarianism. The participant therefore was wondering how to counter this negative image, when it appears that many positive things are going on. The positive effects of these groups are not able to counter the sectarianism and the takfirism if they don't have visibility, if they do not reach the people who could be affected by these phenomena. There is a need to create another image which reflects the reality. A double face of social media groups was pointed out: they enable exchanges, but if the exchanges stay within the groups, they contribute to the segmentation of society because they concretise groups discussing within themselves and not interacting with others. To empower these exchanges and enlarge their visibility, a Saudi participant proposed to establish Twitter and Facebook accounts.

Next steps:

With the new members of the Saudi delegation, they have extended their network geographically to Medina and Najran. In December, a meeting will be held within the Thulatha forum. They want to intensify such events. Through the participants' networks, the Saudi delegation can have at its disposal radio programs and cultural centers. They want to focus on arts and culture and use these spaces to enhance and communicate ideas. The National Dialogue Centre would be a useful resource as well, run by very moderate people, so they will assess if there is some possibility of coordination and communication with it.

They will create Twitter and Facebook accounts. As Twitter is called in Saudi Arabia the "Saudi parliament" and has become a trend-creator, it is expected to have a bigger influence and a bigger impact at all levels with the use of this social media.

A far-reaching objective is to establish a CSO, since the parliament recently passed a law to allow CSOs for cultural activities.

To reach beyond the current circle of network and especially among the youth, an idea is to select about 12 young people to brainstorm what initiatives could be undertaken to spread the messages in society. They might work with an artist, for example, who has produced an iconic painting "Peace and Love". The strategy is to work with moderates first, and reach more extreme elements later.

12. Yemen

The situation in Yemen:

The situation has become worse and worse since 2014, according to the speaker. The presidency is not an issue of agreement any more. Saudi Arabia has caused dichotomy between the "legitimacy" of Hadi and the coup, and there is now no middle ground. Moreover, there are different parties within each party. Now it is a war of attrition and people are killed. At the beginning, the aim was to achieve some balance within the country. Internal positions became pointless after the Saudi Arabian intervention that internationalised the war. Negotiations have all resulted in nothing. The reason is that everyone is making a vision for survival of its own party, but no one is making concessions for peace. The economic situation in 2014 was bad but stable, but after the war, there have been no salaries for those under the "legitimacy", and then the same situation affected the areas under Houthi control.

A participant added that the escalation started with the Saudi external intervention in Yemeni affairs. The move of the central bank from Sanaa to Aden meant no salaries had been paid for the past 5 months, which has led to starvation. Ansar Allah and the Saudis are the root causes of the crisis, according to this participant.

A participant mentioned the talks supported by US State Secretary Kerry in Oman, but the speaker explained that Kerry only met with Houthis at this stage of the initiative. A participant reacted to the emphasis of the Saudi role in the crisis and requested the meeting to not forget the Iranian influence in the escalation and its interference.

Project, entry-points:

A participant had collaborated with another Yemeni (who could not attend the Platform) to resolve the abduction of personalities in their two different camps in 2014. However, when it

appeared that the military wing might prevail on the political establishment of Ansar Allah, they had to stop their initiatives.

The participant discussed a project that aims to train a Salafi youth delegation and a Houthi youth delegation in conflict transformation mechanisms. The objective would be to establish action groups in most of the governorates as watching units or “helplines” that can intervene in case of tensions between the two groups to help solve the issue. The logistical part of the project should be reviewed to overcome the challenges of the current war situation. Safe zones to implement the training have to be identified, for example.

A participant highlighted the need to work with the youth. There are two ongoing initiatives in Riyadh that work with ulama and with Zaidis respectively, but a great deal of work should be done with the youth to avoid sectarianism.

Next steps:

The participant will update the project and give alternatives to address the challenges of the implementation. CFG will keep in touch and review the design of the project. Then the participant and CFG will look for funding and ways to enable the implementation of the project.

13. Conclusion

The objectives of this meeting were as follows:

- 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;
- Follow-up of the country-based developments and on-going projects since the first Middle East Platform held in June 2016;
- Identify and discuss entry points for future engagement within the framework of this program;
- Design the next steps.

Regarding the first objective, the meeting was the opportunity for intense and fruitful exchanges among the participants. A significant number of experiences were exchanged and new ideas for action were discussed. An atmosphere with a real “team spirit” could be perceived within the sessions and outside, even though the diversity of the participants was increased and included conflicting parties. This diversity was a great value of the meeting.

As for the two other objectives, fields of potential action were discussed thoroughly among all the country delegations. Each delegation discussed a few ideas in detail and proposed next steps for some of them. At a regional level, there was a general agreement to study the reality of religious and sectarian media and to investigate how “hate-speech” can be monitored and countered. The participants agreed on the necessity to promote communication and interaction among people with different confessional backgrounds and religious references at a national and a regional level.