

# CORDOBA WORKSHOPS REPORTS

## Middle East Practitioners Platform I

*Public report*

Promoting social cohesion and interaction through  
the notion of citizenship

Istanbul, 2-4 June 2016

*Author* | Kheira Tarif and Sarah Franck

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Fondation Cordoue de Genève

Case postale 360

CH-1209 Genève

Tel : +4122 734 1530

Email: info@cordoue.ch

www.cordoue.ch

*Middle East Practitioners Platform I, Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship*

*June 2016*

**Author:** Kheira Tarif and Sarah Franck

**Editor:** Kheira Tarif

**Layout and front cover design:** Amine Lakhdar

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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 10<sup>th</sup>-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 by fostering the cohesion and inclusiveness of the social fabric.

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## **Executive Summary**

The Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG), in partnership with the Religion-politics-conflict (RPC) Desk of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs' (FDFA) Human Security Division (HSD), conducted this first 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 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.

The objective of this meeting was to discuss concrete engagement in practical joint initiatives to promote an 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. More specifically, two initiatives have been selected in Lebanon, one dealing with detainees and the other one with collaboration between charities. As the situation in Bahrain is very tense, an exploratory mission might be needed as a first step. In Saudi Arabia, a *WhatsApp* group has been created directly after the meeting and the participants exchange regularly on the situation. They are exploring the feasibility of different initiatives, including peace tourism.

During the workshop, the participants emphasised their desire to work fast, and to work efficiently, and also vocalised their desire for assistance in coordination from the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva and from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, particularly because of the acceptance of these two actors in Middle Eastern countries.

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

## 1. Introduction

From July 2013 to April 2015, the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, in partnership with the Religion-politics-conflict (RPC) Desk of 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 from Sunni and Shia communities, in Middle Eastern countries, by fostering the cohesion and inclusiveness of the social fabric.

The transformations that have taken place in the Middle East region since the wave of revolutions which started in late 2010 have had a major impact on the social fabric of the region. In particular, the aftermath of these popular uprisings and the strategies that the authorities have used to manage them have deeply affected the social categories to which individuals perceive themselves or the other as belonging. Social categorization based on religious references has greatly increased, creating social groups and social identities which are antagonistic along religious lines. For example, in the Bahraini context where a Sunni minority rules over a Shia majority, the uprising consisted originally in a gathering of Sunni and Shia citizens who were not defined based on any particular political, social or religious affiliations, but were claiming for greater political freedom in the wave of the so-called "Arab Spring". However, the larger context of the uprisings in the Middle East enables a reading of these upheavals based on religious identities. Debates could be easily shifted from the political arena to a discourse based on identity.

Since the revolution in 1979, Iran has been perceived in the Arab region as developing a policy agenda to expand its influence throughout Muslim countries and especially in the Middle East, including through the support of local Shiite political actors. This perceived foreign policy has raised great concern in Saudi Arabia, which shares with Iran the aim of establishing itself as the main geopolitical and influential power in the Middle East and therefore considers the post-revolution Iranian government as a major threat. Political rivalry between these two countries has fuelled a dangerous confusion between political interests and religious identities.

Recent history has shown much evidence that the Sunni-Shia religious divide has not been the primary element underlying the deadly tensions that are currently raging mainly in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. First, it highlights the complexity within these designations and that neither Sunni nor Shia can be considered as monolithic blocks. For example, in the Iran-Iraq war, the majority of Iraqi troops fighting Iran were Shia. Similarly, Hezbollah and Amal, the two main Shia parties in Lebanon, clashed several times during the civil war. On the Sunni side, the successive

waves of crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood, the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the war between different armed factions in Syria are examples of intra-sectarian struggles. By the same token, Hezbollah, after its victory against Israel in 2006, became the symbol of resistance for the entire Arab region and thus went beyond religious identifications. Similarly, Hamas leaders used to be based in Damascus, the centre of what is seen now as an Alawite power, but that used to be seen as the centre of the secular Baath government of Syria.

However, the balance of power started to move with the 2003 Iraq war and the fall of Saddam Hussein. The discriminatory and sectarian policies adopted by the Jafari and Maliki governments towards Iraqi Sunnis alienated Sunnis not only in Iraq but throughout the MENA region and even in Muslim Sahel countries. Iran has been increasing its influence with impressive effect on events in Iraq and through the powerful Hezbollah in Lebanon, currently active in Syria. The 2011 popular uprisings took place in this context and governments which felt threatened, as well as other actors and stakeholders, saw in the fragmentation of the social fabric a key strategy to counter the democratic impulse and claims of freedom, or to increase their power on the ground. Moreover, neglected minorities could have been tempted to look for support wherever they could find it, and sometimes to foreign powers, on the one hand. On the other hand, big powers could have seized the opportunity of denouncing foreign interference in order to legitimize hawkish policies. In these fragile national contexts, for four years the exacerbation of religious identities has been taking place through discourses and conflict narratives and also in the field, and religion has become the key issue of the system of orientation for self-reference, before political, social, national or economic criteria. Added to these national contexts, a polarization of the states themselves could also be observed, as some were supporting the uprisings in other countries and others were opposing them. This phenomenon fuelled further the polarization of societies, giving a regional scale to this division along religious lines. Finally, the alignment between interests and identities at the local level, the current geopolitical dynamics of the region (Saudi Arabia vs Iran) and the legitimization of political actors by religious authorities have supported the conflation of political interests and religious identities.

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 is seen as the most suitable approach to forestall this tension. Dialogues that will be developed within this space will avoid doctrinal as well as geopolitical aspects of the Sunni-Shia relations. They will focus on the living together within a national space and be based on the principles of the citizenship and the respect of pluralism. The project will focus on concrete engagement in joint initiatives to promote an inclusive citizenship and a sense of common interests in an inclusive society.

## **2. Conflict Transformation and mediation: concepts, approaches and tools**

### **Objectives of session**

The first session of the Middle East Practitioners' Platform included an introduction and outline of the conflict transformation methodology of the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva (CFG) and the Religion-politics-conflict (RPC) Desk of the Swiss Department for Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and their past experiences in mediating conflicts with religious dimensions.

### **Introduction to conflict transformation**

The first presentation from the CFG introduced approaches and practices for conflict analysis and transformation, and included a discussion of parties to conflict, mediator qualities (neutrality or at least impartiality), types of violence (negative and positive) and types of mediation (low to high powered mediation, secured vs. individual etc.). This presentation emphasised the important role of "creativity" within conflict transformation processes, then proposed two methods for analysing and effectively responding to conflict, and finally presented the diapraxis methodology. Diapraxis or dialogue through practice tries to develop solutions on the basis of practical experience and measures that are acceptable to all conflict parties and compatible with their worldviews. This methodology is a central component of the CFG's methodology.

Participants' reactions to this presentation demonstrated a high level of engagement with the theoretical tools for conflict transformation, as much as a great desire for practical tools and mechanisms for mediating between parties. The participants' initial interventions immediately raised the numerous ways in which tensions between self-identifying Sunni and Shia communities have been experienced, and explained (including as a religious division, as a political division, and as a social division). Participants also expressed a desire to hear from case studies in the European context – notably in Northern Ireland – where conflict between religious communities was successfully transformed for more peaceful coexistence.

### **Safe mediation space**

A second presentation by a senior advisor from the Swiss Department for Foreign Affairs focused on experiences of conflict and resolution in the Arab and Muslim world with the aim of introducing the "safe mediation space" methodology. "Safe Mediation Space" is defined as "a space in which groups embedded in different worldviews feel safe and not attacked by the other in particular in relation with the values through which they shape their behaviour and understanding of reality and where they can talk about practical things within which they can work together". The practitioner reaffirmed the importance of creativity within conflict transformation mechanisms and presented the action as a creator of trust between parties.



Examples included mediation between post-Soviet and Islamist elites in post-independence Tajikistan and facilitating dialogue between Salafi actors in Lebanon. The presenter recalled the spirit of popular engagement and collaboration between communities during the popular uprisings called the Arab Spring, and reaffirmed that the central motivation was to move forward, away from dictatorship, together. This collaborative spirit led to many popular, local initiatives for dialogue and joint work in numerous places.

Participants' reactions to this presentation emphasised their awareness of the importance of parties to the conflict and to the mediation, and the potential role of so-called spoilers. Interventions evidenced the common concerns for government engagement in social dialogues, as an important component of their success. They also raised the issue of certain parties' refusal to join a dialogue. Some participants also referenced the wider political atmosphere as a key factor in the potential for dialogue.

### **3. Case Studies**

#### **Objectives of session**

One session of this workshop focused on two case studies of experiences in establishing dialogue between various parties, specifically focusing on dialogues with a religious component, and dialogues held in the region.

#### **London mosques**

The first presentation was on experiences of facilitating greater dialogue between government and security institutions and the wider British Muslim community, following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005. In the context of rising Islamophobia and a fear of violent extremism in the aftermath of those attacks, the British government instituted some discriminatory measures which lead to resentment among the Muslim community, and alienated them from the rest of the nation, including the state institutions. In an attempt to prevent radicalisation among young people, this project sought to facilitate a dialogue between the British security apparatus by sensitising police officers and the Londoners including Muslim communities to the behavioural norms of the other. The project also facilitated periodical discussions of tensions, issues and problems within and between the parties.

Participants' reactions noted that similar initiatives involving parts of the regional governments had previously been attempted, in order to improve social and communal relations. However, some participants offered the view that Muslims in Britain are "more citizens" than people in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, demonstrating an understanding of the core issue in the fair and equal engagement of individuals in any nation. Indeed, as highlighted by a participant, "the issue of citizenship is the core of the problem". In this context, this same practitioner emphasised the need for a practical discussion on potential approaches and solutions, away from theoretical issues.

This peace mediation expert summarised the London police and community engagement initiative in four main lessons learned. First stakeholders involved in the initiative established a safe mediation effort based on the rejection of the "Clash of civilisations" and confrontation theories (George Bush & Al Qaida narratives). This required transparency, intra-community dialogues, and diapraxis activities between the police and the Muslim community. Second, the awareness of the responsibilities of each actor towards co-existence, the values of citizenship

and respect of diversity in society increased. This involved on the part of the Muslim community centre keeping up to date with new regulations, building trust with other actors, as well as devising contingency plans in case of crisis. Third, launching a culturally balanced mediation process led to lessening fears in the wider society. Concrete examples of this track included organising training workshops for new police recruits to introduce Islam to them; dealing with the fears of the police; organising Ramadan iftars for police and Muslim community leaders as well as open days at the Muslim community centre for journalists and politicians. Finally, anger of the Muslim youth was channelled to political and civic engagement rather than violence.

### **Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms in Egypt**

In the context of the Foundation's North Africa and West Asia in Transformation (NAWAT) program conducted in partnership with the FDFA, it organised a training workshop in collaboration with the Culture and Religion in Mediation (CARIM) program of the Zurich based Centre for Security Studies (CSS), the Egyptian organization MADA for Research & Consultation, and Future Step NGO. The workshop convened influential stakeholders from various groups and parties in Egypt, in order to build experience together on how to effectively defuse sectarian tensions by building mechanisms of early warning and rapid response and by cooperating together at official and non-official levels.

The workshop was part of a longer process aimed at building a consolidated early warning and rapid response mechanism to defuse violent clashes between Muslims and Christians in upper Egypt in a context of severe polarisation. It was held over five days in March 2013 and gathering a team of 24, with great success, thanks to the quality and diversity of the participants and their involvement, but also the careful program design and facilitation, and highly functional practical organization and teamwork. The initiative also resulted in the drafting of a charter agreed by all parties, which served as a formal basis for the EWRR mechanism.<sup>1</sup>

According to one practitioner, the presentation of this early warning response mechanism case is an interesting comparative example that could be used in the Middle East to help dismantling the crisis.

## **4. Practitioners' Experiences**

### **Objectives of session**

Three sessions of this workshop were dedicated to individual presentations on the context of the intra-Muslim tensions in each country represented in the event, as well as on personal or other local experiences of engagement for alleviating the conflicts. Over ten presentations from the participants with diverse backgrounds and pertaining to numerous religious, social and political trends, gave greater depth of understanding of the complexities of these national and regional issues. Based on these presentations, two common factors can be identified as contributing to the vertical divisions within the Middle East region, including 1) an absence of effective citizenship and 2) the wider, ongoing geopolitical conflict between regional powers – both of which translate into government disengagement from dialogue initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Owen Frazer and Lakhdar Ghetta (eds.) in *Conflict Transformations Approaches*, (Geneva: Cordoba Now Forum, 2013), pp.32-38. Available at: <http://cordoue.ch/publications/papers/item/287-conflict-transformation-in-practice>

This section will focus on the main points raised in these interventions, with special attention to accurately reflecting the diversity of opinions that was presented.

## **Saudi Arabia**

One participant from Saudi Arabia noted that there have been few studies into sectarian conflict in Saudi Arabia, and that there are seven different main Islamic traditions in the country. There are meanwhile structural factors that have led individuals to retreat into the social safety net of the tribe or the sect. These structural factors include gaining access to means and services, reflecting the break in the relationship between the individual and the state. This participant opined that there is no reason not to build strong relations within families, tribes and communities in Saudi Arabia, but emphasised that this should not necessarily translate into sectarianism and tribalism - both of which contribute to undermining social and political cohesion.

The presentations on the context of the Sunni–Shia tensions in Saudi Arabia, and existing work to alleviating these tensions, demonstrated that there have been national initiatives, and that there are existing social initiatives to bridge the gaps between communities. One Saudi practitioner noted two communal initiatives, called Thulatha Forum and the National Communication Forum, which encourage better relations and dialogue between Sunni and Shia communities through joint events, including art exhibitions, presentations on cultural heritage, and social events like *Iftar* meals (breaking fast during the holy month of Ramadan). These events are open to all members of the community and these programs were highly commended by other participants from Saudi Arabia, as well as from the wider region.

However, the presenter identified the lack of knowledge of the other as one of the main obstacles to decreasing tensions between communities and finding peace. For example, a participant noticed that Shia communities are often considered as close to Iran because of their common sect, while actually most of the Saudi Shia do not follow the “marja’a” of the Iranian Supreme leader. The extremely conservative and extremist fringe of the society was also identified as an obstacle to rapprochement between Sunnis and Shias in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the issue of how to balance private and public discourse was raised. Indeed, according to this participant, initiatives need to be taken that favour dialogue and discussion within the social sphere, in order to reduce inter-communal tensions.

In response to this presentation, other participants noted that there is less experience of and engagement in these projects among the Sunni communities of the country. Furthermore, one noted the general inaction of Saudi politicians in these efforts for dialogue. Another participant presented three needed trends regarding Saudi Arabia. The first one was to build an “internal society”, the second one was to be more open politically and the final trend was to be open to religion. According to him, reform in education and mosque discourses are a key element that could favour community rapprochement. He finally reaffirmed the need to distinguish Shia from “transborder alliances”.

One practitioner concluded this session by suggesting that the “collective homeland” could be used as a framework to find a bridge between interests.

It was also pointed out that the image of communities in Saudi Arabia is frequently distorted, and that the Shia in particular suffer in this regard, with much of the media portraying a negative image, and linking indigenous Shia groups with Iran, while on most cases this link does not exist. A further issue is that the main concern of the political elite is for security, while extremists attack Saudi Arabian Shi’ites for their religious traditions, so the moderate majority

is ignored and unheard. There was a general view that Iran's push for political influence in the region has a detrimental impact on Arab Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia.

## **Bahrain**

The context described by two participants from Bahrain indicated an open and mixed society which historically cohabited with good relations, but also one that has been subject to regional shifts in politics, and in which political conflicts have been translated into sectarian divisions.

Participants noted that because of the particular socio-economic realities of the country, it has been a location for preaching work (*da'wa*) for many years. One participant noted that since 1980s some religious currents (especially Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis) started to have a growing influence on the society with the support of the government. They opened Coran recitation centers, charities, women preachers started to gather circles as well. The ideologies of these religious currents have therefore been intensively conveyed and that created a rift in the society. The participants also noted that discriminatory government practices towards the Shia community have led to alienation from the state structures - where they have been barred from joining the armed and security forces. It was also reported that there has also been a drive by government to give citizenship to Sunni migrants or residents, in order to boost the minority Sunni population of Bahrain, and that many Shia civil servants had lost their jobs, exacerbating the sectarian divide. One participant affirmed that this is seen as a breach of Shia's rights and citizenship. This has also contributed to the rise of sectarian discourse, as the Shia community resorts to support from the religious community, and from Iran and the Shia religious authorities (*marja'*).

Participants also noted that there are still intermarriages between Sunni and Shia communities in Bahrain, and that these groups occupy a middle ground for finding social initiatives to tackle the division. One referenced the *Watan* (homeland) initiative, where members of local Bahraini municipalities have brought people together for social activities - however this participant opined that these have had limited success. Other existing initiatives include from dignitaries from the Sunni community, for rapprochement between the regime and the opposition, however this has not received much government support. One such initiative is by the Bahraini Crown Prince, which promotes coexistence and dialogue since 2011. Another participant mentioned the work of the Wasat (centrist) news outlet, which seeks to maintain and promote Bahraini citizenship through enhancing discussions around tolerance and coexistence, giving Sunni and Shia issues equal representation, and also through publicising the importance of dialogue. The interlocutor expressed the need for a national dialogue or mediation between Shia communities and Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements in Bahrain.

One participant concluded the two sessions on Saudi Arabia and Bahrain by underlining that bridging the gap between communities relies on the responsibility of everybody. He suggested three levels of action: the first one was the issue of recognition of diversity and pluralism and the recognition of the other, as well as adhering to the injunction that "there is no compulsion in religion", the second one was to build cohesion through citizenship and the third one was to resolve the political and geopolitical conflict. One practitioner reaffirmed that what is needed is to find a group of solutions that are feasible, as well as a management and a scenario planning. The entry points for potential projects could be identified according to this participant through a "conflict mapping", in order to identify accurately all the sources of the conflict and not limit its understanding to a single reading of the causes.. It was also postulated that, 100 years after Sykes-Picot and despite its drawbacks, it would better to accept that nation-states have been built on that division, and to build further based on these nation-states. The alternative could

lead to further chaos, and risk destroying many good things that have been built in the past century. It was also recognised that young people are extremely frustrated at the present time, and in such a state of hopelessness that they are willing to die for change to occur, and this situation needs to be addressed. The key to a resolution is by promoting citizenship and participation, and one vector for doing this is through actual joint projects which include both Sunni and Shia as full partners. Another is by the promotion of dialogue.

## **Lebanon**

Presentations on the Lebanese context, and existing initiatives to bridge the gap in community relations, reflected the complex religious and political makeup of that country. One participant noted that the Sunni–Shia tensions in the country reflect wider political crisis, which has entrenched political divisions that are conventionally translated as sectarian allegiances. This participant countered this interpretation by affirming that the Sunni and Shia are comfortable with one another, that there are intermarriages and integrated lives. Another self-describing Muslim Salafi participant described his diverse and overlapping Lebanese heritage, which includes Christian – protestant and orthodox – and Arab nationalist background. This same participant called for a disconnection from the outside regarding inside players in order to develop a joint citizenship and common interests. It was mentioned by several participants that the outside political influences have a very destabilising impact on Lebanon, particularly the competition between regional powers and their “projects”, which have an influence on local actors. Lebanon meanwhile represents a key example of inter-communal relations, with huge diversity, many mixed marriages, and a large number of civil initiatives to address tensions.

One participant, specialist on Lebanese affairs, presented experiences of an initiative to reform religious media and therefore public outreach from with the Lebanese Dar al Fatwa, i.e. the official State institution that represents Muslims (only Sunni in the case of Lebanon). This program aims to focus on problematic terminology that is used in contemporary regional media, and that contributes to deepening the divisions between communities, and that can lead to violent confrontation. This participant noted that the revision of Dar al Fatwa media content is being undertaken by local experts and researchers, and that engagement with this initiative was being promoted through meetings and workshops to encourage participation of students and various religious institutions. As part of this program, Dar al Fatwa is developing a curriculum for teachers and imams, training them to resolve conflicts between Sunni and Shia in certain neighbourhoods, through mediation. This participant expressed the opinion that the content of education is most important for resolving the existing social divisions in Lebanon, as is the content of media, as well as the content of religious guidance for Islamic prisoners. According to this participant finally, this initiative aims to develop a new framework on the specific relations between the religious and the state and to promote a new concept of citizenship through the religious discourse. In this particular context intellectual willingness and a spiritual revolution among the clergy is, according to this practitioner, needed for changing mentalities in Lebanon.

Lebanese participants at this workshop expressed the opinions that the most recent municipal elections in the country may signal a shift in the sectarian forms of political affiliation that have previously dominated. This may demonstrate a general frustration with the sectarian system, and the opening of a space for discussing Lebanese citizenship outside the context of religious affiliation. According to one participant this signal should enhance the awareness among politicians, that they should orient their actions from the monitoring of the street. However, one participant gave a precision that one of the main new development parties that has emerged,

Beirut Madinati, failed at the municipal election. For her, this is proof that their “jargon” is “outside the society” and “foreign to the mood of the people”.

## **Iraq**

One Iraqi participant presented the general situation in that country, and the particularities of the extremely violent political issues that have shaped social and communal relations in recent years. The presenter noted that the Iraqi conflict has become fratricidal, where “there are deep familial divisions because of the conflict”.

This presentation demonstrated that the reinforced sectarian divisions within the Iraqi nation have meant that religious institutions and figures have taken the lead in addressing tensions, through actively promoting a more plural interpretation of Islam. One practical and effective initiative was by the Sunni Waqf (religious endowment). The Waqf Al-Sunni is, according to this practitioner, currently looking at ways to reform not Islam per se, but how Islam is taught. The Waqf drew up a tribal code of conduct before the liberation of the city of Ramadi by Iraqi armed forces. This worked on tribal ideology in order to prevent revenge attacks against other tribes who had lent support to the so-called Islamic State, as well as honour code killings.

Another initiative was initiated by the Dar al Ilm, of the Shia religious centre in Najaf, where a Shia school has created programs for Sunni teachers to teach Shia students about numerous religious doctrines including from the Muslim, Christian and Jewish traditions. The speaker underlined that this initiative wishes to instil pluralism and educate students from a young age as part of their traditional Islamic education. One novel aspect of this program is that instruction on the different religions is given by adherents of each religion, thus avoiding bias and prejudice against the religions in the teaching.

The Iraqi participant also noted that a very important meeting, launched by the Iraqi Council for Interreligious Dialogue, established in 2013 in Baghdad, took place between Sunni and Shia religious clerics from regions as diverse as Mosul, Samara, Fallujah, Ramadi, Baghdad, Najaf and others. The meeting was held in Rome, Italy, under the auspices of the Vatican, because the clerics could not agree on a city in the Arab and Islamic world to meet. The meeting was initiated as a means for religious scholars to discuss important issues and find common ground. According to this participant, clerics have an active role in Iraq to resist sectarian discourse and hatred. He further explained that they recognise that only a civil state could protect Iraqis without having one group dominate the state at the expense of another.

He noted also that, in a climate like that of Iraq, the very act of bringing people into the same room to talk is a positive and necessary step to peacebuilding, especially when the alternative is silence or worse. As one participant added, “When clerics stop communicating, they often become tools of division”. He noted that this event received criticism from extreme parties on both sides of the Sunni–Shia divide; the attendees were labelled as traitors and as supporters of Iran, despite the fact that, according to him, Iraqi Shia see the relationship between religion and politics fundamentally differently from their Iranian co-religionists. He concluded by saying that all clerics agreed that the essence of the conflict in Iraq is neither religious nor sectarian but political, and the danger is, for this specialist, that the “top-down political sectarianism could morph into grassroots bottom-up sectarianism”.

## **Yemen**

One Yemenite participant explained briefly the current dramatic situation in Yemen and expressed hope for seeing an end of hostilities through negotiations. He also emphasized the

negative role of the media that deliver a daily discourse harmful for the Shia population. According to this participant, a secure space is needed in Yemen in order to find stability in the future. This participant also mentioned the lack of understanding of the make-up and evolution of Yemeni society generally in the region, and explained that such an understanding would help external actors better interact with the dynamics at play within the country. The participant noticed that the reshaping of the religious landscape, with a significant increase in Salafi adherents over the past several decades, combined with a demographic decrease in the number of Zaidis, has resulted in increased inter-communal tensions. This has been accompanied by the use of pejorative language and an increase in prejudice, which has contributed to the current violence. As with other countries in the region, the influence of outside parties has also been significant and is generally perceived to be negative.

Reacting to the country-based presentations, one participant and practitioner from Saudi Arabia noted that all of the initiatives that were discussed demonstrated a recognition of the importance of resolving Sunni-Shia tensions, and of presenting alternative solutions. It also, he said, indicates a new handling of this issue outside of the official, state institutions, and in the hands of civil society actors. It was noted that in some countries there have been improvements over past years (for example for the building of mosques or access to religious books), and that these had been achieved through constructive dialogue by minorities with the authorities. A participant also called for further study into experiments in transforming social tensions, as well as looking into ways to sensitise politicians to the hazards of the current divisive political tendencies in the region. He further asked the question: how can we promote civil and official collaboration in handling these tensions?

## **5. Thematic Discussions: Hate speech and breaching community relations**

### ***Objectives of session***

The next session focused on discussing two themes in the Sunni-Shia tensions of the Middle East region. The first was hate speech directed at each group in the media, and often by religious figures. The second was the breakdown in community relations, and how this could be overcome through exchange and collaboration.

## **Hate Speech – Media and religious scholars**

The presenter of this thematic discussion immediately noted the prevalence of ideologically extreme discourses as one of the preconditions to any armed conflict, along with socio-economic conditions and a group of people who convert discourse into exclusion and violence. He noted religious tendencies towards extremism, and the ways in which these are increasingly promoted through advanced modern media outlets, which preclude positive social relations through exclusionary ideology. Although, he noted, he cannot approve the closing of media outlets, this presenter urged that within press freedom it is necessary for persons and institutions of the media to respect professional standards, and to respect human rights by avoiding discourses that encourage popular hatred. He further stated that this should be enshrined in legislation and upheld by international bodies. Finally, he identified 5 needs to contribute to the decrease of hate speech in the media and in religious discourse: 1) to work on joint interest and to separate them from controversial and sectarian belief, 2) to get to know each other, 3) the need for a new education (imams, literature, religious culture etc.), 4) to confront *takfirism* and 5) to enshrine rights and equal citizenship within the constitution.

One Lebanese participant noted a shift in language used in official and social media, where antiquated and inflammatory names have been returned to use, including Safavid to describe Iranians and Ottoman to describe Turks – recalling a period of regional power struggles in the 14th century. Other dangerous language used includes the term ‘rejectionists’ (*ruwafid*) to describe Shia Muslims, which further entrenches exclusionary religious identities. One Saudi participant stated his opinion that the prevalence of hate speech in the media is partly derived from extremist religious entities in the region. Another Salafi Lebanese participant supported this statement, by arguing that the practice of excommunication from the Muslim community (*takfirism*) is being used as a pretext for achieving certain violent political goals. He reaffirmed that the central problem around the issues of extremist discourse is the emphasis on exclusion or elimination of the other. However, a Bahraini participant noted that it is not exclusively religious discourse that reinforces sectarian and social divisions. She highlighted certain media outlets, including the Wissal and Al Alam television channels, which broadcast divisive news to the Sunni and Shia populations of the country respectively. According to her, deepening the sense of citizenship is crucial in order to counter these harmful discourses. Another participant identified fear as the essential element that leads to hate speech and according to him secularity could be a solution not because of the concept itself but through the act of “believing in believing secularity”. One practitioner however stressed the need to find a new term that could be adapted to the Arab world. The concept of secularity is indeed negatively connoted and not accepted by all in the region, and an alternative and acceptable terminology needs to be found.

In order to combat divisive and inflammatory language in the media, one Lebanese participant proposed the establishment of a national observatory for detecting and monitoring religious-based hatred, for disseminating information on its findings. The observatory would be open for all individuals wishing to combat hate speech, and would be connected with other institutions and bodies (including religious ones) for effective information sharing. Other participants supported this initiative, and even raised the importance of such a body operating at the regional level.

## **Breach of Community Relations – Cultural exchange, social interaction and collaboration**

A second presenter discussed a number of areas in social life where relations between Sunni and Shia communities have worsened. This practitioner noted that exclusionary mentalities have influenced the daily practices of the individual in some societies, and that this can take



numerous forms. He noted calls to boycott certain industries or businesses, based on the religious identity of the proprietor. This presenter emphasised that the real danger is for the younger generations and children who are developing in this tense, confrontational environment, in their schools, mosques and homes. Another expert participant raised the issue of the potential role of the family in reinforcing social identities. He urged that the educational discourse within a family should aim to build a secure social space, and not a conflicting one. He noted that certain proverbs and statements may be propagated to younger members of the family, ultimately leading to protracted social divisions and a lack of understanding of the other.

The Saudi presenter opined that potential initiatives to alleviate community tensions must be removed from the sphere of religion and politics – which are the engines behind worsening social relations. He gave examples of potential areas of improving social relations, including 1) cultural and media activities, effected through collaboration, such as cultural fora, joint publications, festivities and celebrations; 2) the arts, such as joint exhibitions, artistic competitions, through film media and on broad unifying themes; 3) human rights activism, which can overcome religious and sectarian discourse, and 4) youth engagement to counter the negative impact of social issues such as unemployment.

One expert participant noted three examples, including Hutu-Tutsi relations in Rwanda, post-Apartheid relations in South Africa, and sectarian relations in Northern Ireland, as evidence that taking action against the extreme polarisation, and even violence, of some societies is possible.

## **6. National Initiatives**

### **Objectives of session**

The last day of the workshop included a session for country-based group work for brainstorming on potential national initiatives for bridging the gaps in the social relations between Sunni and Shia communities. With the support of representatives from the Foundation and from the Department for Foreign Affairs, three groups (Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia) discussed and formulated ideas for working within the specific national socio-political context and framework. This section elucidates the outcomes of this group work. The ideas for initiatives were framed as to be worked on by the participants themselves. Neither the FCG nor the FDFA has the capacity to support all of the ideas which need to be further developed and worked upon by the group members. However the Foundation is committed to following up the exchanges, the ideas and the discussion and the feasibility of further support will be assessed in due time.

### **Lebanon**

The Lebanese group discussion resulted in three possible initiatives for improving social relations in the country: 1) the due process of Salafi detainees; 2) humanitarian relief for Syrian Refugees and 3) a national observatory for media output.

The first issue, of Salafi detainees, will be presented as a national issue of human rights, away from a doctrinal issue. This will help to facilitate the engagement of support groups from different backgrounds, under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice. It will be approached as a legal and social issue, and with two tracks for engagement, each with their own committee. One committee will deal with the judicial cases of these detainees, and one with the social support for these prisoners and their families. These committees will host public meetings to put pressure on the Lebanese government to address this issue. The Lebanese group suggested a

number of organisations that can take on this issue, including Dar al Fatwa (which already provides aid to Salafi prisoners), LIFE, human rights groups, religious forums (which represent people from different perspectives, ethnicities and factions), the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice. Media coverage of this initiative will help to enhance feelings of citizenship by demonstrating that the state is supporting a resolution of the Salafi detainees' case.

The second potential joint activity would focus on the humanitarian relief in favour of Syrian refugees. Cooperation between Sunni and Shia organisations in the humanitarian field is indeed an important potential area of practical cooperation as a lack thereof is commonly observed. Workshops on humanitarian relief for Syrian refugees will convene humanitarian civil organisations from different backgrounds to explore practical ways of collaboration with a first experiment in the Bekaa. Such an initiative will be CSO and NGO-based and will work outside the framework of the UN. The aim will be to engage these different CSOs and NGOs working in favour of Syrian refugees in constructive dialogue.

The third project was a national observatory for hate speech in the media, based on the recommendations of one Lebanese participant during the meeting. The body would include three tiers: one for detecting hate speech, one for analysing its content, and one for responding to such outputs. The observatory would also act as a pressure group against the institutions that produce such discourses, and encourage the use of moderate discourse instead. This observatory would not only target religious institutions, but would also approach media outlets and United Nations affiliates to treat this matter. The group identified and enumerated media institutions in Lebanon, including television and others, that are responsible for this kind of incitement. They also envisage the inclusion of the Lebanese Ministry of Information and other media authorities to take the lead in such an initiative.

One participant from Saudi Arabia noted that the observatory is also relevant to other countries, including his own, and urged the group to use this initiative as an opening for other parts of the region too.

These initiatives would address sources of tension in Lebanese society, as well as building on potential unifying factors for all Lebanese citizens. The group's ideas also indicate a desire to engage government institutions in positive changes for reinforcing Lebanese civil engagement in contemporary issues.

## **Bahrain**

The group from Bahrain proposed a number of ideas of initiatives for improving social relations between political factions, as a means of reducing the tensions between groups affiliated to Sunni and Shia identities.

The first included a mediation space between Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi affiliates and members of the Shia opposition. The aim of this dialogue will be to encourage the establishment of some common ground for collaboration between the different political groups of the society, for the recovery of society. The first step in this initiative is to carry out an exploratory mission in order to see the feasibility of such an idea as well as to test the willingness for a dialogue. A more long-term aim to consider is to further expand this dialogue to other factions of the Bahraini Sunni political groups, in order to establish political and social relationships.

Another initiative suggested by the group is a project providing support and solidarity for the mothers of young Shia Bahrainis who have received prison sentences. The aim is to encourage Sunni women to demonstrate their solidarity with those Shia mothers by working on mediating with the authorities to secure the needs of those young people, and in collaboration with prison

authorities. These women will focus on alleviating acute needs including family reunions, supplementing finances, and providing means for those young people to continue their studies.

A further two actions were proposed as immediate next steps in Bahrain. One was the establishment of an association for people of mixed Sunni-Shia marriages, to act as a social networking platform to organise those families to show social solidarity with Bahraini citizens. Another was the revival of an official initiative called the Bahraini National Organisation for Dialogue, headed by the Bahraini Crown Prince, and its rehabilitation among the civil society, organising projects to encourage solidarity at the local level, by building personal relationships. The aim will be to improve this existing project.

These presenters from Bahrain also expressed the need for dialogue on the topic of hate speech and aggravation of sectarianism in the media discourse in Bahrain. Resources and experiences from other countries could be used for example the media campaigns in Northern Ireland following the Good Friday Agreement. The Bahrainis speakers expressed their desire to collaborate with the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva on this specific initiative. According to them indeed, knowledgeable figures coming from outside Bahrain could have a positive influence on participants that will attend these workshops.

The initiatives proposed by the Bahraini delegation demonstrated the extent to which Sunni-Shia divisions have impacted that country's society, state and institutions, but also indicated their intention to broach this issue at all levels.

## **Saudi Arabia**

The delegation from Saudi Arabia focused on the creation of mechanisms that will support and extend solidarity among Saudis, as a first step towards implementing organisations for improving the relationship between Sunni and Shia communities. One Saudi participant noted that it is not easy to establish an organisation or an association in the country, and consequently their proposed actions reflect that particular national framework.

First, these participants established a constant means of communication between themselves, by means of a WhatsApp group for sharing news. They equally proposed establishing more public forms of social engagement, including a Twitter page (which is a very widely-used mechanism in Saudi Arabia).

The second proposed action is to facilitate effective cooperation between existing forums and centres in the country, thereby strengthening their activities, their resources and their potential output. This proposal also included joint research activities, from researchers with different perspectives and backgrounds to mitigate the existing gaps between social groups.

Another cultural and social initiative proposed by this group is to facilitate trips and outings around Saudi Arabia, attracting intellectuals, knowledge-producers and media from the Sunni and Shia communities ("Peace Tourism"). This will allow these individuals to develop better personal relationships with each other, and afford them the time and opportunity to discover their similarities and common grounds. These trips could visit all areas of the country, to promote Saudi culture, and to reinforce a sound basis for building social peace and cohesion. Publicising this positive relationship in Saudi Arabia will reflect on the wider region's behaviour.

A fourth proposed initiative is artistic and cultural festivals and events to host people from all communities, and to provide a safe and neutral meeting ground.

A fifth initiative focused on promoting so-called ‘ethical programs’ that surpass sectarian rhetoric, for example an initiative entitled “be good to your parents”, to sensitise young people to positive social relations.

A sixth and final idea proposed is the creation of joint publications from people belonging to both Shia and Sunni populations, to help foster a sense of national unity among the nation’s elites.

One Lebanese participant reacted to the restitution of the work groups by suggesting the idea of a “Code of Peaceful Coexistence” that could be implemented on the model of the Charter of the Work of Goodness developed a few years ago by the Cordoba Foundation of Geneva.

## **7. Next Steps**

Following the end of presentations on country-based initiatives for promoting social cohesion, one Saudi participant asked for the Foundation’s close engagement with next steps in these countries, as a coordinating body within and between groups. Other participants expressed their agreement that next steps should be formally established, as well as the date of the next practitioners’ platform, organised by the Foundation, and the contact person in charge of the coordination in each country where projects were identified will be designated in the near future.

Within the CFG a liaison officer will be established to follow up the national initiatives. The next Middle East Platform is planned to happen by the end of the year 2016 with a broader diversity of participants including youth and women as suggested by participants.

## **8. Conclusion**

The participants highlighted the need of such meetings. They emphasised their desire to work fast, and to work efficiently, and also vocalised their desire for assistance in coordination from the Foundation and from the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs, particularly because of the weight of these two actors in Middle Eastern countries.

In conclusion, this first platform had two main objectives:

- The creation of a broad network gathering influential and knowledgeable actors willing to engage in the promotion of social cohesion in their respective countries
- Discussing entry points to address the obstacles to the social cohesion and exploring ideas of initiatives that could be undertaken by the participants

As for the first point, the platform gathered a diverse representation of Lebanon, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. While only one Iraqi participant was present, a delegation from this country as well as from Yemen should be discussed early on in the preparation of the next meeting.

As for the second objective, some initiatives and the way of their implementation were discussed during the country-based group works. In Lebanon, two initiatives have been selected, one dealing with detainees and the other one with collaboration between charities. As the situation in Bahrain is very tense, an exploratory mission might be needed as a first step. In Saudi Arabia, a WhatsApp group has been created directly after the meeting and the participants exchange regularly on the situation. They are exploring the feasibility of different initiatives, including peace tourism.