

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

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Ghadi Sary

Welcome, everyone, to Chatham House. My name is Ghadi Sary. I am an Asfari Academy fellow here at Chatham House, hosted by the Middle East and North Africa Programme. It's a real pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural Asfari Forum, the first in a series of forums that are kindly presented to us by the Asfari Foundation.

I would like to just remind you that this is on the record. You are welcome to use Twitter, using #CHEvents.

I'm just going to present our great panel today. I'll start with Mehiyar Kathem, who is associate fellow at Integrity UK and a doctoral candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies. We'll start with you, Mehiyar.

Mehiyar Kathem

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I've been working with Iraqi – and I'll only speak today about Iraq, because that's my area of expertise, so I can't speak about civil society in the Middle East. That's for the other speakers that will cover that broader issue. I've worked in Baghdad since 2003, first with a multiple number of NGOs that sprang up in the aftermath of dictatorship. I've worked on multiple programmes, international and domestic programmes, in the country.

NGOs played a key part, and civil society plays a key part, in the country. Beyond the news we hear today, there are organizations, domestic organizations, that work to heal Iraqi society from the abuse of dictatorship, and increasingly from what's happening today in Mosul, which has negative repercussions on wider society and not just on the people of Mosul or the areas that are affected, but across the country, including in Basra and Baghdad.

I believe that civil society needs to have an increase and a strengthened role to play, a more important role in the country's politics and in society. From my research on my PhD, where I'm looking at state-building and the formation of the Iraqi NGO sector after 2003, most of the international aid actually shifts with the interests of the US administration. Today, for instance – before we had security interests and the money was revolving around that. Today we have humanitarian interests and the money revolves around that.

So those issues are very important. Those key sectors of security and humanitarian affairs are very important. But we really need to have a negotiation with the Iraqi civil society actors and the NGOs that play a key role in Iraq today to solve some of those problems that we all experience. Transition hasn't happened fully in the country, the transition to democracy that we all yearn for. But I believe that civil society and different groups and actors in the country, outside the politics of the political parties and the elites that control the country, or at least control the formal politics of the country.

So I am open to any of your questions. I'll leave it for further questions. I would like to hear the other speakers.

Ghadi Sary

Thank you Mehiyar. Our next speaker is Nayla Tabbara. Nayla is Lebanese and she is the vice-chairperson of the Adyan Foundation, as well as director of the Adyan Institute (which means 'religion' in Arabic). She also holds a PhD in the science of religions.

Nayla Tabbara

Thank you, Ghadi. Just now before entering here, we had news of Lebanon, that there's an explosion in the southern suburbs of Lebanon, with 37 persons dead. This is part of the sectarian situation that we are in. So this sectarian narrative is related to what is happening, and what is happening is also related to the sectarian narrative. We are in this vicious circle.

I had prepared to start with something else actually, to start with a personal experience that I had. I was born in 1972 – you can count my age. At the age of three, the war in Lebanon started, in 1975. The war ended in 1990. In 2000, I went to study in Rome. When I was in Rome, there was – I'm a Muslim – there was a monk, a Lebanese Maronite monk, who told me: let's sit down and talk about the jokes we had about each other during the war. I thought, what is he talking about? He said: yes, let's do that. We started telling each other the jokes we had about each other, our side, their side. He was so right. It was so true that the jokes just tell you how we perceive the other. Some tell you that it all starts with jokes and then we build it up, build it up, and it becomes a sectarian narrative against the other, demonising the other. Making fun of the other and then demonising the other.

This experience also allowed me to understand that the sectarian narrative is not only religious, but it's also political. Then I saw what I thought I had as truth about all the history of the war, the events of the war, was just part of it, and was just the vision of my community. A blurred vision, sort of, or the way they wanted to see it, with a selective memory. The other had the other part, with selective memory.

This has been a very important moment in my work and in my life and dialogue. I realized that political is as important as interfaith. So this has led, among other things, to the foundation of – to me as being one of the founders of Adyan Foundation, where among other things also we work on the religious narrative.

It is very important to accept that we do have sectarian narratives, and not say that we don't. We do have that. It is normal, because we are either war societies or postwar societies. So it's normal to have that because this is how it functions generally. This is the dynamic. So let's accept that there is a problem in order to go further.

The second thing is, we need to accept also that our religious text and our religious discourse is also sectarian. We have words that we use to describe the other that we need to work on, that we need to explain. We have words that we use between – I would start to say, from the Muslim community, we have words we use when we are talking about Christian or other communities, that we need to re-study. We have words today that are used between Sunnis and Shias that we really need to get out of our dictionary.

So we need to be working on religious perception of others. This is one of the things that we work on in Adyan Foundation, because the first thing generally people ask each other when they meet is, how do you perceive me? What do you think about me? Is there salvation for me? Am I an infidel? Who am I, for you? So that is one of the basic things that allows to bridge the gaps, to get people closer together, at least on the religious discourse and the religious narrative.

I will stop here and maybe continue with the questions.

Ghadi Sary

Thank you so much. I think the idea of narrative is an important one, which brings me to Sarah El Ashmawy, who is from Egypt. Right now you're a research analyst here in London, on the corporate intelligence team at KPMG, but before that you worked as a programme manager on freedom of religion

and belief at Minority Rights Group International. There was a lot about the narrative in Egypt at the time. Can you tell us more about that?

Sarah El Ashmawy

To talk about religious minorities and sectarian narratives in Egypt is really complex but I think an easy way to understand it, especially if you will operate in the context as a civil society organization, is that you have the state as an actor who produces a certain narrative about minorities and about identity in general, where religious minorities don't exist and sectarian tensions don't exist. We have this one fabric and one nation where everyone is basically the same. Then you have non-state actors who produce narratives, such as religious institutions, and they have very specific ways of talking about the other, just like Nayla was saying. So, who is the 'other'? Do we like them, do we not like them? Who do we recognize as an 'other' and who do we not recognize as an 'other'? So when a Shia leader gets murdered in Egypt, the first reaction of Egyptians is: I did not know we had Shia in Egypt.

So this is quite interesting in terms of then people wonder, how do they extend their sectarian narratives to these new groups who are invisible before? Especially in a time where everyone is trying to reformulate their identity, including their religious identity. Then you have the media obviously, who also formulate sectarian narratives and talk about sectarianism in a certain very specific way.

In the middle of all this, civil society has to walk this very fine line where they have to counter narratives that encourage sectarianism and sectarian violence, but at the same time don't want to be exacerbating differences between communities and kind of shedding light more about what's different than about what's common, and how can we bridge understanding between these communities. As someone who was implementing a human rights programme in this context, it's a hot topic but everyone is so sensitive about talking about it. We were wondering as an organization, how do you talk about it without really talking about it?

We found a crazy but very creative solution, and that is: let's do street theatre in Egypt. Let's re-enact scenes of discrimination in front of people, where they can recognize themselves as a victim but also as a participant in the sectarian narrative, and engage with the problem without feeling really exposed about their own behaviours, and create this safe space where people question how they deal with religion on an everyday basis and how they interact with people. I think this is one very effective way we found to tackle a hot topic such as sectarianism, and to invite people to create their own narratives about religion and about who they are. This is, I think, the way that you start countering sectarian narratives, is to empower people to create their own narrative about identity, and be able to say to all these other actors who have a specific agenda: I'm sorry, but this is the way I understand my narrative about religion.

Ghadi Sary

Quite a challenge as well. Arine is a lawyer. He's also a social and political activist in Lebanon. As you were saying before, Nayla, the country has seen lots of bouts of violence. You did your contribution to the community in a very tough situation. Can you tell us more about your experience, Arine?

Arine Hassan

[in Arabic]

Ghadi Sary

Thank you. We'd like to take questions.