

FROM TRANSFORMATION TO MEDIATION: THE ARAB SPRING REFRAMED

RICHARD YOUNGS

Politics in the Middle East are increasingly polarized and fragmented. The Arab Spring's citizen-led spirit of reform is still alive, but societies are increasingly torn apart by bitter tensions between Sunni and Shia, secular liberals and Islamists, and governments and civil society. As polarization has deepened, the concern with engaging in dialogue to bridge differences has intensified. The relationship between these mediation efforts and support for systemic reform will be a pivotal factor in the Middle East's future political trajectory.

Key Themes

- The spirit of unity forged in the early days of the Arab Spring has faded and polarization has deepened across the Middle East. It has become apparent that many societies lack consensus on basic political rules of the game.
- Nearly all Middle Eastern states have some form of national dialogue to help build consensus, and many international actors stress the need for an inclusive process of mutual compromise to lay the groundwork for political reform.
- Strategic approaches to the Arab Spring need reframing to reflect the fact that the fate of political reform hinges upon successful consensus building and dialogue on political rules.
- Admirably, the European Union (EU) has increased the emphasis on consensus building in its diplomatic efforts and its funding initiatives across the Middle East.
- The necessary focus on mediation and dialogue must not supplant support for political reform. Reform and dialogue need to progress in parallel and be mutually reinforcing.

Striking the Right Balance

National dialogues differ considerably across countries. They are all designed to foster agreement between a wide range of political actors on reform options, but their formats and remits vary significantly—as have their effects on political reform.

The way in which political reform and consensus building interact varies across countries.

Inclusive dialogue can facilitate political reform, and in some countries it has been necessary to keep reform momentum on track. But in other countries, some degree of political reform is needed to level the playing field and establish conditions conducive to successful mediation.

International actors like the EU must effectively balance mediation and reform promotion.

Mediation should not become a substitute for reform initiatives. The EU must not tilt too far toward elite-centered deal making that undercuts the spirit of political reform that marked the Arab Spring's origins. It needs to be more aware of the potential drawbacks of mediation that is not accompanied by a broader upgrade of reform efforts across the Middle East.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Youngs is a senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Program. He is an expert on the foreign policy of the European Union, in particular on questions of democracy support.

CONTACT

Christine Lynch
Senior Communications Manager
+32 2 209 29 93
clynch@ceip.org

CarnegieEurope.eu

 [@Carnegie_Europe](https://twitter.com/Carnegie_Europe)

 [facebook.com/
CarnegieEurope](https://facebook.com/CarnegieEurope)

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance the cause of peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.

© 2014 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

The Carnegie Endowment does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.