



Reaching Out to the Arab Spring: Lessons from an American Experience

**An Interview with Stephen McInerney
Executive Director, Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)**

By Alona Volinsky*

September 2013

For Americans, reaching out to the Arab Spring is much easier than for Israelis. Therefore, Israeli institutions seeking dialogue with the region can benefit from insights collected and lessons learned by those in the US that are constantly engaging with emerging elites in the Arab world. The US-based Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) is a leading institution in this field. In an extensive interview with Mitvim, POMED's Executive Director, Stephen McInerney, speaks about progress towards Arab democratization, the rising significance of Arab think tanks, the importance of building a network with Arab partners, the characteristics of current US-Arab dialogues, and the prospects for broader Israeli-Arab ties.

A. About POMED: Supporting Arab democratization and US-Arab dialogue

The [Project on Middle East Democracy](#) (POMED) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization based in Washington D.C. dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the US can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, civil society partnerships, and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for US policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

POMED regularly conducts conversations and meetings with US policymakers in Congress, as well as officials with the State Department, National Security Council, and Department of Defense. It also organizes private round tables and public events with participation from representatives and policy makers from both the Arab world and Washington. These events aim at keeping policymakers well informed about the developments in the Arab world and at enhancing dialogue. POMED also publishes position papers, original research, and analysis to enrich the public discourse and the decision-making process. Finally, POMED partners with nascent civil society groups in the Arab world to build their capacity to encourage policy analysis and government accountability.

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B. Arab democratization is progressing slowly; Tunisia is the most successful

Chances for democratization in the different Arab states vary. The transition differs significantly from one country to another and it will take a lot of time until this process reaches the desired magnitude.

Egypt has not moved in the direction that everyone had hoped following the excitement of seeing Mubarak overthrown in 2011. Egypt's leaders have consistently failed to meet the demands of their citizens for accountable government institutions that respect the rights of all Egyptians. The military's ouster of Mohamed Morsi has only highlighted the failure of Egypt's transition to democracy. Some in Washington have viewed this move as an alarming setback and a dangerous precedent while others who were alarmed about the direction of Egypt under Morsi and the Brotherhood have welcomed the army's intervention in the short-term. Egypt is widely viewed as the most important Arab Spring country, and it is widely perceived that a failure of Egypt's transition would have serious consequences for the region and for US national interests.

Tunisia is currently in the best position in terms of transition to democracy, despite political difficulties and polarization. It had a more developed economy and a more educated public than other Arab Spring states before the protests arose, and the population is generally more educated.

Libya has several great challenges that other countries do not have, including high rates of arms possession and a major political vacuum. However, it has an advantage of possessing natural resources to support its economy, in times when economy constitutes a main pressure in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen.

Yemen suffers from poverty more than the other Arab Spring states. Its transition process has made slow progress, but unlike in other Arab Spring states, Yemen's politicians seem to be making genuine efforts to reach consensus regarding elections and the constitution. This assists Yemen in reducing political polarization and in avoiding difficulties encountered by other Arab states, such as Egypt, though the challenges remain great

C. The emergence of Arab think tanks is a key post-Arab Spring phenomenon

In the late 1980s and early 1990s it was human rights organizations that quickly spread in the Middle East. Now it is think tanks. Across the Arab world, there seems to be a lot of energy and enthusiasm for the development of think tanks and other institutions that carry out independent research and analysis.

Interest in such work had begun to emerge prior to the uprisings of 2011, but was accelerated dramatically by the Arab Spring and the political changes that it brought. In countries like Tunisia and Libya, it suddenly became possible to undertake independent political analysis and writing, which had been strictly forbidden by the former regimes.

The political transitions in each of the Arab Spring countries included new political parties and movements, suddenly faced with the challenges of governing and policymaking for the first time. Many of these groups have been receptive to outside analysis and policy recommendations, increasing the demand for think tank work.

Opposition parties are also looking to think tanks when developing alternatives to government policies, which will better address the country's challenges.

Many of the Arab think tanks are now in their first stages of development. With time, we are likely to see further institutionalization and stabilization of the field. Some think tanks will fade away, some will grow and improve, and some will merge with others.

The return since 2011 of large numbers of expatriates from the West to countries such as Libya has also accelerated the emergence of Arab think tanks, as those returning from abroad have included many who had gained experience and familiarity with think tanks in Western countries.

D. A good network in the Arab world is a prerequisite for effective partnerships

POMED's staff regularly travels to countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and participates in various regional conferences. This has helped POMED to gradually build a strong network of contacts across the region, which is extremely helpful in tracking political developments on the ground and especially in terms of the civil society scene. This network is also extremely valuable in terms of identifying potential partner organizations.

POMED normally reaches out to numerous civil society organizations to explore potential partnership opportunities, and continues the dialogue with those that seem to be the best fit and the most likely to result in productive, cooperative projects. Most often, POMED will spend several months developing project plans with its local partners, followed by yearlong agreements to move forward on particular projects. These projects focus on building the capacity of NGOs in the Arab world to undertake independent tracking and analysis of their government's policies, to develop recommendations for local policymakers, and to undertake advocacy on behalf of those recommendations.

POMED has different types of partners - people who are active in civil society movements, in think tanks, in political movements - largely opposition parties, researchers, members of NGOs, and human rights organizations. Many of POMED's partners are now in transition, while some used to be part of the civil society but now are active within political parties. Others are political activists who are not officially part of a formally instituted organization but are working to enhance democracy through informal movements.

E. US-Arab dialogues now focus on domestic challenges to democratization

Before the revolutions the focus of mutual meetings was mainly on regional and international issues, whereas now the main interest has shifted to domestic and internal issues. Still there is focus on US policy in the region and broad regional topics, but they occupy a much smaller space than before.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the focus was on attempts to pressure the governments towards a more democratic society and more freedom. Right now this stage is behind and the focus is on institution-building.

Most of POMED's partners are still excited about the revolutions and the opportunities brought on by the Arab Spring, yet they remain more focused on the outcomes and the difficulties of evolving towards a more democratic and opened societies.

F. Israeli-Arab dialogue can be best carried out during international events

In general, the Arab Spring has resulted in less focus in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya on issues regarding Israel and the Palestinians, as the citizens of those countries remain preoccupied with their own domestic politics. Israel comes back to the spotlight when a specific incident takes place or when there is violent escalation involving Israel.

In the past, under the rule of stagnant authoritarian governments, there was greater interest in regional issues, with Israel often topping that list. Currently, there is a sense that previous corrupt dictators were adapting policies towards Israel and the West without taking into account the positions and sensitivities of the public. The previous leaders are also often accused of neglecting the Palestinian issue.

Although the populations within specific Arab Spring countries currently appear to be less preoccupied with Israel and the Palestinians, there has also emerged a sense across the Arab world that it is now time for the Palestinians to achieve their independence from Israel, just as Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, and Yemenis gained their freedom from local dictators.

Engaging in dialogue with groups in the Arab world will be difficult for Israel. Despite the new freedoms, engagement with Israel is problematic even for the most liberal fragments of the societies. Direct bilateral exchange would be tough, however, engaging with actors in the Arab world as part of wider international networks, discussions, and conferences may be easier and more practical.

Arab activists and NGO leaders seem to be willing to engage with Israelis in a neutral environment. In the post-Arab Spring reality, more Arab representatives participate in international events taking place in Europe and in the US, opening a great range of opportunities for Israeli engagement with them.