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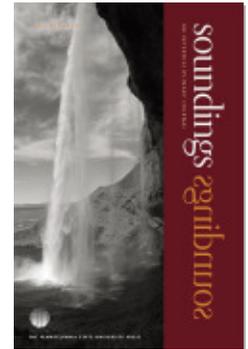
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## **Fikra Forum: Online Engagement between the West and the Middle East**

David Pollock, Gilad Wenig, Noam Raydan, Gavi Barnhard

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## *Fikra Forum* *Online Engagement between* *the West and the Middle East*

DAVID POLLOCK, GILAD WENIG, NOAM  
 RAYDAN, AND GAVI BARNHARD

### *Abstract*

This article introduces *Fikra Forum*, an ongoing experiment in online engagement that attempts to help fill a serious gap in communication and mutual understanding in both the virtual and the real worlds. It offers a platform for activists, experts, and concerned citizens throughout the Middle East to share their ideas and experiences directly with an interested American audience—and with each other. The focus is on issues of democracy, reform, religious tolerance, and countering violent extremism in the region, all broadly defined.

**Keywords:** Middle East, extremism, democracy, reform, U.S. foreign policy

### **Background and Overview**

Born out of the political unrest that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread throughout the Middle East, *Fikra Forum* is a bilingual online community that seeks to generate discussions on social, political, and economic issues in the region, with an eye toward informing U.S. policy. As a project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Fikra Forum*'s reach expands beyond that of traditional policy papers and research by engaging a much wider spectrum of individuals in the Middle East with a diverse range of views.

In the three years since its founding, this forum has engaged over one hundred different authors from across the Middle East, literally from the Atlantic to the Gulf, joining their American, European, and other counterparts in dialogue and debate over these issues. The direct audience is still modest, but it is growing; selected posts have been widely replayed in other influential online outlets, including the *Huffington Post*, the *Atlantic*, and the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*.

The range of contributors demonstrates that *Fikra Forum* has managed, in its own relatively small way, to break through a number of stubborn taboos in certain areas of engagement. Contributors include Turks and Kurds, Palestinians and Israelis, Salafis and secularists. They represent a veritable mosaic of regional religions: Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Christians, Druze, Jews, and more. Politically, writers include both pro- and anti-regime activists from countries around the region in transition or in turmoil: from Tunisia, on the successful end of the spectrum, all the way to Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq—and notably also from Syria, which remains mired in full-fledged civil war. Perhaps most strikingly of all, participants in this dialogue understand that it is sponsored by a U.S. think tank known for engaging not just with Americans, but also with all the peoples of the Middle East.

### **Real-World Effects**

Beyond this effort at engagement in the virtual space, *Fikra Forum* has constructed several bridges to the real world. It has helped bring a handful of prominent Arab contributors—from Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—to Washington, D.C. for several weeks of intensive meetings, brainstorming sessions, and media exposure. And it has sent its American staff to those places and others, and also to Europe and around the United States, for parallel personal engagement.

The linguistic vehicle for this face-to-face engagement has ranged from English to Arabic, French, Hebrew, and a smattering of other languages. The venues have ranged from the halls of parliaments to the ivory towers and cafeterias of academe, from the White House to Congress to TV studios and beyond. The reception is usually cordial, even if the discussion is sometimes spirited, even heated. Overall, the feedback is encouraging. One e-mail comment captures the usual spirit of this engagement reasonably well: after a

lively exchange between *Fikra Forum*'s director and two dozen visiting Arab journalists, the organizer of their State Department-sponsored study tour wrote that "they particularly appreciated your candor, which they felt was in rather short supply elsewhere in their Washington meetings."

Unfortunately, not all the feedback is so positive. *Fikra Forum*'s director has been seriously warned that it would be dangerous for him to show up at Beirut airport ever again, given his well-publicized views of Hezbollah. Some potential contributors have promised articles, only to have second thoughts as events in the region—such as the 2014 Gaza war—raised the emotional temperature to a fever pitch. More recently, and much worse, a Palestinian contributor found his car torched in his East Jerusalem driveway on the same day he published a post entitled "A Plea for Moderate Islam" (Dajani 2014). A Yemeni contributor was harassed, threatened, and finally physically barred from her workplace in Sana. Several Syrian contributors have been targeted by online smear campaigns in assorted extremist forums, both in the United States and abroad. And an Israeli contributor was singled out for opprobrium in a Syrian regime propaganda video entitled "Know Your Enemy."

Such incidents, whether positive or negative, offer evidence that engagement on *Fikra Forum* is noticed—but also that such notice is not always an unmitigated blessing. Overall, however, negative reactions have been the exceptions that prove the rule. Spontaneous contributions from Arab authors are steadily on the rise, as is their apparent willingness to broach even the most controversial topics.

### **Issues and Authors**

Many of *Fikra Forum*'s expert regional contributors have not only shed light on the revolutionary spirit of the Arab Spring, but also embodied it. Three weeks before the 2011 Egyptian uprising broke out, Basem Fathy, then the media coordinator for the Egyptian Democracy Academy, wrote: "Internally, Egypt has almost reached a point of transformation. It could happen as a result of the fact that time has nearly ended for the man that the system revolves around or due to the archaic nature of the system itself, the built-in challenges that have accumulated over time threatening its sustainability, or due to the lack of any formal or superficial reforms to allow it to persist at least without any dramatic losses" (2011). Other Egyptians, emboldened by the removal

of longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak, implored the international community for its support. In response to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to Egypt, Esraa Abdel Fatah, an Egyptian pro-democracy activist, urged the United States and other countries "to demonstrate their intentions to cooperate with Egypt in order to achieve greater improvements" (2011).

Before and as Syria descended into civil war, *Fikra Forum* was one of the top media outlets for Syrian opposition leaders—Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Kurds—to voice their opinions. Radwan Ziadeh, who went on to hold a leadership position in the Syrian National Council, provocatively argued in February 2011 that "Syria is an ideal case for a revolution, given the state of political and economic failure." One month later, buoyed by the successes of Tunisians and Egyptians, peaceful protests took place in the Syrian cities of Daraa, marking the start of that country's revolution. In response Sirwan Kajjo, a Syrian Kurdish activist and journalist, explained that "Syria today is not the Syria we knew before." Kajjo went on to ask: "Who would have predicted that the people would publicly call for the fall of the regime or even dare to demand freedom?" (2011).

*Fikra Forum* also made—and continues to make—an effort to shed light on underreported protest movements in countries such as Yemen and Bahrain. Nadia al-Sakkaf, who went on to become the Yemeni information minister in 2014, wrote "It is not in Yemen's best interest to have a ruler who runs forever and who appoints his family members in power positions [*sic*]. The question remains whether Saleh will eventually realize that it takes more than words to find the courage to face his family and save Yemen from more tension and upheaval" (2011). Writing later in the year, Jasim Husain, a former member of the Bahraini parliament and opposition figure, expressed uncertainty at the prospect of reconciliation and progress in Bahrain. "[I]t seems unlikely that the state of affairs is heading toward a quick political solution," he wrote with some degree of prescience (2011).

As violence and counterrevolutionary forces took root in the Middle East, however, *Fikra Forum* had to evolve to stay relevant. Thus, it moved beyond a narrow focus on reform and democracy to include analysis of security, stability, and countering extremism—both locally and regionally. For example, Ali Al Ahmed, a Saudi Arabian national living in the United States, took to *Fikra Forum* to explain how "[t]he house of al-Saud has become highly adept in

exploiting regional ethnic and religious fault lines to advance its own political goal,” especially in Yemen and Bahrain (2011).

More than simply a response to the changing landscape in the Middle East, this thematic shift is in line with the underlying mission of *Fikra Forum* to “generat[e] ideas to produce a brighter future for Arab democrats.” Take Lebanon, for example, which is bearing a significant burden due to the civil war in Syria. Salman Andary, a Lebanese journalist, in an article published in December 2014, assessed that “[t]he path to security and stability in Lebanon is long.” Andary argued that the Lebanese army needs not only domestic, but international support in the face of groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. Elsewhere, in Tunisia, jihadist groups that threaten Tunisia’s democratic transition are on the rise. Habib Sayah, director of a Tunis-based think tank, and Mohamed Bechri, who previously headed the Tunisian branch of Amnesty International, both charted their growth and proliferation on *Fikra Forum* because, at a fundamental level, security and stability are essential for any country seeking to reorient itself and implement serious reforms (2013).

At the same time, *Fikra Forum* writers continue to opine on democratization and its challenges. At a time when most of the international media has turned its attention to the chaos that has spread throughout the region, especially following the rise of ISIS, *Fikra Forum* focuses on topics that do not find their way to the front pages of newspapers, or are not “trending” on social media networks, despite their importance and relevance to people on the ground. These include elections in Mauritania and Algeria, decentralization in Libya and Jordan, water politics in North Africa, regional Islamist movements. Although not in vogue among many Western analysts, *Fikra Forum* aims to provide an open platform to examine these issues.

In doing so, *Fikra Forum* has started to host online symposia that bring together experts and analysts from the region to deliberate over political dynamics in a specific country. In the past, *Fikra Forum* has held debates on issues such as U.S. foreign aid to Lebanon, democracy promotion in Egypt, and the Egyptian government’s 2013 crackdown on protesters in Cairo. It even featured a debate on sexual harassment in Muslim-majority societies, with contributors ranging from secular women to an official of the Salafi al-Nour Party in Egypt.

Some of these debates have now evolved into full-fledged symposia on regional issues, most recently on Tunisia (2014), which held elections in November 2014—a watershed moment for the country. In January 2011, *Fikra Forum* contributor Mohamed Abdelbaky foresaw that despite Ben Ali's departure, "the road toward democratic change for a government whose institutions were characterized by authoritarianism is long." He was right, and this symposium allowed a diverse variety of Tunisian analysts and observers—ranging from leftists to Islamists, including Habib Kazdaghi, an academic, and Yusra Ghannouchi, the Ennahdha Party's international spokesperson—as well as Americans to examine this topic further and offer their perspectives on Tunisia's progress and trajectory. This two-week venture allowed for in-depth analysis by individuals who are otherwise not in conversation with one another, and set a model for similar symposia to be held in the future.

*Fikra Forum* contributors also focus on human rights—particularly for minorities—in all corners of the Middle East. For many such contributors, *Fikra Forum* provides a unique platform, as these topics are generally not covered in the regional press due to serious limitations on free speech. As such, *Fikra Forum* contributors have written on minority rights in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Bahrain. They have discussed the troubles of Middle Eastern Christians, Druze in Lebanon and Syria, and the plight of Shiite Turkmen in Iraq. The latter was among the first—if not the first—English article to bring attention to ISIS's siege of Amerli, a Turkmen town in Iraq. For the author, Elham al-Bayati, the situation was personal because she has family living in Amerli. "It is hard for people like my cousin to keep up their morale when the world does not seem to care for their suffering. 'If no one is willing to help,' they ask, 'are we stuck in a death trap?'" (2014). These articles have helped break down the monolithic picture of the Middle East that often fails to account for its complex religious and ethnic composition.

*Fikra Forum* is as much a resource for Middle Easterners as it is for practitioners and analysts of U.S. foreign policy and Arab politics. The former are eager to discuss issues relevant to their lives, while the latter value local insight on regional dynamics. For this reason, *Fikra Forum* has made a concerted effort over the last six months to reach out to individuals in the policy and academic communities. For the first time in years, *Fikra Forum* had a presence

at the Middle East Studies Association's annual conference, which is the largest gathering of academics of the Middle East in the United States.

There are, of course, challenges in satisfying both of these constituencies. Writers will sometimes pitch articles on topics that they find relevant and interesting, but the editorial team believes will not resonate with an American audience. When content is so narrow in scope, it can seem of secondary importance when compared to broader regional issues and trends. The global fight against ISIS might grab the attention of more readers as opposed to tribal politics in Libya or human rights in Oman. So how does *Fikra Forum* achieve its goal of empowering and broadcasting voices from the Middle East while resonating with Americans? It remains committed to exploring local issues with the conviction that doing so encourages deeper and broader engagement. And the website's readership seems to agree.

### **Statistics and Special Cases**

On average, *Fikra Forum* is approaching one thousand unique visitors per month. This is still an admittedly small number, especially compared to more sensational (or extreme) social forums. But anecdotal feedback suggests that some leading experts, officials, and opinion-makers both in the West and in the Middle East are among the regular readers. The impact, if any, on governments, media, or broader societies is impossible to measure. But *Fikra Forum*'s numbers are clearly increasing, particularly during the past year.

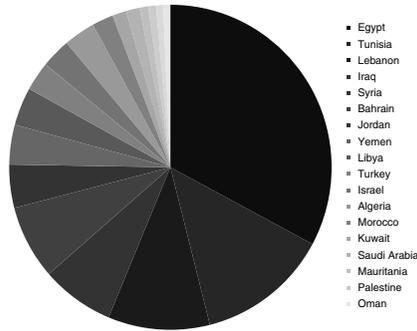
Between 2013 and 2014, *Fikra Forum* experienced a 62 percent increase in average monthly unique readership; there was also a 67 percent increase in average monthly page views. Approximately two-thirds of readers are located in the Middle East, primarily Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Naturally, readership fluctuates depending on the content of its articles. During the summer of 2014, after ISIS's assault on the city of Mosul, *Fikra Forum* placed a good amount of focus on internal Iraqi issues, ranging from the repressive ways of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to the Kurds' aspirations for statehood. As such, interest in *Fikra Forum* surged among Iraqis; during that period Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah topped the list of cities with the highest readership.

Months later, in October 2014, *Fikra Forum* published an exclusive article by *Fikra Forum*'s director, David Pollock, titled "ISIS Has Almost No Support

in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon—But America Has Little More.” In it, Pollock revealed surprising data about support for the Islamic State among Egyptians, Saudis, and Lebanese, which was accompanied by a series of graphics. During the following weeks, there were over 18,300 “page views” of and 7,130 “unique visits” to *Fikra Forum’s* website, more than double the number of “page views” and “unique visits” in October 2013, and an approximately 50 percent increase in both categories compared to the previous month. To date, this is the most “organic” surge in traffic—in other words, not driven by paid advertisements—*Fikra Forum* has received.

As with any budding venture, *Fikra Forum* sees both opportunities and challenges lying ahead. Since its inception, the website has amassed over one hundred contributors from fifteen different Middle Eastern countries, stretching from Morocco to Yemen. But it has been difficult to attract writers from the Arab Gulf states, specifically Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. *Fikra Forum* has published pieces by Gulfis living abroad, in the United States and elsewhere. For instance, Bandar Dawshi, a graduate student in the United States who wrote an article titled “Yemen’s Descent into Chaos,” is the first Saudi Arabian to write for *Fikra Forum* in some time (2014). Similarly, Nabhan Alhanshi, the executive director of the Monitor for Human Rights in Oman, is the *Fikra Forum’s* first Omani contributor. And it does have two Kuwaiti contributors: Shafeeq Ghabra, professor of political science at Kuwait University, and Muna Al-Fuzai, a columnist for the *Kuwait Times*. Other Gulf Arabs have expressed an interest in *Fikra Forum*, in some instances even pitching articles. But as of yet, *Fikra Forum* has not published any articles by residents living in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. (Bahrainis of all political orientations, meanwhile, publish quite often on *Fikra Forum*.)

Although this has been a significant hurdle to overcome, the editorial team is constantly devising new ways to seek out individuals from these countries, activating personal connections and forging new ones to find individuals who are willing to write on issues of consequence. Social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook, and e-mail have proven to be the best ways of corresponding with contributors and explaining to them that *Fikra Forum* is an outlet in which they may write about issues that they otherwise might not be able to discuss in their home countries. One journalist who fled Egypt for the United States as an asylee, Muhammad Mansour, continues to courageously



**Figure 1**

cover developments in Cairo. In October 2014, Mansour acknowledged that Egyptians—himself included—must ask “whether we bear responsibility for undermining our own revolution,” adding: “Did we not prop up a new dictator after overthrowing Mubarak?”

Contributors serve as *Fikra Form*’s “correspondents” in the field, witnessing—sometimes first hand—events as they unfold. This is the platform’s strength: when Syrians write about the civil war at home, they write as individuals who suffered at the hands of the Assad regime and, in most cases, now revolt against it. But this comes with attendant risks and, on occasion, *Fikra Forum* has withheld writers’ names for security concerns. The first time *Fikra Forum* did this was in July 2011, when one Bahraini requested anonymity for an article titled “Bahrain Is on the Road toward Al-Qaeda.” According to the author, “The policies followed by the Bahraini regime for the past ten years have aided—whether intentionally or not—in turning Bahrain into an ideal environment for ideologies like those of al-Qaeda.” For a Bahraini national, there is great risk in making such a claim. Later on, *Fikra Forum* developed a relationship with Bassam Barabandi, a former Syrian diplomat in Washington. Barabandi began writing for *Fikra Forum* when he was still a Syrian government employee, so he did so under a pseudonym. His first article, which he wrote as “Atef al-Souri” prior to defecting, discussed countering Iranian influence in Syria (2013).

Mohammed Dajani, a Palestinian academic, has also used *Fikra Forum* as a platform to express his centrist views of religion and politics, despite pressure not to do so. In January 2014, in the midst of peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians, Dajani—then a professor at al-Quds University in East

Jerusalem—wrote a bold article titled, “Are Negotiations a New Opportunity Being Lost by the Palestinians?” In it, Dajani said that he “must reject the claim that all Israelis are opposed to peace and all Palestinians want.” “There is a camp containing Palestinians and Israelis who seek peace,” according to Dajani, “up against a camp that contains Palestinians and Israelis who are opposed to peace and seek to abort the peace efforts.” He urged Israelis and Palestinians to “learn from the lessons of the past and listen to those in the middle” for the sake of future generations. A few months later, Dajani led a delegation of Palestinian students on a visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Upon his return, he and his students were subjected to threats and harassment, which eventually prompted Dajani to resign from the university. *Fikra Forum* has since continued to run Dajani’s articles, most recently “A Plea for Moderate Islam,” in which he argued that moderate Muslims must recognize that Islam and its central texts have “been hijacked by a small, vocal minority for political ends” (2015). Hours after its publication, Dajani’s car was torched in East Jerusalem, illustrating the real-world implications of being a critical voice in the Middle East.

Another challenge that *Fikra Forum* has confronted is addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This issue is particularly sensitive in the Arab world, and at the outset, *Fikra Forum* opted to stay away from this issue. The editors wanted to broaden *Fikra Forum*’s appeal and attract a wider spectrum of Arab writers who were interested in publishing on various issues concerning the Middle East. Moreover, due to its affiliation with the Washington Institute, some potential contributors voiced concern about publishing on *Fikra Forum* because of potential backlash in their home countries. However, despite this initial hesitancy, *Fikra Forum* has started to broach this topic as of late for two primary reasons.

First, each week *Fikra Forum* tries to reflect the relevant and important issues being discussed around the Middle East. As such, the editorial team felt it would be remiss not to discuss Israeli-Palestinian issues when they are in the spotlight. For example, during the summer of 2014, *Fikra Forum* hosted a number of articles revolving around the war in Gaza. Tania Hary, deputy director of the Israeli nonprofit Gisha, which seeks to protect the freedom of movement of Palestinians, wrote a piece arguing that despite sending humanitarian aid to Gaza throughout the hostilities, Israel was not doing enough to help

promote and develop the strip. This article prompted a series of comments from *Fikra Forum* readers and helped further an important discussion about a complex dynamic in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Second, the traditional binary of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian camps is not as useful a divide in the current regional context. The raging civil war in Syria, the insurgency in Egypt, and the anti-ISIS coalition that includes many Middle Eastern countries have redefined strategic interests in the region in a way that has downgraded the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Given this new reality, *Fikra Forum* has attracted contributors who have highlighted the opportunity for increased cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In July 2014, Nadav Pollak, an Israeli graduate student at Princeton University, shed light on the increased trade cooperation between Israel and the Gulf Arab countries, emphasizing the potential for strengthening these ties. Nearly one year later, in May 2015, *Fikra Forum* published articles by Hiam Nawas, a Jordanian-American analyst, calling for stronger and more overt ties between Israel and the Arab states. These articles capture the changing geopolitical priorities in the Middle East that minimize the emotional nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Despite the extremely controversial, even provocative nature of this individual contributor's argument, the available metrics show that readership throughout the Middle East continues to grow and, moreover, expand into new countries.

### **Language Issues**

When *Fikra Forum* began in 2010, there was no dedicated Arabic editorial team. That changed, however, given the breadth of the forum's contributor base in the Middle East. The bilingual nature of the website is essential to its success and appeal. Many if not most contributors assert that they are able to participate at all only in their native Arabic (or in a few cases, French) language. Because of this, *Fikra Forum* stands out among other websites producing analysis on the Middle East. Going forward, however, in today's mixed media environment, this linguistic accessibility would ideally be extended from text to audio, video, and more. The broader lesson may well be that in order to realize its full potential, engagement needs to be multilingual, not simply multicultural and multidimensional.

### **The Road Ahead**

*Fikra Forum*, and its various virtual cousins, will never be the loudest voices discourse on the Middle East—but they may help offset some of the more strident and sensational ones. At a minimum, this kind of engagement serves to remind moderates on both sides that they are not alone. And the engagement does appear to be growing, albeit at what can fairly only be described as a measured pace. Our own staff has come to terms with this prospect of continuing yet modest success, but it is a challenge to keep up with the chorus of negative noises on all sides.

This experiment in engagement will also necessarily evolve, in both practical and conceptual ways. On the practical level, we anticipate some technical enhancements to the website, which appear increasingly essential to audience maintenance and growth. We hope to make more use of social media to raise awareness and invite expanded interaction. And we intend to push even harder for a larger stock of prominent American and other Western contributors. Ironically, and completely contrary to our initial expectations, we have so far found it much easier to recruit Arabs than Americans as authors.

On the conceptual level, in the coming few years as in the past few, *Fikra Forum* and others like it will to some extent be at the mercy of developments in the Middle East. What began as a platform for the rise of the Arab Spring is now more like a dialogue about its demise. Upcoming events in the region, rather than conscious decisions in Washington, will likewise largely determine its future course. The one thing that can be said with certainty is that the intense dialogue between the West and the Middle East is fated to continue—and continue to be difficult. In this sense at least, the future of *Fikra Forum* is assured.

#### *About the authors:*

**Gavi Barnhard**, a graduate of Princeton University, was Research Assistant at *Fikra Forum* in 2014-15. He is currently an editorial research associate in New York City.

**David Pollock** is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues. He is the director of *Fikra Forum*.

**Noam Raydan**, a former research associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, previously served as the Arabic editor of *Fikra Forum*.

**Gilad Wenig**, a former research associate at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, previously served as the managing editor of *Fikra Forum*.

### Note

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