

How Arab Security Sectors Can Advance a Peace Between Peoples

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Brief Analysis

Terrorism knows no borders—and the struggle against it calls for neighboring countries to cooperate for the sake of regional and global security. Regions including Europe have come to recognize this reality, with dozens of governments forging unprecedented partnerships in policing, intelligence, and counterterrorism over the past decade. In the Middle East and North Africa, jihadist carnage and Iranian expansionism have also inspired some unlikely alliances. Arab governments have recently made common cause not only with each other but also with the neighboring state of Israel in order to make their counterterrorism efforts more effective. Security cooperation has reached new heights between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, its formal peace partners, while new relationships are beginning to grow elsewhere in the region as well.

In one crucial facet of counterterrorism, however, no substantial partnership between Israelis and their Arab neighbors has yet been forged: the struggle to end the pervasive use of media, school systems, and religious pulpits to spread radicalism and hate. This gap does not stem from ignorance of the general problem. To the contrary, widespread concern about extremist indoctrination has led a number of Arab governments and NGOs—as well as outside stakeholders worldwide—to seek remedies to these challenges, ranging from new educational programs promoting tolerance to the rehabilitation of former jihadists.

These efforts have taken a variety of shapes. Some are multilateral: **The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change** (<https://institute.global/>) (previously the Tony Blair Faith Foundation) has engaged governments and civil society organizations in numerous Muslim-majority countries, while the UAE-based **Hedaya center** (<http://www.hedayah.ae/>), a public-private partnership, has forged collaborations from New York to Jakarta. Other efforts are unilateral: the Saudi security sector has used state television to develop an immensely popular program called *Humumna*, which strives to dissuade young viewers from joining extremist groups.

Israelis in government and civil society alike have much to contribute to such efforts, and are indeed engaged in some of the educational initiatives stemming from North America and Europe. But as far as Arab countries are concerned, there has been no cooperation on this key issue to speak of. The reasons for this lack of collaboration should come as no surprise: some of the same Arab security and intelligence systems that now work with Israel in repelling jihadists and Iran have themselves been major propagators of antisemitism and hostility to Israel for

decades. With respect to the latter, the demonizing narrative they propagate far exceeds any rational criticism of the Israeli government or its policies. Rather, it ascribes an inherent evil to the country and its people, calling in substance for both to be eradicated.

As is well known, Arab security sectors exercise a weighty influence over media, schools, and religious instruction within their borders. They have long used these platforms to incite violence against Jews and Israel—whether as a tool of blame deflection for local problems or as a means of unifying a fractured population against a perceived foreign enemy. Despite this legacy, the Israeli government, in its enthusiasm to grow new Arab security partnerships, has not been particularly forceful in demanding an end to the ongoing legacy of incitement as part and parcel to other deradicalization and security efforts.

However, the antisemitism in the region, for which Arab security sectors deserve so much of the blame, should actually be understood as more a threat to Arab governments and their populations than Israel itself, and should be treated accordingly. The tools of scapegoating and blame deflection that initially targeted Jews and Israel have long since found new, local targets—whether ruling elites or rival ethnicities and sects. Radical transnational militias and movements routinely use the same hostile tropes first developed by the security sectors in an attempt to foment civil war or turn a given Arab population against its government. In certain cases, this incitement has actually succeeded. The case for ending state-sponsored antisemitism—and the tropes of demonization that go along with it—is first and foremost a matter of Arab national security.

It should also be noted that the very feature of Arab security sectors' domination of the national discourse is markedly open to criticism. Proponents of democracy in the region naturally demand that their governments stop controlling what people publish, broadcast, teach, and preach. But in the relatively stable autocracies of North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Gulf, radical change of this sort is not imminent. Many prominent reformists have eschewed the revolutionary option altogether in favor of incremental reforms, suggesting that Arab security sector influence over Arab public discourse is likely to continue for some time. It therefore behooves Arab reformists to demand that such influence, so long as it endures, serve the common good. One way is for these security cadres to help roll back the legacies of antisemitism and hostility to Israel that have proved so damaging for so long.

It is possible that some Arab leaderships have already begun to grapple with this problem. Even so, the promotion of coexistence and tolerance toward the region's Jewish and Israeli neighbors is not easy to manage unilaterally. It is unreasonable to assume that strategic communications officers in an Arab security apparatus, themselves raised to hate Israel and Jews, can suddenly message honestly about a country and a people of which they know little that is actually true. To reform the state's impositions on media, schools, and mosques will require enormous political will, knowledge and expertise from the outside, and substantial personnel changes within the state apparatuses themselves.

Given a hypothetical situation in which a given security sector receives such a mandate, the implementation would require a new series of cross-border partnerships among the state and reform-minded civilians—that is, the Israeli government in cooperation with its Arab allies; Israeli civil society working together with its Arab counterparts. Such collaborations would involve the migration of corrective content about Israel and Jews to all Arab platforms in which they are a topic of discussion, supported by cadres of bilingual, bicultural communications specialists with the talent and creativity to do so. Israelis have not only the will but also the wherewithal to play their role: In addition to generations of scholarship about their own history, faith, and heritage, new expertise in migrating it to youthful Arab audiences has been honed, as [Linda Menuhin Abdel Aziz previously described in her own Fikra Forum contribution. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/an-israeli-facebook-page-in-iraqi-dialect\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/an-israeli-facebook-page-in-iraqi-dialect)

The challenge of countering this bedrock facet of radicalization in the region will be hard. Even so, failing to try is unconscionable.

This article is adapted from the paper he delivered at the Arab Council's inaugural gathering in London, November 19-20, 2019. ❖

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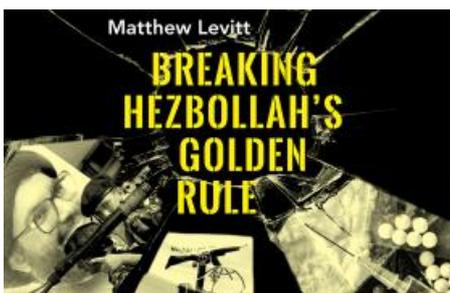
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