

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Beyond Conflicts, the Arab World's Other Challenges ^[1]

DOHA, Qatar --- News from the Middle East is dominated by conflict, whether the stories come from Syria, Libya, Iraq, or other states in the region. Blood is plentiful; hope is scarce. But beyond the lurid viciousness that dominates daily journalism are long-term challenges to the region's future that are impervious to solutions that rely on the weaponry of conflict. The resolve and creativity with which Arab leaders and publics address these matters, as well as their local wars, will shape the lives of coming generations.

At this year's Doha Forum – an annual gathering of policy makers, academics, and other experts in Arab affairs – although conflict, particularly in Syria, was never far from anyone's mind, discussions centered on economic development and nation rebuilding. Participants' presentations underscored the magnitude of the region's challenges. Former British prime minister Gordon Brown observed that with a young population that is growing younger, the Arab world needs 40 million new jobs. With economies trying to establish themselves, trade agreements must be designed. Stimson Center analyst Mona Yacoubian pointed out, for example, that only 3 percent of North Africa's trade is intra-regional.

Political and economic infrastructure is flimsy and this undermines the work of those who understand the connections between prosperity, democracy, and peace. Brown called for creation of a Middle East-North Africa Development Bank, and Yacoubian suggested a Marshall Plan for the region. Market-oriented rather than state-centric economies must be constructed.

But even such ambitious projects cannot stand alone. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman reminded Forum participants that economic plans must incorporate a commitment to human rights. In this part of the world, where infant mortality rates remain high and women are excluded from much of civic life, Karman's warnings have special resonance.

Nothing comes easily in this region. Two years after the "Arab Spring," people are finding that change can be difficult to manage. Journalist Robin Wright noted the "proliferation of democracy beyond what is viable," with so many political parties and candidates that actionable mandates are rare. Wright cited a Tunisian who told her, "We have far greater freedom and far fewer jobs." Wright also pointed out that violence is constantly close at hand. In Libya, she reported, there are four guns for every man, woman, and child in the country.

Many of these matters are well-suited for responses built around public diplomacy. During this time of uncertainty, people are likely to be looking for ways to take on more responsibility for their own lives. Public diplomacy programs can foster entrepreneurship, expand educational opportunities, improve grass roots journalism, and address other issues that are more within the purview of individual citizens rather than governments.

But nothing will be easy. At the Forum, former Tunisian foreign minister Rafik Abdesallam noted that the search for policy solutions is complicated by the need to reconcile “the requirements of Islam and modernity.” Bringing these two forces together is complicated, but it is a political necessity.

And all the while, artillery thunders in Syria, militias spread armed anarchy in Libya, Palestinians despair of ever establishing a viable homeland, and hope flickers uncertainly elsewhere in the region. For those of us who participated in the Doha Forum and who are committed to helping build a strong and stable Middle East, sustaining hope is an essential first step. The scope of our responsibilities is enormous, but so is the range of our opportunities.
