



## In MENA Region's Turmoil, USIP Dialogues Confront Tensions, Part 1

### Stepping Into the Breach: Facilitators Guide Antagonists to Nonviolent Solutions

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In the midst of Tunisia's fragile transition, angry standoffs emerge frequently, echoes of the tensions that triggered the Arab Spring five years ago. As the informal economy mushrooms, for example, the police—reared under authoritarian rule—regularly crack down on street vendors selling everything from clothes to food to appliances. One such incident flared in 2014, and the risk of violence was palpable. It was just the kind of scenario that called for the skills of someone like Tarek Lamouchi.



Lamouchi is one of some 60 civil society leaders across the Middle East and North Africa supported by the U.S. Institute of Peace to conduct facilitated dialogue and advance its use for preventing or defusing violent conflict. Amid the region's persistent war and strife, USIP trains activists like 35-year-old Lamouchi and has gathered them into country networks in Tunisia, Libya and Iraq. More recently, the institute assembled another cadre of community leaders experienced in mediation to form the Middle East and North Africa Regional Facilitators Forum so they can share ideas and develop the field.

The facilitators bring a range of experience. Some have nurtured a national dialogue in Yemen or mediated among tribes over a massacre by the "Islamic State" extremist group in Iraq at a military base known as [Camp Speicher](#). Others have analyzed conflicts among politicized student unions in Libya or trained the staff of camps sheltering displaced Iraqis in how to defuse tensions.



The case that drew Lamouchi's attention, years after the onset of the Arab Spring, illustrates the need – and what facilitated dialogue can achieve.

Tunisia had become a textbook example of how low-level tensions can build into explosive, far-reaching crises: In December 2010, a [young roadside fruit and vegetable vendor there set himself ablaze](#) in frustration over the constant indignities of petty corruption and authoritarian rule, illustrated one last time for him in a slap and insults from a police officer. The death of the 26-year-old vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, sparked protests against dictatorial regimes across the region in early 2011. The explosions of violence in the aftermath continue to shred the region today.

Tunisia thus far has managed to avoid war. But the wrenching political and economic transition repeatedly [pushes the country to the brink](#). Aware of these potentially deadly dynamics in the west-central market town of Kasserine in late 2014, Lamouchi shuttled among the [street vendors](#) and municipal officials to find an opening to mediate a peaceful resolution.

Kasserine, located in the country's impoverished interior, has repeatedly been one of the flashpoints for Tunisia's tensions; an October 2014 [analysis](#) found it had the highest number of fatalities – 30 – in confrontations between police and demonstrators during the 2011 revolution. Lamouchi, a university teacher and currently a field and training officer for [New Tactics in Human Rights](#), mobilized in the Kasserine case with Asma Ben Hassen, another member of the Alliance of Tunisian Facilitators, and the local organization Youth Forum for Citizenship Culture. The project was supported by the Washington-based [Global Fairness Initiative](#). Hassen, an economist, is the initiative's country director.



*Facilitator Tarek Lamouchi*

Lamouchi describes gathering 13 street vendors, three municipal representatives and four people from a civic group to discuss the issues and search for a resolution. By the end of the dialogue, the two sides reached agreement: the municipality wouldn't destroy the informal roadside stands as long as the vendors kept their wares off the streets, began to register their businesses and sought legal, permanent locations. It was a temporary solution that would have to be nurtured with further dialogue to hold fast, but it was a start. Lamouchi and colleagues conducted similar processes with women selling handicrafts in the city of Le Kef in the northwest and with [cross-border traders](#) in the coastal area of Ben Guerdane near the Libyan border.

### **Treating the Wound While It's Small**

"For now, the problems of Tunisia seem small compared to those of its neighbors," said Linda Bishai, director of USIP's North Africa programs, referring to wars like those in Libya, Syria and Iraq. "But if you don't treat the small wound, it will grow bigger."

Participants in such country networks and members of the six-country regional forum repeatedly step into the breach, reducing violence in ways large and small. And they learn from each other as they go.



“The culture of peace, the culture of conflict resolution does not exist in a country where the ... system was dictatorship for the past four decades,” Dr. Saieb al-Gailani, a member of the regional network, observed in an interview. Iraq’s emerging democratically elected leaders mostly still lack the capability and understanding to deal with the country’s myriad problems in a constructive way, he said.

Al-Gailani is an [oncologist](#) and former member of the first provincial council formed in Baghdad after the toppling of Saddam Hussein. In the escalating political tensions and violence of the following years, he was forced by death threats to him and his family to flee to the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, where he lives today. Efforts at social and political reconciliation in Iraq are poisoned by a stew of religious and sectarian strife, corruption and government ineptitude, he said.



Facilitator Dr. Saieb al-Gailani

At the height of the violence in Iraq in 2007, he and other Iraqis worked with USIP to respond to a request from local tribal and government officials and the [U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division](#) to facilitate a [dialogue in Mahmoudiya](#), an area south of Baghdad known then as “the Triangle of Death,” that resulted in a peace accord between Shia and Sunni tribal sheikhs.

Now, USIP is seeking to expand and deepen the practice of facilitated dialogue across the region. The civic leaders in the regional forum or in the individual country networks conduct, manage and research [facilitated dialogue](#), a process of guiding groups in a dispute toward peaceful resolutions.

The regional network, funded in cooperation with the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, gathers experienced, practicing facilitators, many of whom are leaders in their communities and have run their own non-governmental organizations or have worked for international organizations such as the United Nations or the World Bank. Together, they share observations and tips and collaborate on regional initiatives. They are developing a handbook of best practices in designing and managing facilitated dialogues, with the aim of promoting and strengthening the process for the region. USIP will help the group attract outside funding to expand and sustain their activities for the long term.

### Training Facilitators

The separate national networks—in Iraq, Tunisia and Libya thus far—are made up of facilitators trained by USIP in conflict management and in mediation on rifts ranging from serious local disputes to the most explosive national-level divides. The training covers topics such as methodical conflict analysis, listening skills, communication techniques and how to deal with the often-volatile role of identity. In the Tunisian network, USIP also works with the organization Search for Common Ground, which offers an online community and supports dialogue initiatives.

*“If you don’t treat the small wound, it will grow bigger.” – Linda Bishai, USIP director of North Africa programs.*

Some of the facilitators have worked on projects with USIP for years. Khalid Alwafi, a member of the regional network who is from Misrata, Libya, is director of the Lawyers for Human Rights Association

and a founding member of the Human Rights Association for War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity. A former criminal defense lawyer with expertise in international law, Alwafi documented war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the regime of former dictator Muammar Qaddafi. He also was a member of the National Reconciliation Group that sought to build national unity among different towns in Libya. Bar associations became critical resources of expertise and mediation during the revolution because the public came to trust them, said Alwafi, who participated in two-week workshop at USIP in Washington in February 2013 on rule of law principles.

The four networks draw on USIP's [experience in facilitated dialogue](#). In addition to several major local dialogues in [Iraq](#) since the 2003 U.S. invasion, such as the case of Mahmoudiya and one last year in [Tikrit](#), the institute has supported similar processes in Kosovo, Haiti, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Colombia, Nigeria and Nepal, among other locations. USIP also cultivates justice-and-security dialogues to improve relations between citizens and law enforcement in countries where security services traditionally have been mechanisms of government control rather than a public service.

Instructors in USIP's Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding, the Institute's professional education arm, define dialogue as more than short-term mediation or negotiation. Rather, it involves a methodical process of [joint inquiry and listening to diverse views](#), with the intention of addressing practical and structural problems in a society by transforming relationships.

The regional and country facilitator networks convened jointly for the first time last August in Beirut to analyze each other's projects, get advice and tackle tough issues: how much to focus on local-level disputes versus national-level rifts, how to avoid being labeled as biased toward one side or another, when or how to deal with armed groups and, perhaps most vexingly, how to sustain a resolution over the long term.

Joining the two dozen facilitators were five members of USIP's [Generation Change Fellows Program](#), which is designed to provide training, camaraderie and other support for young civic activists in the Middle East and [Africa](#). These youths all run their own non-governmental organizations, and the Generation Change program aims to strengthen their work and bolster them against the extreme difficulties of pursuing peaceful solutions in some of the world's most volatile environments.

"For me, it is a good experience to know what the other countries are doing in peacebuilding and conflict management," Amani Jamal Odeh Al-Zubi, a Generation Change fellow from Jordan, said in an interview.

### 'Denial of Change'

Palestinian civic leader Zoughbi Zoughbi joked to his colleagues on the second of the two days that the workshop was akin to "communication between the generation of change and the generation of denial of change." As one of the most experienced facilitators in the regional forum, the 52-year-old Zoughbi is founder and director of the [Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center Wi'Am](#). He has conducted and written about community-based



*Generation Change Fellow Amani Jamal Odeh Al-Zubi*

mediation among Palestinians for decades, including exploring lessons that can be drawn from Arab traditions.

Several of the participants, including from Yemen and Syria, have themselves become refugees as war erupted again in their countries. One of them, Suad Almarani, led a U.N.-backed National Dialogue process in her native Yemen that had shown promise before it stalled amid renewed political strife in early 2015 that quickly turned into war. The conflict has [killed or wounded](#) more than 8,100 people and forced in excess of 2.5 million from their homes.

Almarani and another Yemeni facilitator, Abdul Karim Thabet, said the National Dialogue was so fraught in part because of the accumulation of a history of repression, widespread illiteracy, a lack of needed government structures and corruption among those institutions that do exist. Still, Almarani said it was amazing to witness the discussions of what Yemen could look like, how new governing structures could be established and how citizens and authorities should interact.

“The experience was so deep. It was so emotional. It was unbelievable. I think a lot of people...they didn’t believe we were serious,” Almarani recalled in an interview. “No one thought we would come up with restructuring the whole state. But it did happen in the end.”

But then violence erupted. She fled with her mother, sister and brother, first to Oman and then on to Malaysia, the only country other than Jordan that didn’t require a visa for Yemenis and the only place the family could afford once they arrived. Thabet is living in Hungary for the time being.

### **Establishing Credibility**

The complexities of encouraging constructive dialogue in today’s Middle East and North Africa infused the two days of discussion in Beirut last year: the volatile dynamics of transition in politics, economics, culture, religion. Everything is a swirl of change. The facilitator groups have been meeting in Beirut again this past weekend for four days of further workshops to learn from each other and hear from a USIP expert on countering violent extremism.

Facilitators have to work quickly to establish their credibility within a dialogue to reduce the risk that they would be labeled immediately as biased one way or another based on their name or nationality or tribe or other affiliation.

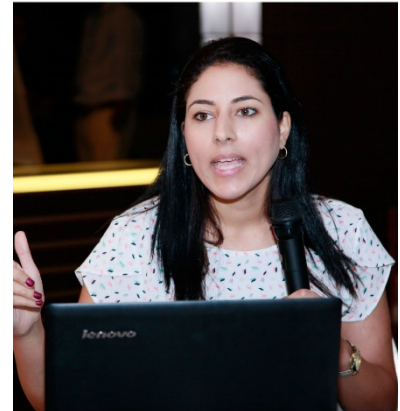
“My experience in Lebanon and our experience in Iraq with the Network [of Iraqi Facilitators] is that the facilitator can gain legitimacy on the grounds of his work,” said Elie Abouaoun, USIP’s director of Middle East programs. He emphasized the need to demonstrate professionalism and deep knowledge of the situation.

The facilitator “needs to be a walking encyclopedia” on the groups, issues and capacities of those involved, Zoughbi said. That starts with extensive research.



The cross-border connections these activists are making through the facilitator networks help build that knowledge base, said Sherine El Taraboulsi, an Egyptian research fellow with the Overseas Development Institute in London who is a member of the regional network. She's done research in and about Libya and said many Libyan refugees in Tunisia were activists before escaping the political violence at home.

"Many of the Libyans with whom I've spoken have mentioned that they have benefited enormously from the experience of Tunisian civil society," she said in an interview. "The international community [does] not take into account the common historic, cultural and tribal background" between Libya and Tunisia, she said.



Facilitator Sherine El Taraboulsi

The work doesn't stop when a dialogue process is over. While it's challenging to hammer out an agreement among parties in a dispute, "the bigger challenge is what happens after signing that document," El Taraboulsi said. "The problem with the Middle East right now, the Arab region, is that, because you have shifting alliances ... those interests are getting built around conflict; they're not getting built around peace. There are no incentives to keep the peace or to enforce a document like that."

Over breakfast on the second day of the August Beirut workshop, El Taraboulsi and Hamdi Khalifa, a USIP regional program officer based in Tunis, listened intently as Zoughbi pulled from his many years of experience to mull out loud the benefits and pitfalls of drawing on religious traditions to build bridges across faiths.

"It is all our duty to make religious practice a source of peacebuilding instead of a source of conflict," Zoughbi says. "The idea is not to use the Koran or the Bible in their nitty gritty, but to focus on the values." El Taraboulsi agrees that drawing on tradition could be a powerful mechanism to break through persistent divides. But they're all aware of the vexing obstacles that confront any attempt at genuine and successful facilitated dialogue.

"We are a community of learners," Zoughbi says.

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*Part 2 of the series: the interplay of cultural traditions of mediation and modern practices of facilitated dialogue. Part 3: the facilitators.*

<http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/03/15/in-mena-region-s-turmoil-usip-dialogues-confront-tensions-part-1>