YARA partnered with the Amman Hub of the Global Shapers Community and participated in the first ever Shaping Davos event on January 21st, 2015. The event was held at the King Hussein Business Park (Building 16) in Amman, Jordan. A participating audience of 50 individuals was present; coming from various backgrounds of the private and public sectors.

The four local panelists were:

1) Dr. Omar Razzaz. Chairman of Jordan Strategy Forum; Chairman of the Board of Directors of Ahli Bank; former Chair of Trustees of King Abdullah Fund for Development.

2) Mr. Saed Karajah. Co-Founder at Saed Karajah Law Firm; Member at the Governmental Committees of drafting the Communication Law & Investment Promotion Law.

3) Mr. Sameer Petro. Philanthropist; Co-Founder of Ithraa NPO for relational training. Founder of East West Initiative for cultural training.

4) Mr. Ahmad El-Zubi; Director of Research and Policy at the Jordan Investment Commission. Vice-Curator of the Amman Global Shapers Community.

Session moderator: Mr. Amir Shihadeh. Founder and Director of YARA; Shaper and Curator of the Amman Global Shapers Community; Chief Operating Officer of Mlabbas; Country Chair of Jordan of Global Dignity.

Religion has always played an important role in shaping the identity of people across the world. The MENA region in particular is unique; it is the cradle of civilization and the birthplace of many of the world's religions, the largest being Christianity and Islam (and their numerous denominations).

Religion continues to play a major role in MENA societies, and it is much more visible when contrasted against the secular institutions of governance that prevail in most countries in the region. More recently, especially during the past few decades, religion has been portrayed in the media as a source of division, conflict, and violence. More often than not, "religious people" in the media are often portrayed as "extremist" and "terrorist"; an image that has become associated with the religion they adhere to - namely Islam. Is religion inherently violent, or are there other factors that contribute the often violent nature of the acts ascribed to its adherents?

The aim of this session was to examine the rise of extremism through the lens of "identity", i.e. could the MENA region be experiencing an identity crisis? Reflecting on the history of the region over the past two centuries and the collective traumas suffered would explain why identity is such an important aspect: the fall of Ottoman Empire signified the end of the last region-wide Caliphate; foreign imperialistic powers "redrew the map" creating new countries that combined or divided people with no regard to history, ethnicity, religion, or any other shared aspect. The result was new nations that did not satisfy the need of its people to belong to something greater.

Thus, the people of the region sought other identities of which were supra-national (like Arab Nationalism movement, or the Greater Syria movement), or ethnic (Kurds or Assyrians) or religious. This contributed to the shift towards a nation-state identity (inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution), which further devolved within these states into identities associated with religious sects, ethnicities, or geographic areas.

What added further trauma was the sudden oil wealth, the establishment of the State of Israel and the occupation of Palestine, the history of colonialism, the continued interference in regional affairs by foreign powers, and the establishment of despotic regimes over these newly created nations. The more recent conflicts have continued to contribute to the fracturing (case in point being Iraq, and a case in making is Syria). In this context these conflicts cannot be described as a clash of civilization, but as a class of extremisms with despotic regimes on the one end, and violent extremists on the other.

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Dissect the concept of identity further, we find that there are 3 important components:

1. **A shared understanding of history**, which describes where we come from, what happened, and how we evolved (as a society). History, particularly, is part of the "sacred"; we need to distinguish between history and holy text. If history is sacred in the same religious texts are treated in our region, particularly in relation to birth of nation states, then it becomes impossible to criticize and becomes grouped with tradition. In that sense, many in the region are prisoners to their identities; they are unable to understand how their identities came to be, nor are they satisfied by what it represents.

2. **Shared values**, which more or less stem from religion and the cultural practices that may or may not be related to religious teachings. This in turn becomes a schizophrenic situation: what we say we believe is very different from what we practice. One obvious example is the rights of women in traditional societies where cultural practices infringe of the basic rights of women, in direct contradiction to religion. Furthermore, Islam emphasizes higher morals and an ethical conduct, very much in contradiction to the practices of religious authorities in certain countries.

3. **A shared vision for the future**, which is shared between all individuals ascribing to an identity. Such a shared vision cannot be imposed, but must come from a genuine desire from the people, and can only be developed through democratic institutions.

Other points that were raised during the session were:

*   The way we see ourselves in the MENA region is "collectively" - we are part of a greater whole, which is in contrast to the strong sense of individuality that is felt in the West. Decision making is rarely done individually, with decision being deferred to family, elders, and governed by broader social norms. This helps preserve the fabric of society and the strong familial ties that individuals do rely on for support. However, it becomes dangerous when there is little criticism of cultural norms in an ever-changing world.

*   Foreign influence had supported the creation of extremist elements - and the collapse of order in some countries offers opportunities for these elements to thrive. Ideology is always a motivation for action, regardless of the religion or identity. The danger lies in extremist elements finding ways to spur into action adherents to their twisted ideologies. It becomes clear that the lack of structure, lack of critical thinking,

lack of education, and poor socio-economic conditions enable extremist elements to offer alternative (and lucrative) identities for youth to adopt.

- There are several philosophies for education:
    1. Young children need to be schooled in order to make sure they can fit into society (i.e. they are identical copies equipped with the same information).

    2. Each individual is educated to be distinct and independent - i.e. nurturing creativity. This is difficult to achieve at a later stage. Therefore, it is not fair to ask why youth are not thinking critically (i.e. at a later stage) when the system of education is designed not to nurture that trait. Regretfully, not many education systems in the MENA region promote critical thinking, but this remains part of the solution to combat extremist thought.

- The MENA region suffers from a socio-political problem of not empowering citizens, nor encouraging participation and engagement in society. Youth always have a need to do something, and it is the state's role to empower them (or guide them) to do so in a positive manner; otherwise this role is carried out by tribal leaders, or even gangsters.

The main questions posted during the discussion where:

1) When was the turning point in our recent Middle Eastern history where the majority of the MENA region stopped having a single common identity?

2) How can youth participate in the process of forming their new 21st century identities? And what role will religion play in forming this identity?

3) What are the main differences between youth from our MENA region and that of the West? And by differences, we mean perception of their own identity and how they see themselves.

4) What makes ISIS, with its extreme ideology, so attractive to the youth?

5) What is the role of education in defining identity? Is lack of education a precursor to extremism?

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