

## **What is the Middle East’s “New Normal?”**

**Session:** Session 2

**Date/Time:** April 26, 2016 / 16:30-18:00

**Moderator:** Karen E. House, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University

**Speakers:** Henri Barkey, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
Reza Eslami-Somea, Shahid Beheshti University  
Suat Kiniklioglu, Center for Strategic Communication, Turkey

### **Session Sketch**

Session 2, titled “What is the Middle East’s ‘New Normal?’” examined the political, economic, and security issues facing the Middle East today. Participants discussed the evolving role of governments in tackling these challenges, as well as how bottom-up movements could shape the policies of the future. The moderator of the session, Karen House, senior fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, began by providing an overview of “The New Normal” in the Middle East, which she described as “chaos.”

Henri Barkey, director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, began by analyzing the Middle East situation one hundred years after the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Dr. Barkey discussed the problems of national governments and suggested that the West focus their policies on states, rather than the regimes that govern them. To rebuild the Middle East, he argued, the state needs to be rebuilt. Not just the infrastructure, but the regimes themselves. Dr. Barkey also commented on the role of the Kurdish people and how their displacement will continue to be an important variable in regional politics.

Next, Reza Eslami-Somea, associate professor and director of the Human Rights Department at Shahid Beheshti University, approached “The New Normal” from a human rights perspective. He claimed that, since the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, lack of a cohesive US

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policy, government suppression, and extremist religious ideologies have hindered human rights development. Prof. Eslami-Somea emphasized the need to develop strong institutions to empower the people, claiming that one of the reasons youths join extremist groups like Islamic State is because they come from underprivileged backgrounds.

Finally, Suat Kiniklioglu stated that many of the problems in the Middle East stem from the delegitimization of the nation state. As conflicts continue, many people in the region feel that the government cannot provide for their security. Mr. Kiniklioglu discussed a crisis in political Islam, in which people are beginning to question whether religion and politics should be intertwined. He also suggested that the Middle East is searching for a new consensus on how governments should interact with their citizens, although whether this new consensus will be a form of liberal democracy is unknown.

During the question and answer session, Dr. Barkey emphasized that any bottom-up solution to the Middle East's problems will require an enormous international effort, but one that is not imposed from the outside. Prof. Eslami-Somea expressed his belief that capacity building will empower people and allow them to not have to choose between security and freedom. Mr. Kiniklioglu discussed the internal politics of Turkey and the necessity of stronger opposition to help stem the tide of authoritarianism.