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Arab minds solving Arab problems



After several years of working as a journalist, columnist and fellow at various prominent think tanks, Raghida Dergham decided that the Arab region needed its own indigenous brain trust. Thus Beirut Institute was founded.

By Ayswarya Murthy

Journalism, think tanks, the government – there is a revolving door between these disciplines, with people shifting to and fro between these roles with relative ease. So Raghida Dergham agrees that, yes, her work now as the Founder of Beirut Institute could be considered a natural extension of her parallel life as a columnist and Senior Diplomatic Correspondent/ New York Bureau Chief for Al Hayat. “I

will still continue to deal with issues that matter to society, just like a journalist, but instead of reporting and commenting on them, in a think tank I will be in connected-thinking mode, brainstorming with others and hoping to come out with policy options which are then put forward to policy makers,” she explains. “Like any other think tank, I hope Beirut Institute will expand the process of bringing democratic thinking to those in power; give them options so that

they are not confined to advice of those in their immediate circle. Think tanks are a very healthy part of the society and I pray that the institute will contribute to progress in the Arab world.”

Dergham had always felt the need for more intelligent, engaged and local voices to shape public policy in the region; it was like a nagging voice in her head, growing in response to the ubiquitous resignation she witnessed among the youth, both in

the Arab world and those of Arab-origin living outside it, in their ability to impact the region's future. Their submissiveness troubled her. But what came next made the need for what she had in mind even more clear and urgent. "Though it wasn't a complete surprise, when the Arab Spring erupted, I realised how an organisation that can provide direction and collective analysis was even more necessary now. There was a need for the people, from those in power to those on the ground, to understand their options in shaping their present and future and not let the process be confiscated, which it unfortunately was in many cases."

From the very beginning, Dergham was sure and proud of the identity of the institute she was putting together. Their voice would be that of the moderates and modernists. This begs the question whether such a declared stance doesn't automatically counter the institute's claim to be non-partisan, in this part of the world especially, where moderate voices are regularly muzzled, accused of being aligned with Western interests and, consequently, seem outnumbered. "Well, I don't think of it that way but if being moderate can be categorized as partisan, so be it," Dergham says. "For me, it's very important that we are distinct from those who fight and shout for their point of view to be heard. Of course the Arab society is divided, not just in opposing directions but into divergent factions; there are destructionists and extremists; there are those with hawkish and religious identities; they are welcome to their ideologies. But in a region which is, unfortunately, witnessing a lot of destruction, we want to be constructive. Beirut Institute will be a place of debate and logical thinking. Our fellows and board members might not always be on the same page all the time but the final analysis and recommendations will always be geared towards building up the society."

Dergham has been working full-time towards starting up Beirut Institute since 2010. "I thought it would be much easier but this proved to be a novel concept in this part of the world. I automatically assumed I would get the support I needed because influential Arabs I met in other gatherings worldwide fully encouraged me, saying that if I built it, they would come. Well, they didn't." Nevertheless, the excellent contacts she had developed in the course of her years of experience in the space came through for her, and Beirut Institute is getting ready to host its first international summit in Abu

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Founder
Beirut Institute

Dhabi this October.

For Dergham, it was important to give Beirut its rightful place as a bastion of liberal thinking. "Beirut deserves that. Although I had lived in New York, I was born in Beirut. To me, it is beautiful, all the more because of its history of being the receptacle of people from across the region who wanted to think and speak freely. One of our board members told me once that Beirut is the "lungs of the Arab world" and our institute should be the oxygen in those lungs. It is a testament to the faith our members have in us and the work we are doing." While the think tank is registered in Beirut, it seeks to serve the entire region. "We celebrate the diversity in this region, be it ethnic or religious. Our board members and the advisory board comprise prominent thinkers from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Kurdistan, Bahrain... It represents a fantastic medley of young people from various backgrounds - finance, government, civil society, business, foreign relations - who are all looking forward to contributing to the future of the Arab world," she says.

But Beirut Institute's reach and ambition extend beyond the region. "We have been associated with the United Nations and through a series of off-the-record lunches we hosted, we put members of the Security Council in touch with analysts from the region, whose inputs and points of view have been extremely beneficial in the Council's deliberations." Dergham also points to their policy paper on the impact of refugees from Syria on Lebanon which was very well received. "We are the convener of minds who brainstorm together and summarise the results into policy options which are delivered to policy makers."

And while there are several institutions in the region working on the same, Dergham still believes that since overall as a region, the MENA accounts for only 5% of the global distribution of think tanks, the more the better. She hopes organisations like hers will be in step with the big foreign-based think tanks based in the region, like Carnegie Middle East Center and Brookings Doha Center, in making positive contributions to the society.

The more we listen to Dergham's story, the more Beirut Institute sounds like a Silicon Valley story - an ambitious startup with plans to change the world for the better. "The institute is being entirely financed by individuals and corporations and never by any government. Even in the case of the summit, the Government of Abu Dhabi is covering part of the costs of the event and not contributing to the institute as such. We have some wonderful partners who are supporting us with pro bono branding, legal and other kinds of work for us. I myself haven't drawn a salary since I founded the institute," she says. But for all this, Dergham expects to make a big splash in Abu Dhabi.

To be held between October 10 and 11 in St Regis Abu Dhabi, this global conference will bring together political leaders, senior policy makers, prominent thinkers, major CEOs, and civil society leaders to reflect on "reconfiguring the Arab region and its global space beyond political economy and security threats" through different summit tracks and a series of on- and off-the-record policy meetings. "The calibre of the people who are participating is amazing," Dergham says. She hopes to take the results arrived at through these conversations and deliver them throughout the world, and "help to open the eyes and minds of people to what collective thinking produces".

While there is value to off-the-record gatherings, think tanks are also increasingly more open and feel the need to engage the public, through conferences like these and the media. "In the public part of the summit we will discuss a magnificent array of issues beyond geopolitics and the economic impact of reconfiguring the region. Technologists, regional innovators and film directors will be part of the conversations, reflecting on issues related to sexism, religious strife and other issues that deeply affect the region." For Dergham, the conference is only the beginning. The conversation needs to continue. It is the only viable alternative to the guns and bomb-driven dialogue, which has become the norm today. ■