

Guns, seats and protests: Prospects for political reforms across the Middle East

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1. Introduction: Back to 2011?

Ten years ago, citizens across the Middle East took to the streets to demand reforms that would create more social justice and better livelihood prospects. Upheaval, revolution, crisis and violence followed. Demonstrations turned into civil wars as countries became battlegrounds for venal interests, power politics and ideologies alike. Civil wars internationalised as regional and great powers intervened. Since 2011, the socio-political landscape of the region has become more fragile and divided due to conflicts, geopolitical competition and the Covid-19 pandemic. In the main, ruling elites have held onto power as the overall condition of the region deteriorated.

Large protests re-emerged in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran in 2019 with smaller protests taking place in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Israel. Similarly to the Arab uprisings of 2011, citizens took the street to demand better livelihoods and services, better governance and more social justice. Both in 2011 and in 2019, protests were mostly leaderless, cross-generational and cross-class. The more recent protests also showed that resentment against ruling elites is not limited to the region's poorer autocracies but extends to sectarian quasi-democracies such as Lebanon and Iraq. While Covid-19 halted most of these protests, their causes remain. At the same time, it is also clear that substantial constituencies supportive of more authoritarian modes of governance remain throughout the region. An underlying question that often remains unaccounted for is what level of social reform is required for further reaching political reforms to become possible and take real effect, for example in terms of gender relations, sectarian clientelism and the relation between religion and governance.

The most recent wave of protests was ignited by the deterioration of economic conditions across the region, increases in social tensions, weak performance of many governments and persistently high levels of corruption in a context of conflict and regional strife. Given the long-term nature of many of these conflicts and high levels of elite resistance to political reforms across the Middle East, more discontent and protests are likely. The Arab Uprisings can essentially be viewed as evidence of the manifest failure of many (if not most) political orders across the Middle East to develop meaningful notions of citizenship and generate adequate levels and quality of (semi-) public goods.

Against this background, the concept note focuses on exploring prospects for political reforms across the Middle East that can positively redefine the bundle of rights and duties linked with

citizenship¹ and increase both the volume and quality of (semi-) public goods² produced by the region's political orders. The note outlines a provisional approach for thinking about prospects for political reforms in the Middle East. It serves as the basis for three webinars that aim to provide an initial exploration of the many issues and dimensions in play.

2. Purpose of the project

The project intends to undertake an initial analysis of prospects for political reform across the Middle East by both developing and testing a conceptual approach to political reform via a mix of research and webinars. If this proves to be a productive exercise, the project's findings can serve as the point of departure for a multi-year research effort that develops a sound understanding of the nature of the different political orders of the Middle East, including their political economy and state of conflict; identify prospects and obstacles for political reform/transition across the region, and outline entry points for governance improvement strategies that are feasible and resonant with the socio-cultural realities of the Middle East.

The project will draw from the comparative literature on political change to identify factors that foster or prevent political reforms in the sense of upgrading the conception of citizenship and improving the production of public goods and assess how such factors may – or may not - apply to the Middle East.

3. Conceptualising political change

Change leads to alterations of the status quo that acquire positive or negative meaning in the eyes of those initiating it, observing it or being at its receiving end. Even though the consequences of change can be studied relatively objectively, change processes in the human world are often contentious and divisive as proponents focus on giving greater meaning to the problem to ensure the need for adjustment can overcome the gravitas of the existing situation, while opponents focus on reducing the meaning of the problem to ensure the status quo remains attractive and resilient. Change usually includes trade-offs due to the connectivity of different spheres of human activity, which means it often produces winners and losers in both the short and the long term.

Reform is a type of change that overhauls an existing institution or practice with the aim of improving its performance. In other words, it is positive in its intention and based on a manifest failure of an existing institution or practice that is shared among large groups of stakeholders. This is why the term 'reform' is an appropriate term to use. In the political realm, reform usually refers to:

¹ A citizen is a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership of that community across different domains, including social, civil and political, by which they may also vary. See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/citizenship/#Defn> (accessed 15 July 2021).

² Goods (including services) that are both non-excludable and non-rivalrous (example: road infrastructure). We add 'semi' because impure public goods, i.e. that are non-excludable and non-rivalrous only in part or for part of the time, are also included in our understanding of the term (example: education, electricity).

- Administrative reform: improving implementation processes and tools aimed at addressing a public problem
- Policy reform: improving the operational approach to addressing a public problem within the boundaries of its broader conceptualisation
- Reform of practices of governance and rule: improving the mechanisms for deciding on how public problems are conceptualised, resources allocated, and trade-offs resolved.

More broadly speaking, political reform results from the interplay between demand and supply mediated by interventions that bridge these two points of departure:

- Demands for reform can emerge from different sectors or elements of society (e.g. branch organisations, particular communities, businesses and/or parts of the political elite), which are usually resisted by other parts of society.
- Supply of reform typically comes from political-business elites, government and the civil service, which may also be internally divided.
- The interventions needed to connect demand with supply can take many different forms in terms of their intent (from peaceful to violent) and intensity (from gradual to radical). They have in common that they need to be feasible, innovative, and mediated by key individuals or institutions.

External factors can reinforce the relative strength of those that demand reforms or those that oppose them. In exceptional cases, external factors can even play a (decisive) role in interventions that bring supply and demand for reform (closer) together.

4. The demand-side of political reform: Street and elite

Political reform can occur in countless ways that, however, all tend to feature a mix of popular and elite components, (e.g. 'citizens taking to the street' to demand change in public and members of the political elite advocating for change inside governing institutions or networks). The 'street' component of political reform can involve a specific group of citizens that share a particular interest, location (e.g. community, city or tribe) or another uniting feature (e.g. religion or social class), just as it can involve mass mobilisation and even a general revolt. It can be peaceful or violent. It can be linked with segments of the political elite or operate more independently.

The elite component of political reform can have a narrow or broad basis that is united by either ideology or resistance against a feature of rule, policy or person. It can be violent (e.g. assassinations or use of armed groups) or peaceful (e.g. in parliament, through courts or advocacy). It can be linked with 'street' elements, or be more technocratic in nature.

The main constellations of demand-side factors for reform can be mapped out along these two axes of street and elite support. Against this background, there is the extent of popular support for political reform:

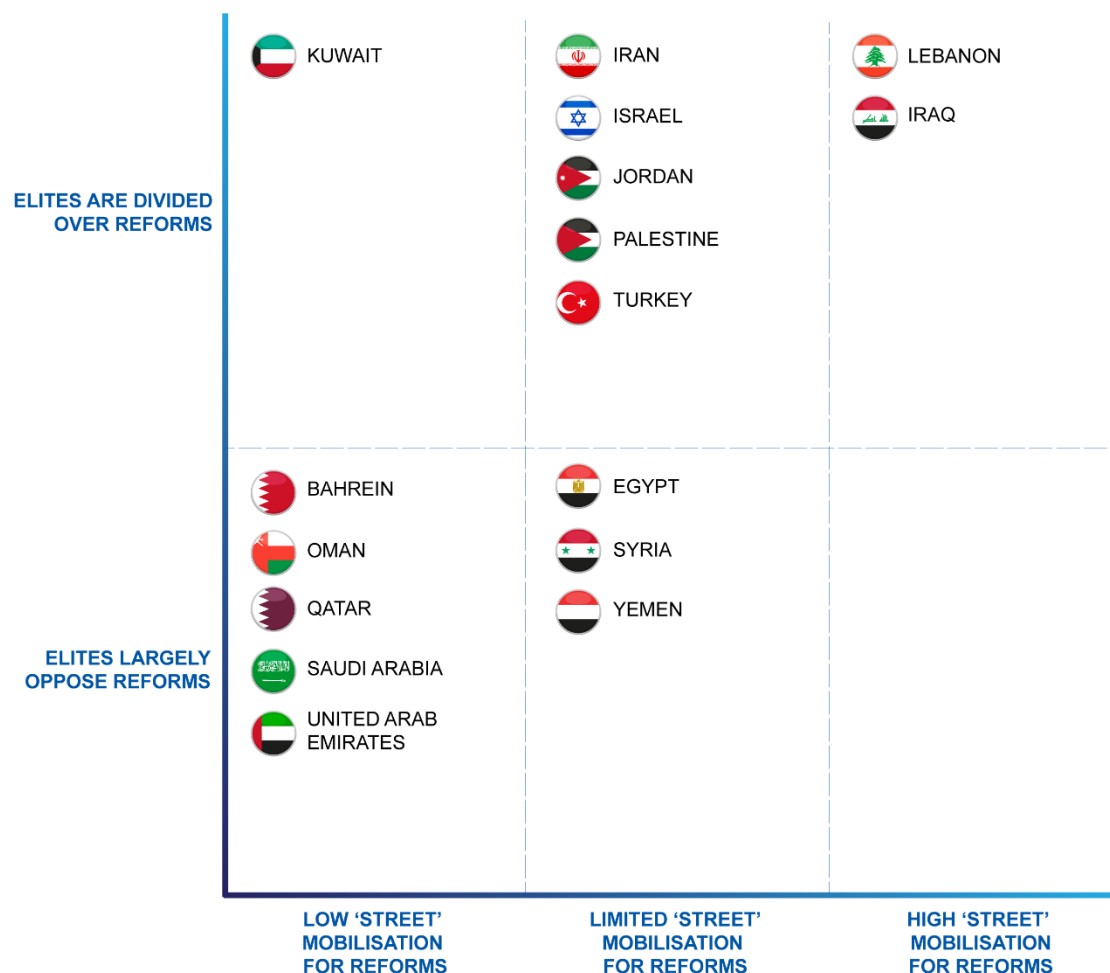
- *High 'street' mobilisation for reforms:* Looking at recent history, this includes countries where many citizens have expressed their support for change by taking the streets or the

squares en masse in the last wave of protests (2019-2020). Lebanon and Iraq are included in this category.

- *Limited 'street' mobilisation for reforms:* Countries that featured limited protests in the recent wave of protests (2019-2020) – either because of popular limitations (e.g. significant population groups continue to support the political elite and government) or government repression. Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and Yemen feature in this category.
- *Low 'street' mobilisation for reforms:* Countries that have not featured significant protests during the Arab uprisings or that have not seen a wave of protests in 2019-2020 for the same reasons as indicated above. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates fall in this category.

In addition, the second axis considers elite demands for political reform:

- *Elites are divided over reforms:* Countries in which members of the elite (individuals, parties, organisations, institutions, etc.) openly express their support for political reforms. Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, Palestine, and Turkey are part of this category.
- *Elites largely oppose reforms:* Countries in which the elite mostly opposes political reforms. Bahrain, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen are included in this category.



5. The supply-side of political reform: Political order and bureaucratic capacity

Insofar as the supply dimension of political reform is concerned, prospects depend on the political-institutional configuration of a particular country, just as demand depends on the configuration of the socio-political forces in play. To operationalise political-institutional configuration – e.g. the supply side of reform - we use the variables of 'political order' and 'government capability'.

Within the variable of 'political order', we distinguish between four types that reflect the extent to which different population groups can meaningfully engage in deliberation on, as well as the practice of, governance and hence, contribute to political reform:

- *Majoritarian republics*: Countries where citizens participate more or less freely in elections but in which minorities are not well protected from majority imposition. Despite the electoral system allowing for changes in governance and leadership, there are substantial limitations on how individuals, communities and political parties belonging to minorities can truly share power. Turkey and Israel are included in this category.
- *Quasi-democratic sectarian states*: Countries where citizens participate more or less in elections with political organisation and voting are partially based on religious/ethnic affiliation (e.g. *Kurds, Shias, Christians*). Electoral and governance systems typically operate as elite cartels that favour incumbent politicians and figures of authority. These systems are characterised by a mix of formal and informal norms/practices that order the political space along confessional or ethnic lines. Lebanon and Iraq are included in this category.
- *(Semi-) authoritarian states*: Countries in which political parties and/or citizens in elections and governance are limited. The centre of political authority resides in bodies or persons with an alternative source of (partial) legitimacy who came to power by military, hereditary or revolutionary means. Elections serve the purpose of symbolically solidifying their rule in the eyes of the world. Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Palestine, Syria, Yemen are included in this category.
- *Rentier monarchies*: Countries where political power resides in a ruling family that commands significant hydrocarbons rent to finance its preferred style and mechanisms of governance. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates fall into this category. Hereditary and cradle-to-grave 'welfare state' legitimacy - for an exclusive group of citizens – are the basis for the rule. This group is essentially a subcategory of (semi-) authoritarian state but requires a separate label because of its wealth-based influence across the region at both the socio-religious micro-level as well as the regional geopolitical macro-level.

In addition to examining types of political order with their different political economies and sources of legitimacy, the project also examines countries according to their *bureaucratic capacity* to implement reforms - once there is an intention to initiate them. The notion of

'bureaucratic effectiveness' is partially based on the fragility index³ and the government effectiveness⁴ index of the World Bank with the caveat that bureaucracies across the Middle East do not tend to be neutral institutions that can be switched into a 'pro-reform implementation' position once there is sufficient elite consensus on the need to reform. Instead, they are often deeply politicized institutions including in ways that can make them bastions of resistance against reform – or proponents of reform – with full, partial or few linkages to ruling political elites.

- *Largely capable bureaucracies:* Countries where the central bureaucracy is willing and capable to deliver and implement reforms. We define these countries based on four characteristics:
 - The bureaucracy can resist or implement reforms with a measure of professional autonomy once sufficient consensus between political elites exist (elite consensus)
 - The security forces control the territory, but not the bureaucracy (bureaucratic independence)
 - The bureaucracy is broadly perceived as functional by citizens (legitimacy)
 - The bureaucracy is financially and administratively capable of implementing reforms (executive capability)

Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia fall in this category.

- *Partially capable bureaucracies:* Countries where the capacity and will of the bureaucracy to resist or support reform is limited. We define these countries based on four characteristics:
 - The bureaucracy is constrained by sectors of the opposition or segments of the elite in the extent to which it can resist or implement reform (elite fragmentation)
 - The security forces control the bureaucracy to some extent (oligopoly/monopoly on politics)
 - The functionality of the bureaucracy is contested in specific sectors or territories (partial functionality)
 - Bureaucratic resources to implement reforms are limited (limited executive capability)

Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Turkey are included in this category.

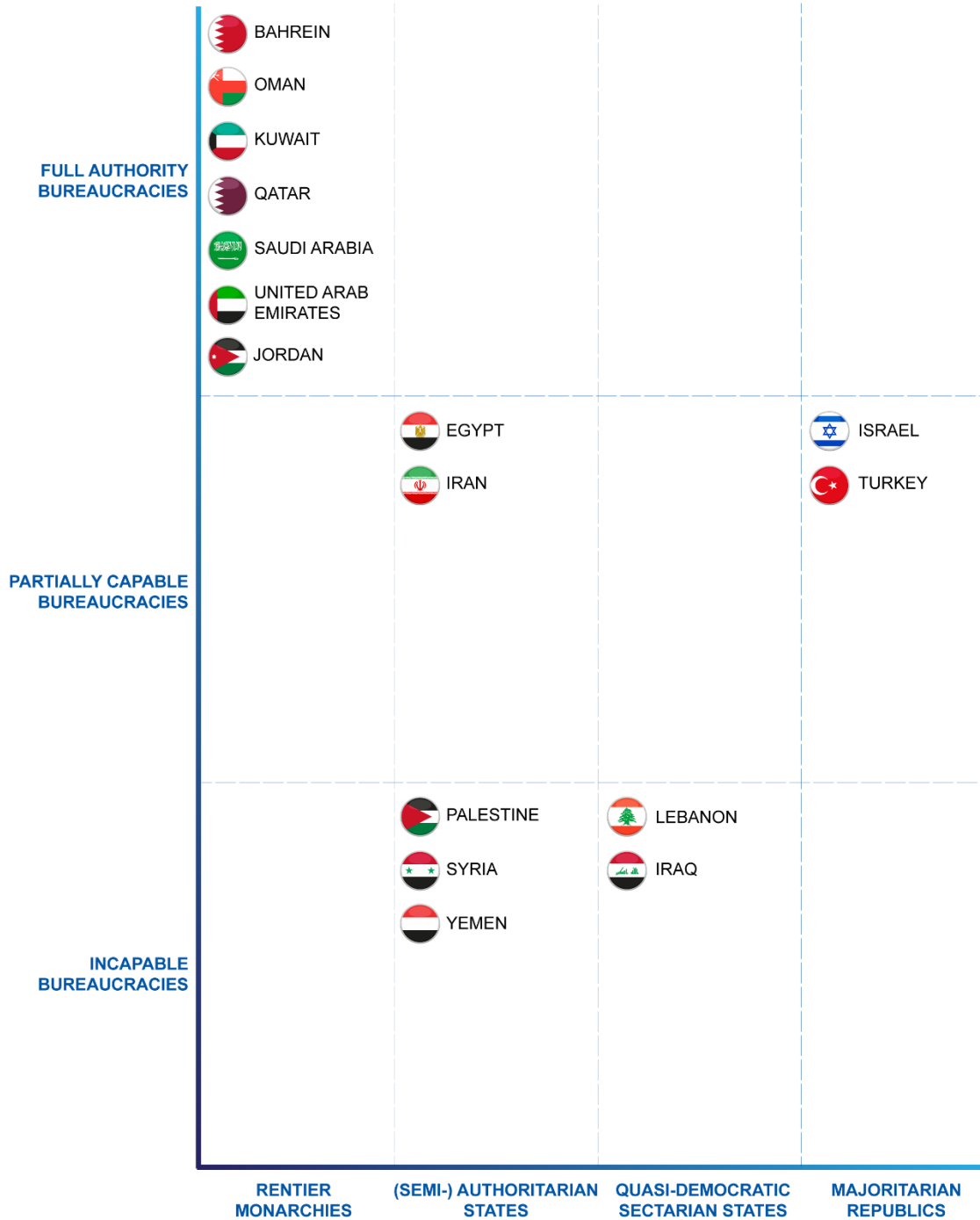
- *Incapable bureaucracies:* Countries where the bureaucracy does not have the capacity to implement reforms even if it wanted to:
 - Bureaucratic efforts to resist or implement significant reforms derive from the position of ruling elites, or are blocked by elites competing for rule (partisan elite dominance)
 - Coercive organisations other than the security forces have a strong influence on, or control, the bureaucracy (oligopoly on use of violence)

³ [Fragile States Index | The Fund for Peace](#)

⁴ [Governance Effectiveness | Data | DataBank \(worldbank.org\)](#)

- The bureaucracy is not (perceived as) functional in large sectors of the society or significant territories (disputed functionality)
- The bureaucracy does not have the resource to implement reforms (low capability)

Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, and Syria are included in this category.



6. Interventions matter: Joining supply with demand

Political reforms emerge from the interplay between the demand and the supply of reforms. However, attempts at reform can fail due to elite resistance to change, insufficient organisational capacity of demonstrators to overcome barriers to collective action or a mix of both. It follows that pro-reform interventions need to be savvy and feasible in order to bridge the gap between supply and demand so that limited, gradual, large-scale or radical political reform may follow.

Savvy interventions are about getting incentives right. They derive from an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of rule in the Middle East, correctly assessing the balance of socio-political forces and elite interests in play and developing the incentive-based leverage necessary to effectuate change. *Feasible* interventions are about understanding the boundaries and scope for reforms. They correctly assess the context, scope, interlinkage and limits of change, as well as the sort of resources required to pursue it. This enables interventions to develop a sustained focus on those change aspects that matter most and lead to further future change.

In brief, the nature of reform interventions matters and must be understood in each particular political context. For the purpose of this note, it suffices to suggest that – if they are to bridge supply and demand gaps - interventions need to feature sticks and carrots that can influence identified interests as well as involve mediating individuals that are trusted by both pro-and anti-reform forces, or involve individuals and organisations that can increase the level of demand or supply for reforms by sheer force of personality and prestige.

7. First explorations: Literature study and webinar series

Before 2011, the authoritarian nature of many political orders in the Middle East helped trigger the Arab uprisings since such orders could not provide a sufficient level of citizenship and public goods to their populations even though the demand for it was high. Today, dynamics of conflict and political crisis have further deteriorated political order and government effectiveness in a number of countries (e.g. Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine), while other countries have not changed much compared with the pre-2011 situation.

Given the ample remaining demand for political reform, the project aims to start identifying building blocks for political reform strategies under the different supply and demand configurations that characterise the countries of the Middle East. This approach is operationalised in three phases: 1) a literature review, 2) a webinar series and 3) design of a multi-year research approach.

The first phase includes an exploratory study of the comparative literature on political reform to identify conditions under which states may enter pathways towards change. With the conceptual approach outlined above as a prism, we will review the existing political science literature on reform in authoritarian systems, transitions to democracy and reform in consociational democracies to identify main obstacles and prospects for political change. The

review will focus on dimensions that we consider particularly prominent in the Middle East context. More specifically, it will pay particular attention to:

- The composition and strategies of the domestic elite to maintain power (e.g. ruling family, ministers, secret services, high officials of the army and religious authorities)
- The relative strength and the role of civil society in the system (membership, access to fundings, legislative limitations, access to public space and focus)
- The role of security forces in the power infrastructure of rule (e.g. role in the economy, influence on politics, guardians of constitutional rights) and the strategies of such actors to foster or block transitions (e.g. siding with the protests, preserving the political order)
- Relations between the prevalent economic model and the nature of rule (e.g. rent distribution, state presence in the economy, booming private sector)
- Regional and international influences, including the role of 'negative externalities' (e.g. refugees from neighbouring countries, transnational militias)
- The role of policy failures and unexpected risk events in aggravating internal crises (e.g. budget cliffs, black swan events, and catastrophic failures).

The second phase will consist of three webinars of ca. 2-3 hours each with small groups of around ten experts, as follows:

- The first webinar will provide a review of the comparative evidence base on factors influencing prospects for political reform, and its relevance to the Middle East. To this end, we will invite a mix of political scientists and Middle East experts from both more theoretical and applied backgrounds. The long list of reform factors culled from the literature review will offer a starting point for discussion. We will invite each participating expert to provide a short reflection (300 words) on the review results and discuss it with participants and policymakers.
- The second webinar will examine conditions, modalities and results of EU support for political reform processes in several case studies across the Middle East. We will examine why countries with one or more comparable element in the political orders are framed differently in policy terms and what 'bad' versus 'best' practices of EU support for political reforms look like. We will invite a mix of regional and country experts.
- The third webinar will focus on the practical dimension of bringing actual reform about and focus on policies and programs that can work in the settings and under the conditions discussed in webinars 1 and 2. We will invite mostly international practitioners and local activists to consider how to support change in the Middle East and identify the main obstacles they are facing in pushing for reforms.

8. Results

We plan to realise a 3-minute video to outline obstacles and policies to promote political change in the Middle East, as well as a 3-4 page report resuming initial obstacles, prospects, and responses that emerged from the webinars, complemented with one or more infographics. In 2022, we intend to initiate a multi-year research program that is based in part on findings and insights gained during the webinar series.