Amman Issue Brief

The Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP)

Arab Civil Societies after the Uprisings: Challenges during Political Transitions

The popular uprisings that have swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011 present a historic event that has fundamentally changed the domestic power dynamics across the region. While civil society has played a prominent role during the protests, its influence seems to be waning. This Issue Brief explores some of the **main challenges** faced by Arab civil societies in the ongoing political transitions, namely:

- **Internal divisions** within civil society that prevent effective cooperation;
- Trade-offs between **different organizational structures**;
- Tensions that arise from civil society's **relations with the political sphere**; and
- Exclusive and contradictory **international policies and donor relations**.

This Issue Brief is the first in a series of papers that disseminate the interim results of research and various consultations taking place with different partners under the auspices of the Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP). Part of an ongoing project, this initiative, entitled "Arab Spring: Challenges during Political Transitions and Comparative Lessons for Civil Societies in the Middle East and North Africa", aims to **strengthen the role and sustainable participation of civil society groups in the MENA region** during the consolidation phase of the current transitions. To this end, the regional consultations provide:

- a space for dialogue and reflection for civil society;
- comparative lessons from previous transition processes outside of the MENA region; and
- exchange between various civil society groups, politicians, regional and international experts, and donors.

The **Amman consultation**, on which this Issue Brief is based, took place in April 2012. It is the outcome of cooperation between the CCDP, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the Arab Reform Initiative, and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP).

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Arab Reform Initiative

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Geneva Centre for Security Policy
Centre de Politique de Sécurité, Genève
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Background

The wave of protests that shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2011, commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring," presented ***sustained bottom-up demands for thorough socio-economic change and in-depth political transformation***. Breaking the barrier of fear, people in every country of the region demanded respect for their human rights, an end to authoritarianism, and a new social contract built on representation. While not all countries have followed the same trajectory, the existing power and state-society relations have been challenged in a profound and potentially irreversible way.

In order to identify and address some of the main challenges connected to these changes, the CCDP's "Arab Spring" project conducted a regional consultation in Amman, Jordan in April 2012. In cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the Arab Reform Initiative, and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), the consultation brought together more than 70 participants from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and Jordan. These included civil society activists, regional researchers, international experts from Latin America and Eastern Europe, as well as diplomats and donor representatives. Civil society groups in the region, international non-governmental organizations, researchers, policy-makers, and donors constitute the target audience of the results of this consultation.

Challenges

1) Internal Divisions

Context: Existing divisions within civil society

Civil society consists of a wide range of organizations that are characterized by voluntary collective action. It takes place around shared interests, purposes, and values that are distinct from those of the state, family, or market. In the MENA region, a distinction is often made between two understandings of civil society: *al mujtama al madani* and *al mujtama al ahli*. The former refers to civic ties, is used mostly by human rights activists, and equated with a modernist agenda of development. In contradistinction, the latter refers to primordial solidarities and tends to be used by more local and traditional (usually religious) charitable organizations. This distinction, which must be contextualized and is not systematic, is nonetheless at the origin of a ***significant division between religious and secular civil society groups***. However, similar divides could also be identified between ***rural and urban*** organizations and those promoting ***democratic versus undemocratic*** values.

Challenge: Intensification of divides hindering cooperation

Historically, transitions have allowed for the emergence of competing projects that are not always compatible. While the common goal of regime change unites the different groups during the revolutionary periods, ***civil society tends to lose its decisive role and become fragmented along political lines*** in the revolution's aftermath. Indeed, the Amman consultation revealed an increasingly widening gap between "seculars" and "Islamists." On the one hand, youth activists and women who were at the forefront of the uprisings fear to be sidelined by Islamists, currently the biggest political winners of the ongoing transformations. On the other hand, Islamists are often sidelined by Western actors without distinction between the different currents within political Islam. While not unsurpassable, the multiple grievances and lack of trust between the different civil society groups ***make the building of a post-transition society difficult and decrease civil society's influence on the ongoing political processes***.

Next steps

- Acknowledge the **internal divisions** within civil society, including political Islam, which also harbours some liberal trends, and work towards decreasing them;
- Engage **wider sections of civil society**, beyond secular and liberal groups;
- Encourage inclusive social and political processes, incorporating the **different visions** of post-transition state-society relations; and
- Promote **cooperation and trust building** between different civil society groups.

2) Organizational Challenges

Context: Established organizations versus spontaneous protest mobilization

While politically conscious parts of civil society have been active for years, the 2011 popular uprisings were largely spontaneous and lacking any identifiable leadership. An important role in the process was also played by traditional and new social media, which helped to create "virtual" solidarities and mobilize groups to take action. On the whole, most of the established civil society activists were present throughout the protests as individuals rather than organizations. The resulting loose coalitions, combined with flat organizational structures, allowed for tactical flexibility in response to government repression.

Challenge: Trade-offs between different organizational structures

There are a number of trade-offs between voluntary, flexible, and flat versus professional, formal, and hierarchical organizational structures. While the former forms allow for more organic and rapid growth and activity, the latter tend to promote long-term organizational survival. In the post-revolutionary phase, continued influence over the direction of the state seems to ***favour more established or hierarchically organized groups*** that have a wide base (e.g. both urban and rural reach), are specified in terms of agenda (e.g. human rights, electoral reform), or approach (e.g. lobby, consultation, monitoring). However, many of the newly-formed groups do not have such a base and are ***not willing or able to make such organizational changes***. Indeed, both Arab and international experience shows that those who "make" the revolution are generally not the ones who help shape the new social and political order. This situation not only creates feelings of "hijacking" of the revolution but also presents the different groups with difficult organizational decisions for the future.

Next steps

- Encourage **diversity in civil society structures** and organizations;
- Engage partners on a more equal footing to create a sense of **local ownership**; and
- Accommodate context-specific **local needs** (e.g. capacity building for new groups).

3) Relations with the Political Sphere

Context: Exclusivity of political access and mistrust towards the state

Before the uprisings, the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region have actively tried to undermine the potential political role of civil society organizations. Acting through cooptation, legal restrictions, and sanctions, they have effectively weakened and marginalized many civil society groups, especially liberal and religious ones. As a result, ***many activists and civil society organizations eschew politics through official institutional channels*** due to a lack of access or for fear of compromising their work.

Challenge: Depth and nature of political engagement of civil society

While civil society is independent from the political sphere, it is both oriented towards and interacts closely with it. In the transition period, the particular form of this relation is crucial for its influence on the ongoing changes. In the aftermath of the uprisings, the different civil society groups have to decide whether, in what form, and to what extent they will participate in politics. This is crucial since international

experience shows that the role of civil society in the political transition becomes more important once the autocratic regimes fall and the transition begins. This decision creates a significant amount of ***tension both between and within organizations***, as the endorsement of civil society helps legitimate the particular political process. Greater involvement of civil society in the political sphere can take a number of different forms:

Political parties
In the aftermath of revolutions, many social movements disappear, transform into NGOs, or into (previously banned) political parties. The latter option is particularly salient for groups like Islamist movements that are well organized and enjoy legitimacy thanks to their involvement in the social sphere. Indeed, the formation of political parties has consequences for the trajectory of political reforms, be they elections, constitutional reforms, or transitional justice. This is especially true when elections are held early in the transition.

Political offices
Specific civil society activists can also get individually involved in partisan politics to facilitate the transition or serve as civil servants in order to contribute to political reforms from the inside. This was the case with Poland's movement leader Lech Walesa in the 1980s or Czechoslovakia's Václav Havel in the 1990s, both of whom came to serve as Presidents of the new republics. Such individual movements from the social to the political sphere can have important consequences both for the state and for the organization from which they originate.

Political reforms and legislation
Officially staying outside of politics, civil society groups can nonetheless participate in political debates, help shape the direction of reforms, and provide legitimacy to the new political order. They can directly help formulate constitutions and new laws or advocate for specific provisions, monitor various political processes such as elections, and push for the provision of transitional justice. Moreover, the fact that civil society works in a more immediate timeframe than the longer-term vision adopted by the political actors makes it crucial that they participate in the political process.

Next steps
- Encourage **diverse participation of civil society** within the political sphere;
- Pay attention to the **sequencing of elections and constitutional reforms** to avoid disadvantaging new groups or exacerbating divisions within society; and
- Promote unique solutions to **country-specific problems** that build legitimacy of the new political order and consensus on the new social contract.

4) International Policies and Donor Relations

Context: Exclusive and contradictory international policies
In the past, international actors have played a contradictory role in the region, simultaneously sustaining the existing authoritarian regimes and promoting the values of democracy and human rights as universal standards. The apparent contradiction between interests and values has undermined their legitimacy among civil society groups as well as the general public. Moreover, the understanding of civil society actors in the region by Western donors has tended to be narrow and restrictive. Often, these donors have only engaged with selected secular or liberal groups while marginalizing Islamists. This has led to the development of exclusive relations to certain civil society groups by both Western and Arab donors and the exacerbation of existing polarizations.

Challenge: Maintaining autonomy and setting own priorities
Given that arguably any support brings an agenda, civil societies around the MENA region currently struggle between ***the need to benefit from international resources and expertise, and the desire to maintain a degree of autonomy from donors***. This is particularly important given the recent attacks on NGOs receiving foreign funding, resulting in the questioning of their intentions, work, and legitimacy.

Another problem arises from the fact that ***foreign aid affects civil society practices by giving rise to the proliferation of professionalized NGOs as an organizational form***, affecting the kind of work the organizations perform. Rather than searching for a balanced rural-urban or voluntary-professional approach, this process is disproportionally centred on professional organizations from urban areas. Indeed, rather than fulfilling the particular needs on the ground, civil society organizations often cater to the projects envisaged by international donors with little regard for the specific context.

Observed by the various civil society groups that participated in the Amman consultation, international experience validates these trends. Comparative experience from Latin America demonstrates that excessive funding in one country or on one specific issue prevents the emergence of an autonomous, grassroots, home-grown civil society. Moreover, shifting aid paradigms can hamper the development of civil society actors.

Next steps
- Develop **innovative funding models** for the MENA region that are tailored to specific country needs;
- Help establish **national and regional funding mechanisms** by investing in capacity building and increasing cooperation between various civil society organizations;
- Allow for **local identification of needs** before engaging in project development, thus ensuring a greater **sense of ownership**;
- Engage with the **full spectrum of civil society actors**, decreasing polarization and building bridges between them; and
- Sustain **pressure on and cooperation with governments** to support the creation of suitable legal, political, and financial conditions for civil society to operate.

Conclusions: A Space for Civil Society Participation during Transitions

Among the most important consequences of the 2011 popular uprisings and the subsequent transitions has been the ***shift in attention from international politics to domestic issues***. Civil society has the potential to play an important role in the ongoing complex project of social, cultural, political, and economic transformation and in efforts to establish a new set of state-society relations. However, there are a ***number of internal and external factors that can hinder an effective civil society participation in the ongoing transitions***.

Internally, these factors include the general institutional structure of the organization, its reliance on voluntary or professional work, as well as its location, support base, and focus of work. Its effect also depends on the nature and depth of its engagement with the political sphere and the organization's relations with other civil society groups and relevant international actors.

Externally, the resistance of former political elites, state laws, the general political environment, as well as the level of trust of civil society toward state institutions are crucial in determining civil society participation. An important role is also played by the existence of domestic coalitions between like-minded civil society groups and international support from external civil society, donors, and policy-makers.

Overall, the ***space for civil society action*** is shaped not only by ***how involved civil societies want to be*** (based on their identity and willingness or ability to engage with the state) but also by the ***limits set by the state***. This configuration is ***not fixed but fluid and malleable*** by the different actors – local, national, regional, and international.

Participating Organizations

Al Badeel Center, *Jordan*
Al Jazeera Center for Studies, *Qatar*
Alliance of Arab Women, *Egypt*
American University of Beirut, *Lebanon*
American University of Cairo, *Egypt*
Anna Lindh Foundation, *Egypt*
Arab Institute for Human Rights, *Tunisia*
Arab Reform Initiative, *Egypt*
Arab Women Organization, *Jordan*
Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, *Egypt*
Association démocratique des femmes du Maroc, *Morocco*
Association of families of disappeared, *Algeria*
Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, *Tunisia*
Association Tunisienne pour l'éveil démocratique, *Tunisia*
Centre d'Etudes en Droits Humains et Démocratie, *Morocco*
Centre de recherche universitaire éthique et droits de l'homme, *Morocco*
Centre Jacques Berque, *Morocco*
Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, The Graduate Institute, *Switzerland*
Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform, *Lebanon*
Civil Development Foundation, *Yemen*
Civil Society Movement, *Lebanon*
Coalition of Women's Groups in Derna, *Libya*
Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement, *Egypt*
Egyptian Center for Women's rights, *Egypt*
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, *Egypt*
European University Institute, *Italy*
Farah El Nas Radio Station, *Jordan*
Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Germany*
French Institute of the Near East (IFPO), *Syria*
Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, *Germany*
Future Foundation, *Jordan*
Geneva Centre for Security Policy, *Switzerland*
Hayya Bina, *Lebanon*
Identity Center, *Jordan*
International Committee of the Red Cross, *Jordan*
Javeriana University, *Colombia*
John Hopkins University Bologna Center, *Italy*
Jordan Reform Watch, *Jordan*
Jordan Transparency Center, *Jordan*
Ligue Tunisienne pour les Droits de l'Homme, *Tunisia*
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Norway*
Moroccan Youth Forum, *Morocco*
Nasawiyya, *Lebanon*
National Center for Human Rights, *Jordan*
National Dialogue Committee, *Jordan*
National Organization against Tribalism and Regionalism, *Libya*
New School for Social Research, *New York, USA*
Organisation Marocaine des Droits de l'Homme, *Morocco*
Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, *Jordan*
Pontifical Catholic University, *Peru*
Samir Kassir Foundation and SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, *Lebanon*
Swiss Embassy, *Jordan*
Tobruk Youth Council, *Libya*
UMAM Documentation and Research, *Lebanon*
University of Jordan, *Jordan*
Youth Development Foundation, *Yemen*
Youth Revolution Council, *Egypt*

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The Amman Issue Brief is an output of the CCDP project *Arab Spring: Challenges during Political Transitions and Comparative Lessons for Civil Societies in the Middle East and North Africa*, coordinated by Dr Thania Paffenholz. For more information, please visit http://graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp/ccdp-research/ projects/ current-projects/arabspring.html.

This Issue Brief was prepared by Zuzana Hudáková, CCDP's Research Assistant for the Arab Spring Project, in collaboration with Lyna Comaty, Junior Regional Expert for the project. Both are currently pursuing their doctoral studies at the Graduate Institute.

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CENTRE ON CONFLICT, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACEBUILDING

Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
132, rue de Lausanne
P.O. Box 136
1211 Geneva 21
Switzerland
E-mail: ccdp@graduateinstitute.ch
Website: http://www.graduateinstitute.ch/ccdp