

For Immediate Release



## **AUB Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship holds inaugural conference on new spaces of civil society activism in Arab world**

Beirut, Lebanon- 23/05/2012 -The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut kicked off its inaugural two-day conference on May 23, 2013, with panel discussions by leading activists, lawyers, judges, journalists, academics, film-makers, and labor representatives from more than nine Arab countries.

Entitled “New Spaces of Civil Society Activism in the Arab World,” the conference is held in partnership with the Arab Studies Consortium (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, Arab Studies Institute at George Mason University) and Legal Agenda Beirut.

“This is a most significant and timely initiative,” said AUB President Peter Dorman. “Many areas of the Arab world are going through unprecedented transitions with unpredictable outcomes. The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship will be at the forefront of discussions related to changes taking place in the Arab world, bringing together leading experts from every sector to engage in dialogue, conduct research and propose innovative ways forward on the most pressing issues. We are very grateful to the Asfari Foundation for its visionary leadership and partnership.”

The American University of Beirut (AUB) created the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship with a \$10 million grant from the UK-based Asfari Foundation, pledged last year. The campus-based institute, which will focus on civil society and citizenship in the Arab world, will advance research and other initiatives to support the development of an informed citizenry engaged at all levels of Arab associational life and promote openness, transparency, and accountability in the region. It will act as a hub in the region, drawing expertise from academics, practitioners, policymakers, and members of the general public from AUB, Lebanon, and the region.

The Asfari Institute will generate evidence-based research, disseminate findings and make policy and practice recommendations. It will provide education and training to promote active citizenship and effective civil society, promote civil society and civic engagement in the region, and stimulate dialogue on related subjects.

Ayman Asfari, chairman of the Asfari Foundation, said, “I am very excited about the inaugural conference of the Asfari Institute. AUB has brought together an impressive group of academics and practitioners from the region to tackle issues of crucial importance to civil

society in the Arab world and beyond. This is exactly the kind of work we hope the Institute will become known for.”

The 25 panelists participating at the two-day conference will analyze how changes over the last two years are reconfiguring the boundaries of state and society and the meaning of citizenship. Speakers and panelists joined the conference from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Iraq, Philippine, US, and UK.

Keynote speakers include Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies in the Department of History at Columbia University, and an expert on Palestinian studies; Khaled Fahmy, professor and chair of the Department of History at the American University of Cairo and one of the authors of the Egypt’s new Freedom of Information Law; Walden Bello, a Member of Parliament in the House of Representatives for the Republic of the Philippines; and Asef Bayat, the Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and an expert on Islamic studies and political Islam.

AUB Provost Ahmad Dallal reminded participants during the opening session that the underlying and unifying sentiment of the protests that have been taking place in the Arab world was a demand for state reform and for more robust means of civic engagement and participation.

“Even in countries where there have been regime changes, the struggles continue because people’s demands and expectations have yet to be satisfied,” he added. “Both the Asfari Foundation and AUB recognize that the Arab World is undergoing momentous change, and both hope that--through research, education, training, and active partnership and engagement with academics, practitioners and members of the general public--the Asfari Institute will contribute to advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world during this era of historic transition.”

Dallal underscored the importance of collaboration among the University and civil organizations in order to achieve these objectives.

Among the issues participants were invited to examine and explain were: how conceptions of citizenship are being (re)formulated in terms of rights claims and the politics of inclusion and exclusion; how constitutions in particular and the law in general have constituted terrains of struggle; how alliances and/or conflicts are framed through and mobilized around gender, sexuality, generation, class, rural-urban divides, and communitarian and sectarian identities; how popular culture and social media have contributed to and reflected collective mobilizations; how protests have been affected by war, militarization, and securitization, including in some places counter-revolutionary repression; and how the protests have produced various kinds of regional and transnational interferences as well as solidarities across borders.

**ENDS**

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## Note to Editors

### About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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