

كسر القوالب
Breaking the mold

**Arab Civil Society & Their Quest to
Influence Policymaking - Conference
2019**

Conference Report

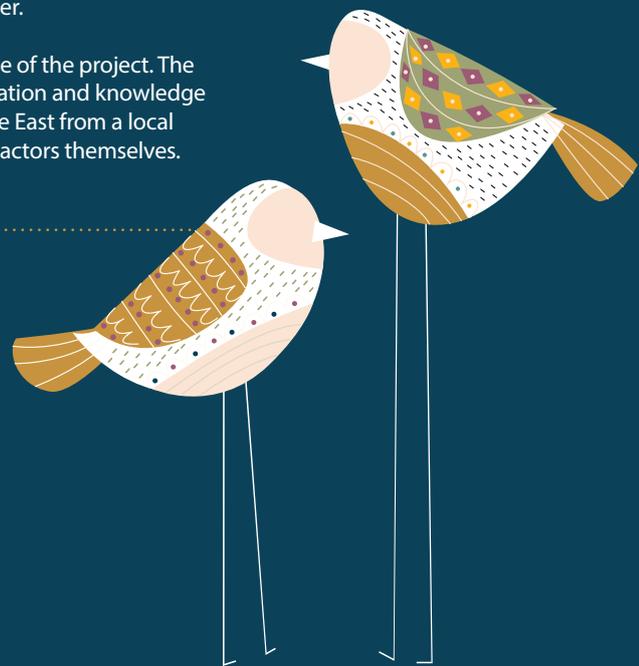
In December 2019, the “Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World” program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs brought together 24 researchers/ research groups in addition to 15 advisors from different Arab countries to present over 90 case studies with the support of the regional office of the Open Society Foundations (OSF). This two-day event, titled “Breaking the Mold,” was divided into several panels covering topics such as socioeconomic rights, political rights and liberties, gender, youth, the environment, regional uprisings, and conflict-affected areas.

The conference marked the end of the “Breaking the Mold” project’s second phase that began in April 2018, according to the program coordinator, Fatima Moussawi, during her opening remarks. She added that the project began with the ambition of reaching 100 case studies from 10 different Arab countries – Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and GCC States (Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia).

According to the principle investigator of the project, Dr. Nasser Yassin, this project was inspired by the post Arab Uprisings’ social and political dynamics that ensued in the region. The Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World program had also worked on individual research projects of a similar nature in Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen previously. In fact, “Breaking the Mold” showcased the efforts of researchers in conducting their work in often unstable and conflict-driven conditions and a challenged mindset in an unstable region.

According to Mr. Mahmoud Haidar, a senior advisor on the project, the project broke three “molds.” First, the research created a form of open discussion in the region in which both cohesive and opposing views could be shared – active participation by the researchers was essential as they weren’t exclusively observers. Second, researchers explored topics in their countries that were either ignored or overlooked from an academic perspective, thus creating new sources of relevant information. Finally, Arab issues and policies were studied from an internal and Arab perspective rather than that of an outsider.

These broken ‘molds’ were the desired outcome of the project. The aim was to fill the void left by the lack of information and knowledge about civil society actors (CSAs) in the Middle East from a local perspective and with the involvement of the actors themselves.



The first panel of the conference was moderated by Ziad Abdel Samad (advisory committee member) and consisted of researchers presenting their respective cases on socioeconomic rights from Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, and Lebanon. Opening the session, Abdel Samad pointed out that the key drivers for CSA initiatives stem from the need for justice and addressing the fundamental aspects that allow for corruption to persist. Whether these actors and organizations succeed or fail in their attempts to create awareness and a sense of understanding on certain issues is vital. Abdel Samad believes that socioeconomic initiatives are possibly the most important and sensitive of issues because they directly impact ruling elites.

Following the opening remarks, Dr. Rachid Touhtou presented five cases on Morocco and explained that social movements in the country are a response to the restricted access to formal politics, mistrust in the political system, and lack of trust in traditional political parties. His first case focuses on the Amazigh Movement and their call for independence; it also explores similarities with the Amazigh Movement in Algeria and the cross-border impact these movements can have in the region. This case study placed emphasis on the 2011 constitutionalizing of the Amazigh language which he described as a tactic used by the government to coopt the movement during the Arab Uprisings.

Touhtou's second case study explores the role of humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for the adoption of a law on migration and exiled individuals. Their strategy included sit-ins on the international day of labor and cooperating with the National Human Rights Council of Morocco with the aim of providing migrants with IDs, to name a few.

The third case study revolved around the unemployment movement that consists mostly of recent university graduates unable to secure jobs. Each generation since the 1980s has inherited the issues that created this movement which in turn has prolonged its survival.

Another case study focused on the Rif Hirak movement of 2016 which began in the city of Al Hoceima in North Morocco in reaction to the death of a fish merchant after local authorities confiscated and disposed of his fish. The death highlighted the socioeconomic grievances of the people in the region garnering national attention which led to the firing of ministers by the king and debates in Parliament.

His final case looked into the boycott movement of 2018, organized by unknown individuals through Facebook, which targeted three major companies believed to be monopolies close to the Moroccan monarchy. The common denominator behind these cases was the sustained efforts demanding access to formal politics and further democratization.

The Iraqi case studies, presented by Dr. Janan Al Jaber, elaborated on post2003- dynamics that have impacted economic rights and labor unions. Labor unions took advantage of these dynamics by advocating for the amendment of the labor law. To achieve their goal, different labor unions formed a coalition and cooperated with politicians, the Ministry of Labor, and the International Labour Organization (ILO), though they did not cooperate with civil society organizations (CSOs) nor with Iraq's labor force, which consists of 11 million workers.

Pre2003-, labor unions in the public sector were banned. In 2009, labor unions upheld their presence in the public sector when the gas and oil sector union in Basra protested against the minister. Eventually, the amendment of the labor law in 2015 allowed for the re-establishment of unions in the public sector.

Al Jaber's other case study addressed the electricity sector employees' demands for full-time contracts. In 2006, the Iraqi government withheld benefits to electricity sector employees by granting them a 'non-permanent' status. As a result, the employees created coordination committees and organized around politically sensitive times such as election periods and times of unrest. Eventually the government complied with their demands. Similar to the Amazigh movement, this action taken by the government might not result in tangible benefits.

The case studies of Egypt and Tunisia were presented by Mr. Omar Samir and covered land issues in Tunisia, along with wage issues and labor unions in both countries.

The "right to land" case study on Tunisia examines the reclamation of public and private land by the Tunisian government after gaining independence from France. The case focuses on the town of Jemna where families organized themselves in 2012 in order to reach an agreement on managing farmland with the state.

The remaining case study on Tunisia discussed the labor union's efforts to increase wages. They held strikes and protests as a tactic to raise awareness on the fact that wages did not meet the standard of living. Public workers joined the protests as well, pushing the government to negotiate after the first general strike, which ultimately did not implement the agreed upon terms.

The case for establishing a fair labor law to manage worker and investor rights remains a sensitive topic in Egypt, particularly after 2013. Egypt's labor law, established in 1981, was not implemented until 2003, and the council dedicated to wage matters was not established until 2014. While business owners and banks still maintain significant power and are staunchly against increased wages, the lack of organization among workers also contributed to the absence of results.

The session's last panelist was Mr. Dany Younes, who presented the case of old tenants in Lebanon. Rental agreements and laws were set during the French mandate. In 1992, laws were enacted to liberate rental agreements from any agreement made after that year, leaving the agreements up to the free market. These changes pitted landlords against old tenants resulting in different committees and CSOs working together for tenants' rights. The National Committee to Defend Tenants (NCDT) is the most active. It cooperated with CSOs and a group of lawyers to collect the signatures of 10 members of parliament (MPs) to appeal the law. As a result, the laws were amended in 2017 with new decrees.

The Q&A at the end of the session touched upon numerous points. Abel Samad elaborated on the need to measure success, as CSOs might achieve some gains without tangible success. For instance, laws can pass and be amended but they might not be implemented. In Egypt, some flexibility in expressing public demands and rights followed the events of 2011 but regressed after 2013 – this shows that the tactics of civil society only have room to act within conditions that aren't harmful to them. It is also important for actors to create a strong foundation to ensure a positive outcome for their actions – in Iraq it was made clear that labor unions lacked coordination with workers and CSOs and lacked proper organization and structure. It is also important to assess and acknowledge the role of corruption in the region which inevitably leads to the movements explored throughout this panel.

In Lebanon, politics should be better strategized when it comes to issues related to rental agreements and public wages. Without a proper political strategy, negative consequences can arise such as the increase of public debt after teachers secured an increase in wages.

The second panel of the conference exhibited case studies addressing political rights and liberties in Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, and Kuwait.

Dr. Falah Al Zuheiri presented the case of Iraq on behalf of Dr. Abdel Azim Jaber on reforming the electoral law in the country. Similar to other cases from Iraq, the case explored the post2003-political climate in Iraq. CSOs challenged the electoral law of the time to demand reform, deeming it unfair and misrepresentative. The demands focused around opening up Parliament to the opposition and to reduce the seats in Parliament from 329 to 213.

Shaymaa Sharqawi presented three cases from Tunisia and three from Egypt. Her first case from Tunisia addressed the right of access to information law which stirred discussions in 2011 until the law was enshrined in the constitution in 2014. In 2016, a law was passed, and a committee was created to ensure its implementation – at the time, CSAs had been elected to Parliament. CSOs played an important role in enacting the law. MPs also played an important role in advocating for it. Citizens also played a key role by sending complaints to the responsible committee – this showed a higher level of awareness among the people.

The second Tunisia case is the reconciliation law and the campaign “I will not forgive” (in Arabic: Mesh Mesameh), that began in 2015 and lasted for two years until a draft law was adopted in September 2017. The “I will not forget” campaign was at the forefront in adopting this law as it was an independent grassroots campaign whose single goal was to prevent this law being passed. The campaign was decentralized allowing it to better influence public opinion. They also cooperated with political parties that opposed the law while organizing debates with the proponents of the law.

The third Tunisia case covers municipal elections and local councils. The first of these elections were held in 2018 with heavy CSO involvement in reforming the electoral law for local councils. CSOs managed to encourage organizations to apply pressure, to make sure local councils were monitored, and ensure CSO members would be able to attend municipal meetings.

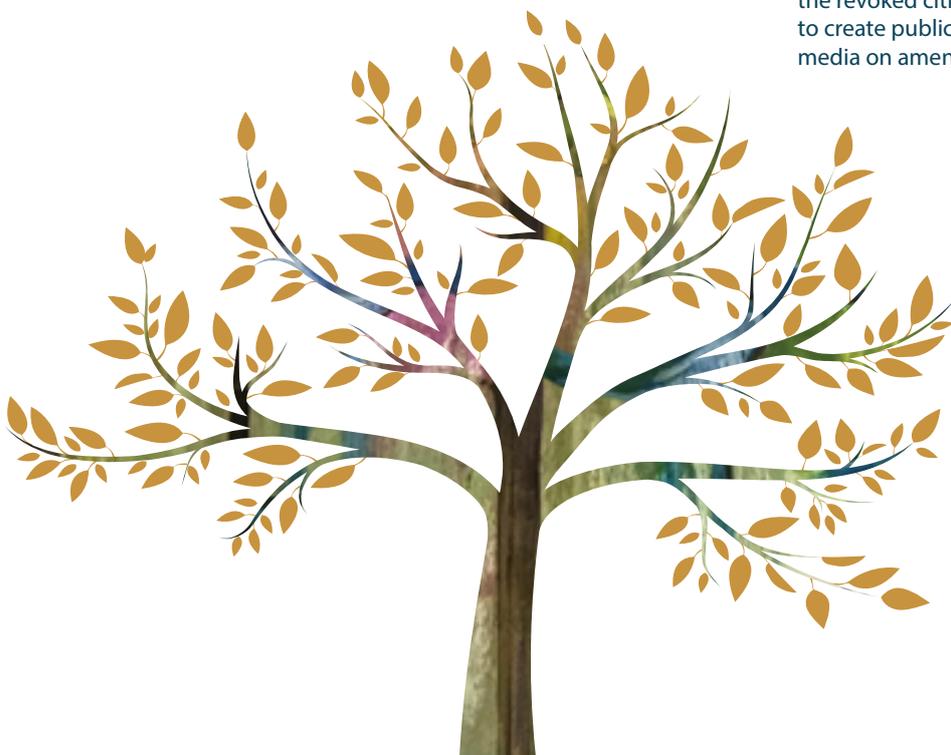
Shayma’s first case from Egypt covered the civil society law that had first picked up in 2011. In the 2014 constitution, the rights of civil society were acknowledged by granting them the right to organize and regulate themselves. The constitution also ensures that these groups can only be dissolved through a court decision – between 2014 and 2017 civil society was the target of many legal and security restrictions.

The second case study is the torture prevention law that was first proposed as a draft in 2015 through the United Lawyers Group in collaboration with experts and judges. The goal was to align the legal system in Egypt with the UN convention against torture as well as the 2014 constitution. As a result, members in the group became victims of harassment by their opponents.

The third case from Egypt assessed the journalism and media law. Debates began in 2014 with specific matters such as legalizing imprisonment for publishing cases and extending the jurisdiction of a government censorship committee to the field of journalism. The draft law was passed in 2018 but was opposed by many journalists and activists. However, there are still attempts by CSOs to influence the enactment of the law before it gets implemented.

The third and final panelist of the second session was Abdullah Al Khoneini who presented two interlinked cases from Kuwait. The first case about the “Leave” campaign explored the movement that pressured the prime minister to resign in 2011. A scandal had erupted in which banks noticed illicit funds were being sent from the government to 16 MPs. CSOs, youth, and various political factions began calling for the resignation of the prime minister; protestors even stormed the Parliament – this resulted in the prosecution of protestors and the MPs involved. After the prime minister resigned, new elections were held in 2012 in which a large opposition secured seats in Parliament. During this time, the Parliament changed the electoral law and voting system for the following elections.

The second case revolved around the citizenship and nationalization law in Kuwait. In 140,2014 people along with their children had their citizenship revoked under the 1959 citizenship law. It wasn’t until 2016 that opposition members secured a minority and attempted to reform the citizenship law and return the revoked citizenships. Although they failed, the issue managed to create public debate and discussions in Parliament and the media on amending the 1959 law.



Session three of day one examined the role CSAs in their efforts to shape policies related to gender in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco. The moderator, Lina Abou Habib, highlighted the importance of this topic in the current context of the Lebanese uprising where she stressed on the prominence of feminist movements and activists. She further elaborated that women's movements are connected and active in times of both war and peace. They challenge social norms and policies while usually encompassing marginalized groups such as refugees and domestic workers.

The first panelist of the session was Mariam Mecky who presented three cases on Egypt related to domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the Kholā' and personal status laws (PSLs). In her first case examining gender-based domestic violence she highlights the neglected position the subject held in public discourse in the last decade despite it being a major issue. As a response, CSOs have advocated for the criminalization of aspects of domestic violence, as it is currently considered legal. The National Council for Women (NCW) is the leading actor in Egypt drafting bills and launching advocacy campaigns. Several human rights and feminist groups are also involved but the NCW actively engages with the government, which in 2015 announced a national strategy to combat violence against women despite it not being enacted into a formal law.

Her second case focuses on CSO efforts to criminalize sexual harassment. The uprisings of 2011 brought the topic to international attention despite CSOs' efforts persisting since the year 2000. Over time, the activism took many forms: between 2005 and 2010 the advocacy was oriented around legal reform while in 2011 it expanded to include volunteer-led social initiatives with the involvement of the NCW. In 2013, Adli Mansour, then president of Egypt, defined sexual harassment in the law and effectively criminalized it – this followed the NCW's submission of a draft law. Mecky emphasizes that this case highlights the success of the CSOs' attempts in taking advantage of the post2011- political climate.

Mecky's third case dives into CSOs' efforts related to the Kholā' law and PSLs in Egypt. Egyptian family laws were enacted in the 1920s only to be amended with negligible differences in the 1980s. A group of activists named the Group of 7 (mostly feminists) challenged the prominent religious and state environment in Egypt by framing their arguments in terms of Sharia law, and not secular-human rights discourse. In 2011, a bill passed in Parliament to grant women the right to divorce (Kholā' law) with the support of the Mubarak regime. The passing of this law inspired CSOs and the NCW to currently work on addressing and reforming PSLs. The success of the Kholā' law represents the ability of actors to challenge religious authorities and an authoritarian state.

Mecky's cases signify the importance of transformative moments (windows of opportunity) have on civil society efforts in shaping policy – these moments could be international support or direct government involvement.

The second panelist of the session was Fatima Moussawi who presented her cases on Lebanese custody laws, citizenship laws, and criminal code.

Her first case examines the role of religious courts in custody-related matters. She highlights that every sect in Lebanon has its own PSLs that impact women, and in turn, influence custody rights. These laws tend to favor the father rather than the mother. Over the years many activists, movements, and groups attempted to shape custody laws across various religious sects, but to no avail. Despite this, the campaigns of these actors succeeded in shaping public opinion and in raising awareness.

Her second case study zooms into the inability of Lebanese women to pass on the Lebanese citizenship to their children if they are married

to a non-Lebanese. Lebanese law stipulates that only children with Lebanese fathers may acquire citizenship, despite the fact that select foreigners have been able to purchase the citizenship. The main issues blocking progress on this front is the divisiveness of national politics. The first organized movement against the law was in 2000, following the end of the Lebanese Civil War. Currently, parties that historically blocked progress are now engaging in the issue, indicating that the topic is no longer a social taboo – Moussawi highlights that this is a form of success in itself.

Her third case examines civil society efforts to amend Article 522, also known as the rape law. Article 522 granted the rapist the ability to avoid criminal punishment if they marry the victim. The campaigns against the law occurred at the same time that ISIS's rape crimes were gaining international media attention, consequently boosting CSO efforts. MPs amended this article in 2017, since they considered it to be the least politically sensitive of the time.

Dr. Mohamad Banane presents five cases on Morocco that are mostly concerned with the legal and political aspects for women's rights in the country.

The first case focuses on the role played by CSOs in advocating for the rights of single mothers within the PSLs. CSOs made recommendations to policymakers on law reform, demanded the repeal of Articles 490 from the Penal Code, which criminalizes extra-marital relationships, and pushed for the reform of Articles 449 to 453 related to abortion. Due to the "charismatic" and experienced leadership of these groups, the results were the social empowerment of single mothers and the reform of PSLs in 2004 and 2009. The second case takes on the topic of inheritance of women and men, in which CSOs have been making efforts to argue that achieving inheritance equality does not contradict with Islamic Sharia law. Consequently, they were able to place the issue of inheritance within the public sphere and influence public opinion in order to support the cause. Article 288, the focus of Banane's third case, prohibits the right to strike within the private sector. This article is in direct contradiction with the Moroccan constitution and international conventions. As such, unions have worked to repeal this article and have recently managed to organize and unify against it, despite political hurdles present within the unions themselves. The last case presented by Banane concerns Law 103.13 on domestic violence, for which civil society has been advocating for since the 1990s through coalitions, campaigning and advocacy work. It has now been passed and made effective. However, some groups are not satisfied with this law since it does not include sexual violence and other problematic matters. Despite this, the passing of this law has proven the ability of CS groups in implementing positive change for women within the political and legal domains.

The Q&A that followed brought up several interesting points. One of these points is the pivotal role PSLs played in most gender-related cases in the region as they impacted a woman's agency in managing their own lives and bodies. In addition, most of the cases indicated similar strategies across the board with a heavy focus on reforming existing laws. Referring to her case, Moussawi reiterates that reforming laws means reshaping the negative perception on women and rape survivors. She also mentions that even CSOs clash primarily due to competition for funding – this was evident in the efforts against the rape law. Mecky notes that laws in Egypt actually uphold domestic violence since judges can base their rulings on their own conviction or on Sharia law. She also mentions that Muslims and Coptic Christians differ depending on their strategy. They both approach domestic violence from a human rights-secular perspective, but when it comes to knowledge production in the case of Muslims, they reinterpret Islamic norms that prohibit domestic violence.

The fourth session of day one raised the question of the political role of civil society organizations and their activism in Lebanon, Iraq and Morocco.

The first speaker was Dr. Carmen Geha, who discussed the political interaction with civil society in Lebanon. She begins by mentioning that popular discourse in the region insists that a country's society is different than its civil society – they usually dub civil society to solely consist of NGOs and secularists. In the Lebanese context, society is not organized due to the country's sectarian nature and national politics. However, she insists that Lebanese society is a civil society considering that its level of social cooperation and integration is stronger than that of the state. Members of society are sectarian and clients and subjects of sectarian politics and elites. She goes on to highlight that the lack of organization and representation among CSAs prevents them from successfully entering politics. She supports her claim by bringing up the politicization and cooption of Lebanon's unions, syndicates, and charities following the country's civil war. Ultimately, one cannot ignore the political reality in Lebanon. The interaction and structure of the state hinders civil society's ability to enter into politics.

The second speaker discussing the situation in Morocco is Dr. Mohamad Saidi. He commences by stating that the involvement of CS in politics depends on its relationship and position in respect to the state. In the Moroccan context, the state and institutions are at the center of politics, and at the center of that is the monarchy. While progress was made in regard to state interaction with CSOs in the past, relations declined after the 2011 protests. The monarchy's main priority is to keep power centralized and to oppose any movements that might harm its legitimacy, particularly nationalist movements. Thus, the state engages in containment and cooption as a countermeasure to preserve itself.

Dr. Imad Daoud explains the progression of events in Iraq. He begins by describing the current state as a kleptocracy which can also be applied to Iraqi CS. CS work goes as far back as to the days of King Faisal when cooperation was present between the two. Following the military coup d'état of 1958, CS activity halted. In the current context, CSOs are tied to the political class and are used to garner votes from the public; they also rely on political parties for funding. Daoud emphasizes that since CSOs can't govern themselves nor adopt job rotations, they are unable to engage in formal politics. He insists that it is the role of academics and practitioners to educate people on how to participate in politics.

As the panelists wrapped up their presentations, the session's moderator, Mahmoud Haidar, reflected on the current civil movements in the region. In his view, citizens are fed up with the institutions in the region – whether political, economic, or corporate – just like they were in 2011. These people are struggling to keep what they have left after feeling robbed by the political class – this is in turn pushing societies to be more political out of necessity. In Iraq, citizens are choking under the control of the security forces and the political class at all levels. He further highlights that there is a lack of distinction between policy, polity, and politics in the region, and thus it is imperative for newer generations to understand the distinction in order to improve their chances of affecting policymaking.



The conference's fourth session tackled the activism of CS within the realms of youth, environment, health and education policies in Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen.

The first case on Jordan, presented by Karim Merhej, focuses on CSOs efforts to amend the public health law to combat smoking in public spaces. CSOs joined hands with the World Health Organization, the Ministry of Health and reached out to MPs in order to amend the law. They also relied on well-received economic arguments to convince the government to adopt the amended law. These efforts resulted in the increase of fines for smoking in certain spaces.

Merhej's second case took on the movement of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) to raise awareness on and pass the new PwD law of 2017. In 2012, the Higher Council for the Rights of PwDs began drafting a new law in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2016, the draft law was sent to the Prime Ministry in order to be proposed to the Parliament following parliamentary elections. Some PwD activists – many of them PwDs themselves – publicly cornered candidates during the election season at their rallies and made them pledge to back the PwD law if they were to be elected. As a result, all elected candidates voted in favor of the PwD law in 2017. As such, in Jordan, CSOs have to maneuver between different centers of power and key political actors. Despite the undemocratic nature of the political system, CSOs are still able to successfully influence policymaking in Jordan. Merhej concludes that these cases highlight how the monarchy has established itself at the center of politics in Jordan, and that CS activists often have to obtain support from non-elected centers of power and influence.



Afterwards, Dr. Falah El Zouheiry presented his case on the water crisis in Iraq and the strategies employed by CSOs in remedying the situation. Water has been a central issue in Iraq for years now; it threatens the livelihood of the people and is dominated by geopolitical motives. The crisis rose to national attention due to the deterioration of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and was exacerbated by the dam built by Turkey in 2018, which caused the rivers to dry up in many spots. Consequently, CSOs were rapidly created and mobilized to protect the rivers and sustain people's access to water. Their efforts, however, were hampered by geopolitical complications, lack of funding and a neglectful Iraqi government.

The third session speaker, Dr. Nissaf Brahimi, outlined one case on Tunisia, and two cases on Egypt. Her first case revolved around the extraction of fossil fuels in Tunisia and the environmental campaigns that led to its delay. CSOs resorted to protests and street pressure, which extended beyond the areas of extractions onto the capital and other fronts. Unfortunately, their work took a step back between 2012 and 2015 due to terrorist attacks.

Brahimi's second case took on the healthcare worker movement in Egypt for the reform of the healthcare insurance law and combatting the privatization of the healthcare sector. CSO representatives drafted a reformed insurance law to be proposed to the Parliament and were able to prevent the courts from privatizing the public health sector, which helped create a national discussion on the health insurance law.

Brahimi's final case focused on an environmental campaign led against a cement company in Alexandria, Wadi el Qamar. The people of the city were able to organize and collaborate with CSOs, which contributed to the success of the results. Through popular pressure, negotiations and raising complaints to the national level, activists were able to spread the movement into other Egyptian cities suffering similarly.

Abdul Moez Bdwan presented the findings of a paper studying the role of CSOs in Yemen in enacting policies encouraging the engagement of youth within public institutions. The work of youth within these organizations was unclear and unknown; therefore, the paper's role was to examine this missing data. CSOs are generally the main drivers behind youth participation in public institutions, which led them to push the youth into joining public institutions through participatory activities organized in collaboration with the government. By employing diverse strategies, interacting with the youth and achieving small wins, the result was the slow formation of trust between the youth, CS and local institutions. Unfortunately, this process was stopped due to the total collapse of Yemeni institutions in 2015.

The sixth session focused on the activism of Arab CSAs in contexts of conflict and instability in the countries of Iraq, Palestine, Yemen and Syria.

The case of Iraq's cultural and natural heritage is presented by Dr. Soufafa Tareq who describes it as a deteriorating and neglected sector in dire need of protection and care. There are few organizations in Iraq that are dedicated to this field, showing that the Iraqi population and the government do not give it much priority. Indeed, the government has been deliberately careless in its treatment of cultural sites; it has sold and abused these sites for political, economic and agricultural gains. Tareq emphasizes that culture and arts tend to thrive within stable countries where human rights are protected. As a result, it becomes difficult to advocate for the environment and culture within fragile countries shaken by unemployment and illiteracy.

When the regime fell in 2003, meetings took place between concerned committees and CSO representatives, but they were fruitless due to a lack of funding that was kept away as a result of political feuds. Tareq finishes her talk by concluding that the government presented itself as a major obstacle towards preserving heritage and that if CSOs had been more active in this field, more progress would have been achieved.

Nabil Dweikat goes into detail on the Palestinian feminist movements and campaigns that are advocating for women's rights and fighting against discrimination in a context of occupation. His first case looks into the legal aspect of the role of CS in combatting gender-based violence and discrimination against Palestinian women. Indeed, the Palestinian legal system does not protect women against domestic violence, as can be seen from the PSLs that further legitimize violence against women. Palestinian feminists took on a proactive role by leading research projects to portray the legal realities of Palestinian women and holding events to spread that knowledge, among others. These efforts resulted in the creation of a Ministry for the Rights of Palestinian Women, and the formation of taskforces to protect women's rights within state institutions.

In his second case, Dweikat speaks of the role played by CSOs in ensuring the Palestinian electoral law upheld gender equality. Activists pushed for establishing a women's quota to increase their representation in Parliament and succeeded in doing so by the 2006 parliamentary elections, which saw 17 out of 182 seats won by women. Currently, women occupy many positions in state institutions and committees, showing an increase in the political participation of women in government.

His final case revolves around the issue of honor killings in Palestine, one that is subject to dominant social taboos leading to little numbers and data on the matter. CSOs have faced difficulties in addressing honor killings due to these social taboos but have nevertheless persisted in raising this cause from the private domain into public life. It is now easier to discuss the numbers and facts concerning honor killings in Palestine, despite the fact that they have not stopped.

Abdul Moez Bdwan began his second talk by going through the rocky history of CS in Yemen, which had gained the legal right to organize in the beginning of the 1990s. Their activities flourished from then on, that is until the Yemeni Civil War destabilized the country and led to a freeze in CSO work. His first case centers on the role of CSOs in fighting corruption. There aren't many groups in Yemen working on combatting corruption, which limited their ability to enact change, but they nevertheless took to monitoring and observing state institutions and raising awareness. As a result, in 2011, CSOs pressured the government to sign the UN Convention against Corruption, to pass laws against corruption

and create anti-corruption committees.

Bdwan then presented his case on arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances, which has been an issue since the 1970s. CSOs and unions have worked to document and combat these incidents through advocacy campaigns and lawsuits and have confirmed more than 3,000 cases of forced disappearances since 2015. Their work has led to the release of individuals taken by the Houthis and of journalists facing the death penalty.

His third case takes on the attempts to establish a National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights (HR) in Yemen, which involved the Netherlands and Canada presenting a draft law to the UN Security Council demanding the formation of a group of experts in HR in the Yemeni context. CSOs contributed by monitoring and evaluating violations, working with foreign legal agencies and urging the government to address HR violations in their agenda.

Dr. Hassan Abbas presented 10 cases on Syria, citing the necessity to discuss and explore such studies on Syria due to the distinct lack of local research produced there as a result of the dictatorship. Abbas lists these cases one after the other, starting with the nationality law, which prevents mothers from passing on their nationality to their children. However, activists have partially succeeded in allowing the children of Syrian mothers married to foreigners to enroll in public education. He then mentions the attempts to pass a domestic violence law in Parliament, but it remained a draft only. The case of transitional justice in Syria, a difficult cause, lost salience and took a major step back after the defeat in the city of Aleppo.

The fourth case, those of the detained in Ghouta, showed no progress so far. The amended ownership law represented a relative success by allowing landowners to prove their ownership of their land within a year, and not just within a period of a month, which was previously the case. The sixth case tackles the documentation of antiquities in Syria, for which there are now registries that document looted antiquities. Abbas also spoke of the local councils of Idlib which formed an effective tool for change but eventually became "dominant". A small success can be seen in the progress of documentary movies on the Syria crisis, which broke the regime's monopoly on filmmaking. There were also campaigns to ensure accountability and justice nationally, which helped raise the role of CS from supplier of information to decision maker.

The last case presented by Abbas is that of As-Suwayda, which proved the effectiveness of CS in assuming responsibility. Objective challenges, external to CSOs, such as having to work remotely and confronting dominant nationalist sentiments, prevented their work from reaching its full potential, while subjective challenges internal to CSOs, such as having a short-term vision, a fragmented structure and a weak networking capacity also contributed to the little success.

Abbas also commented on the actions taken by the Syrian regime to undermine the work of CS. Through establishing the Syrian Agency for Development – known as GONGOs (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations) – the regime developed a means of absorbing CS and bringing it under the auspices of the state.

In the ensuing Q&A session, Bdwan asserts that CSO work is struggling due to funding goals, which is encouraging CSOs to operate in arbitrary non-strategic ways simply to receive funding. Abbas defined this phenomenon as the NGO-ization of CS, which is when social work becomes bureaucratized and the purpose of CS work becomes lost.

The seventh session of the conference takes on the activism of emerging CSAs vs. established CSAs, in the contexts of Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Kuwait.

Dr. Shareefa Al Adwani began her talk on the formal and informal structural and topical differences and dissimilarities between relatively developing civil societies in GCC and Gulf countries and relatively entrenched civil societies in other Arab states such as Lebanon and Egypt. She described civil society activism in GCC and Gulf countries to be relatively emergent compared to Lebanon and Egypt. Indeed, the topic of equal rights was a conversation limited to the rich and ruling men, but over the years, more and more denizens – women and minorities – began to engage in CS. Al Adwani then went on to qualify the similarities shared by CS in the Middle East, starting with formal CS groups, which are highly regulated. They face functional obstacles stemming from government regulations that also employ a vague legal language to govern CS behavior and diminish their agency, pushing them to operate outside the state's legal framework. As for informal CS groups, they tend to coalesce to target issues specific to reform, through which informed participants are galvanized and perform observable actions on the ground. In response to these less tractable informal groups, governments in the Middle East have passed top-down restrictions on civil rights. Al Adwani commented on how everyday non-social movements occur through the power of presence and the normalization of routine. She emphasized that when the marginalized are seen and integrated into everyday life, the marginalized must be acknowledged, making enfranchisement obvious to the political authorities.

Dr. Sahar Harbi outlined the difficult situation of CS in Iraq, who suffer from severe restrictions and persecutions, by presenting a case study on the role of CS in preserving the civil PSLs. In 2003, the existing civil PSLs became the target of religious and political parties who wanted them to be based on religious and sectarian courts. They pushed the governing council to pass Article 137 to repeal the civil PSLs, but CS confronted these attempts. The latter wished to preserve the original PSLs of 1959, which are widely recognized to be modern and protective of the family, the wife and the child. New attempts targeting the civil PSLs surfaced in 2005 to amend Article 140 of the constitution in order to have PSLs based on sectarian and religious belonging. While the drafting of this article was delayed by CSOs, many still turn to religious institutions to settle their affairs instead of going to civil courts.

Daniel Tavana, the last speaker of the session, discussed the participation of civil society groups and movements in electoral politics through two case studies. In his first case, he attempted to answer a few questions: Should CS groups be involved in elections? Should CSOs and activists aspire to rule? Or should they play some other role? Tavana argued that, in the MENA region, elections are not seen as the primary space where political change is imagined. To add, in many countries in the region, elections are not held, and even when they are, they are heavily restricted and don't allow for a realizable alternative, which has expectedly led to difficulties in achieving change through elections. Tavana asserts then that in order to understand why CS has often struggled in reforming elections, it is important to understand the limited cases where it has succeeded, such as the Kuwaiti electoral system. Their electoral process suffers from the usual issues: excessive vote buying, small gerrymandered districts where outcomes were decided, and political manipulations, resulting in the loss of value of elections in the eyes of the masses in 2005. This is where the "Nabiha 5" ("We want it to be 5") movement of Kuwait comes in. It calls for turning the -25district electoral system into a five-district one,

forming thus cohesive units that would make it harder to buy votes or manipulate the electoral process. Activists and online figures publicized the contact information of MPs and encouraged people to flood them with messages, while also attending parliament sessions. After a period of stagnation in 2005, the movement escalated through street protests that forced the dissolution of the Parliament. At that point, the "Nabiha 5" movement transformed itself almost overnight into an electoral interest group. The movement's leaders shifted strategies and entered districts to endorse or criticize candidates based on their approval of the reform. The movement eventually succeeded, and according to Tavana, for two reasons: the credibility they gained by forcing the dissolution of the Parliament, and the clarity of their goal.

The moderator of the session, Dr. Barbara Ibrahim, closed the session by noting the changes witnessed within recent civil society movements (CSMs) and their active members. Due to mounting public dissatisfaction with economic instability and corruption, the rapid response mentality of this new generation of activists is a positive and novel phenomenon meant to combat those in power. She argued that the older movements of the early 2000s planted the seeds for the movements we see now, despite the persisting dualities. For instance, state discourse claims that you are either loyal or neutral, but if you are acting in opposition, you are instantly labelled as an enemy. The younger generation, however, is much less gullible to this ideological rhetoric.



The closing session of “Breaking the Mold,” a panel discussion, focused on the evolving role of trade union movements in Lebanon and Iraq in light of the uprisings in the two countries.

Ziad Abdel Samad, the moderator of the session, began by stating that activists often feel that the movements they have led to achieve change within policy or society are not sufficient. They hope for change that will overturn entire systems and regimes. In 2011, the Arab uprisings showed such promise in some countries, while others ultimately suffered. Abdel Samad believes that revolutions taking place against oppressive regimes serve to highlight their lack of sustainability, but more often than not, the people are not ready to deal with the outcomes of the regime's fall if no effective alternatives are put together. However, the countries of the second Arab uprisings have learned from these experiences.

In Sudan for instance, trade unions and workers united to confront violent state authorities, and eventually succeeded. The revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon, while popular and spontaneous, have seen groups organize and gain recognition without leading the uprising. Abdel Samad adds that in Lebanon, efforts to organize within the uprising were made by academics, university professors and trade workers after it became clear that the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (GCLW) would not play any role. Indeed, the GCLW was emptied from its oppositional capacities throughout the years. Traditional unions also proved unable to uphold the rights of protestors. This naturally led to the formation of alternative frameworks whose goals were to confront the authority and take on solid leadership roles.

Janan Al Jaber began by giving a brief background on the state of workers in Iraq, which is plagued by unemployment. The shrinking of the Iraqi public sector – due to rentier neoliberal policies – and the absence of economic growth has resulted in huge rates of unemployment, reaching almost 40 percent. It is of no surprise then that unemployment represents one of the main motivators behind the Iraqi October revolution. Every worker, whether employed or not, had demands specific to their sectors. According to Al Jaber, the unions in Iraq have taken on different roles during the uprising; the union of teachers and that of engineers led weeklong strikes, while other unions formed committees to defend protestors. She then spoke of three major unions and their actions, starting with the National Coalition of Worker Unions – which is affiliated with the state – which released a statement and held a small protest urging the government to respect the right to protest and calling on protestors to refrain from using violence. The Union of Oil Workers also released a statement which condemned state violence, showed solidarity with the state, called for people to join the protests and outlined their own demands. The National Union of Iraqi Workers released similar statements, but they also organized marches and protests in Tahrir Square and set up tents in Nasiriyah. Al Jaber emphasizes that the majority of actions taking place in the Iraqi revolution were not led by unions, but rather by unorganized workers, fragile state public workers and the unemployed.

Ahmad Al Assi gave an extensive overview of unions in Lebanon and their role in the October revolution. He started with trade unions, whose members are only similar in terms of their profession, no matter their social or economic class. This structure makes it difficult for regular workers to pressure company owners, since they are both union members. Public sector unions are prohibited and can only be formed officially as “associations,” whereas in the private sector it is much more difficult to form unions due to the small size of most companies and the rampant

nepotism within them. There are also false unions, controlled by local political parties, which grew in numbers and entered legitimate unions to cripple their work. Al Assi then placed unions within the current revolutionary context by insisting upon the need for unions to overcome their political differences in order to advocate for their common economic and social rights. This is further proven by the fact that the economic crisis will likely lead to a redistribution of economic losses, which will motivate different groups to minimize their own losses on the backs of each other. While protests keep on escalating, major business owners will continue on working together to preserve their interests. Unions therefore need to defend the interests of the many in order to fulfill their responsibilities towards society. He added that unions should therefore be at the forefront of the uprising for the following three reasons: They are clearly organized, they enjoy a certain degree of protection, and they hold sizeable financial resources (Kettle Melie), amounting to approximately 2.5\$ billion. Consequently, unions should negotiate economic losses with main actors: the Banque Du Liban (BDL), the state, the International Monetary Fund, and other entities. Finally, Al Assi spoke of Mihaniyoun wa Mihaniyat, an unconventional organization of workers in Lebanon operating across multiple work sectors in order to mobilize workers and uphold their rights.

The last speaker on the panel, Dr. Ghassan Slaibi, answered a few important questions on the role of CS groups and unions within the Lebanon October revolution. He stated that CS groups did form a recognizable front during the uprising, but that instead, an unofficial CS block of independent individuals grew into existence throughout this period. Adding to this, a generational gap has shown itself through the fractures present within older CS groups, which are not found within the younger groups. Taking a look back at history, Slaibi defined the union movements of the civil war as highly influential and impactful during this time, but that is no longer the case due to economic factors (the rentier economy, unemployment and the many small-sized companies) and political reasons (the infiltration of political parties within unions, particularly the GCLW). Slaibi claimed that this situation can be turned around with these four factors: the rise and expansion of the independent civil society block, the ability for protestors and workers to recognize their opponent both on the streets and within the unions, the rise of youth and women within the unions, and finally the uprising's social and political motivation to reform and overhaul the entire system. The changes resulting from these factors could be the rise of oppositional currents within unions and the creation of alternative independent unions. Slaibi then compared the outcomes of uprisings on the regional scale, in which union-strong countries such as Tunisia, Sudan and Algeria experienced relative success, whereas in countries whose unions did not partake in the revolutionary efforts, such as Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon, have struggled considerably.

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