



MENA POLICY PAPERS

Reclaiming civic spaces, knowledge and agency

Taking stock and building
a research agenda



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International Development Research Centre
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Preface



Scholars and experts meet on June 3-4 at the American University of Beirut campus in Paphos, Cyprus, to discuss the MENA Policy Papers

Introduction

Some 15 years ago, youth and civil society movements led the Arab Spring protests across multiple countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Ordinary people took to the streets demanding more equitable and inclusive societies, better respect for human rights and the rule of law, improved economic opportunities and livelihoods, and more accountable and responsive governments.

While the promise of the Arab Spring was hopeful, government control on dissent and civic space remained strong. As creative as civil society was in demanding accountability and reform,

governments have been able to resist and adapt to such pressures and have shown great resilience and creativity in countering the civil society mobilizations that were demanding reform.

In the years since, the region has continued to undergo significant societal, political and economic transformation. Five years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic devastated economies, caused major disruptions at many levels and exacerbated existing governance challenges and deep societal inequalities.

Objectives

Against this backdrop, Canada's [International Development Research Centre](#) (IDRC), and the London-based [Asfari Foundation](#) joined forces. They entered into a partnership to explore current perspectives on how civil society can reclaim the energy and hope that led to new visions for a positive future a decade ago, and to address the following key questions:

- How to assess and learn from the impact of past and ongoing civil society mobilizations in the MENA region on social, economic and political life?
- What would a homegrown future research agenda to advance reforms look like today?
- How to ensure that data and evidence are used and how to strengthen the culture of evidence to inform civil society for better advocacy and mobilization?

To address these questions, seven policy papers were commissioned and led to this powerful collection. These papers seek to reimagine donor engagement and make key recommendations for programming that is targeted and useful in supporting civic spaces in the region. They take stock of civil society mobilization in the MENA region since the Arab Spring uprisings and chart a bold, homegrown research agenda to reclaim civic spaces that respect fundamental rights and freedoms and strengthen evidence-based activism. The papers dive into regional trends, the Syrian and Palestinian contexts, and the challenges and opportunities of knowledge production in times of shrinking civic space, war, displacement, and democratic backsliding.

Recommendations to donors

The seventh paper proposes a new framework for donors engaged in research, finding new solutions and working with civil society in the MENA region. This framework paper argues that a constructive role by donors requires a new approach: breaking from traditional aid paradigms and committing to a reimagined funding model grounded in a clear ethical framework that puts local researchers and local CSOs at the center.

The proposed framework, which is informed by the policy recommendations of the other six papers, calls for investments and programming to promote pluralism and counter extremism and post Arab Spring populism, the creation of dialogue platforms for Arab Spring generations to exchange their experiences and build communities and forums that are inclusive, investment in cultural initiatives and efforts to bring together humanitarian assistance with political and civic awareness.

The process

The policy papers were commissioned by IDRC and the Asfari Foundation through a competitive call. The process entailed an intentional participatory process from beginning to end with experts and scholars from the region. These experts helped to define the key focus areas for the papers and reviewed the findings and outcomes of the papers.

The process also included the organization of a key meeting in Cyprus in June 2025, held at the American University in Beirut (AUB) campus in Paphos. In addition to the authors, the meeting included a larger group of scholars and experts from the region who discussed the early drafts of the papers to help finalize them, leading to this online publication. The meeting was organized with support from the Beirut-based Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship.

Two major events delayed the process: the ongoing war in Gaza, as well as the toppling of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024. These events led us to commission the two papers which examined in depth the situations in both these contexts.

The Policy Papers Collection

All papers relied on literature reviews and empirical research. By design, they all provide key recommendations to donor agencies, both about critical research entry points as well as ways and processes of working and funding in the region.

The first three papers broadly discuss and assess civil society knowledge production processes in the MENA region and their evolution since the Arab Spring uprisings.

Paper 1, authored by Sami Atallah and Sami Zoughaib from the Policy Initiative, proposes a new conceptual framework for understanding civil society's knowledge ecosystem in MENA and proposes critical shifts to ensure the sustainability and impact of that ecosystem.

Paper 2, authored by Georges Fahmi, from the Arab Forum for Alternatives, uses six country case studies in the region to understand how the Arab Spring, in its two waves, influenced civil

society evolution in the MENA region. The paper proposes new conceptual tools to understand these changes.

Paper 3, authored by Timothy Kaldas, Nadine Kheshen and Mai El-Sadany, from the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, addressed three key questions: What are the primary barriers to knowledge production and dissemination? What are innovative and responsive ways in which knowledge producers mitigated challenges? And what should donors and knowledge producers do to advance knowledge production and dissemination?

Papers 4 and 5, focus on the specific Syrian civil society context. Paper 4, authored by Rabie Nasser from the Syrian Center for Policy Research, assesses the challenges and opportunities facing key civic space and civil society institutions in the transitional process and outlines possible transformative strategies to foster a more effective contribution to peace and democracy. Paper 5, authored by Basileus Zeno, Trent University, Katty Alhayek, Toronto Metropolitan University, and Mimi Kirk, Georgetown University, investigates the challenges of knowledge production among displaced Syrian scholars, activists, and civil society actors living in diaspora. It also proposes ways to foster inclusive knowledge networks that connect diaspora scholars with peers inside Syria and support locally driven research priorities.

Paper 6, authored by Mudar Kassis, Birzeit University, discusses how Palestinian civil society conceptualizes self-determination. It argues that self-determination must be redefined to be seen not merely as a national project but rather within a framework which encompasses individual, communal, and national levels. The paper identifies a growing demand for Palestinian civil society to reassert its moral and political role in designing post-colonial futures. It suggests that for knowledge production to be a key tool for transformation, it must be organic, participatory, and strategic.

Finally, Paper 7, authored by Nur Arafah, Non-resident fellow at the Malcom H. Kerr of the Carnegie Middle East Center, proposes, as mentioned above, a new framework for donors engaged in supporting knowledge production and civil society in the MENA region. The paper annexes the policy recommendations of the other six papers.

Conclusion

The challenges of shrinking civic space and polarization are not restricted to MENA and are seen the world over. This collection of papers offers insights that reverberate far beyond the region. The challenges of today also confirm that strategies of past decades either weren't as effective as hoped or no longer fit for purpose.

We need to find new ways of working in the context of the seismic geopolitical shifts affecting the region, and indeed the global community. A first step entails an urgent need for experimentation and the production of robust research that puts people's well-being at the heart of any future engagement and informs sound policy analysis.

These policy papers document that as urgent as ever is the age-old and hard-fought lesson that research and reform processes must be led by local actors. The need for a new generation of strategies means bringing in a new generation of voices. The 'youth' of 15 years ago have long since aged.

We hope that this volume provides a valuable first resource to feed these efforts to identify and fund a research agenda that is urgently needed to take forward the recommendations made across the papers. We also hope this collection spurs the next generation of efforts to take forward the aspirations for more inclusive societies in MENA. We need to revive the hope and power of the youth and civil society mobilization of 15 years ago, and we need a revitalized commitment to transparency, accountability, pluralism and inclusiveness. That will be the transformative force the region expects and needs.

An Arabic version of the papers will be available soon.

Acknowledgements

IDRC and Asfari Foundation want to thank all the authors, the scholars and the experts who accompanied and guided the process from beginning to end. Special gratitude to expert reviewers, Paul Salem, Amr Adly and Nur Arafeh for their time and valuable input into the process.

We also extend our gratitude to the Ford Foundation and the European Endowment for Democracy for their active participation in the Cyprus meeting, and to the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship for their leadership and organization of the Cyprus meeting.

Finally, our gratitude to Margaret Piper and Joy Karinge from IDRC for their work making this online publication a reality.

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1. Controlling knowledge

A conceptual framework for understanding the Knowledge Ecosystem after the Arab uprisings

Sami Atallah and Sami Zoughaib, The Policy Initiative

Executive Summary

Authoritarian regimes across the Middle East and North Africa have learned to control not only people and politics but also knowledge itself. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, a vibrant civil society briefly flourished—research centers, advocacy NGOs, and independent media sought to document abuses, shape reform, and anchor public debate in evidence. Over the next decade, however, many of these actors were forced into compliance, exile, or silence. States developed intricate systems of legal, financial, ideological, and coercive control, while regime networks informally co-opted and intimidated those who refused alignment. The result is a managed knowledge ecosystem—one in which what can be known, said, or taught is filtered through the logic of power.

This paper proposes a conceptual framework to understand that ecosystem. It distinguishes between states—the institutions that govern—and regimes—the webs of norms, loyalties, and practices that sustain authority. Across three stages of the knowledge cycle—production, mediation, and usage—these regimes deploy both formal mechanisms (laws, budgets, curricula, repression) and informal ones (patronage, intimidation, co-optation, pseudo-civil society) to discipline the flow of knowledge. The framework, grounded in theories of power/knowledge and hegemony, explains how regimes turn knowledge into an instrument of legitimacy while marginalizing independent voices that might demand accountability.

The analysis draws on forty-three academic and policy sources and interviews with seven leading experts from Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It identifies five major trends: (1) the consolidation of authoritarian control through legal and bureaucratic tools; (2) the resilience and adaptation of CSOs via networking, relocation, and digital innovation; (3) the persistent disconnect between research producers, mediators, and policymakers; (4) the ambivalent influence of foreign donors, whose funding sustains but often distorts local agendas;

and (5) the double-edged impact of technology, which enables both digital activism and digital repression.

The study concludes that despite intensified repression, Arab civil society continues to generate critical knowledge through inventive and decentralized means. Yet sustainability and impact remain precarious. Strengthening this ecosystem requires four shifts: localizing research agendas, improving mediation and communication capacities, diversifying funding toward long-term institutional resilience, and prioritizing physical and digital security for knowledge actors. Only by reclaiming the autonomy of knowledge can Arab societies rebuild civic space and move toward governance rooted in evidence, accountability, and public trust.

Introduction

Over a decade after the Arab uprisings, the relationship between knowledge, power, and civic life in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) remains deeply contested. The popular mobilizations of 2011 briefly expanded civic space and spurred an unprecedented surge in the production and circulation of knowledge about governance, rights, and reform. Universities, think tanks, and newly formed civil society organizations (CSOs) took on the task of documenting events, analyzing policies, and proposing alternatives to entrenched authoritarian systems. For a short moment, it appeared that knowledge—empirical, critical, and publicly engaged—could become a lever for accountability and democratization. Yet as the initial wave of mobilization subsided, most Arab regimes reasserted their authority through new forms of control that extended well beyond traditional coercion. They moved to regulate not only association and expression but also the production and flow of information itself, reshaping the very terrain on which civic knowledge is created and exchanged.

This study arises from the growing recognition that the struggle over knowledge has become a defining feature of contemporary authoritarianism in the Arab world. Whereas earlier scholarship on post-2011 politics emphasized regime durability, protest movements, and institutional reform, far less analytical attention has been devoted to how regimes manage and discipline the knowledge ecosystem that underpins public debate and policymaking. Across the region, state and regime actors have developed sophisticated tools—legal, bureaucratic, financial, ideological, and digital—to influence what knowledge is produced, how it is mediated, and who is allowed to use it. The resulting systems of “epistemic control” shape not only civic space but also the very boundaries of what counts as truth or expertise. Understanding these mechanisms is therefore essential for any effort to sustain independent civil society, strengthen evidence-based policymaking, and reclaim public debate as a site of accountability.

The rationale for this paper is both analytical and practical. Analytically, it seeks to fill a conceptual gap in the literature by offering a framework that connects theories of power and knowledge—particularly those of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci—with empirical realities in the Arab region. Practically, it responds to an urgent policy need: donors, practitioners, and regional actors require clearer tools to understand how regimes constrain or co-opt knowledge-producing CSOs, and what strategies might help preserve the integrity and influence of independent research and advocacy.

The central problem this paper addresses is the absence of a coherent analytical framework for explaining how Arab regimes and states exercise control over the knowledge ecosystem in the post-uprising period. While numerous studies document restrictions on NGOs or media freedoms, few integrate these into a systemic account of how power shapes the entire cycle of knowledge—from production to mediation to usage. The challenge is twofold. First, knowledge production and dissemination in the Arab world occur in environments characterized by hybrid governance, blurred boundaries between state and regime, and pervasive informal networks. Second, knowledge-oriented CSOs—those that generate research and data for advocacy or policy influence—occupy an ambiguous space between academia, activism, and politics. Their work is often tolerated when it aligns with regime priorities, yet harshly penalized when it exposes injustice or demands reform. Without a comprehensive framework, analyses risk remaining fragmented—treating censorship, funding control, or ideological manipulation as isolated phenomena rather than as interconnected instruments of power.

The study therefore poses a central research question: How do Arab regimes and states shape the production, mediation, and usage of knowledge within the post-2011 knowledge ecosystem? This question is further unpacked into three analytical sub-questions:

- What mechanisms—formal and informal—do regimes employ to control or influence knowledge-oriented civil society organizations and actors?
- How do these mechanisms operate across different stages of the knowledge cycle (production, mediation, and usage)?
- What adaptive strategies have knowledge-producing CSOs developed in response, and what implications do these dynamics hold for donors and policymakers seeking to preserve civic space?

From a policy standpoint, the paper also seeks to answer: What practical pathways can regional and international stakeholders pursue to strengthen independent knowledge ecosystems in constrained environments?

The primary objective is to develop a conceptual framework that captures the dynamic interactions between states, regimes, and knowledge-producing civil society in the Arab world. More specifically, the paper aims to:

- Map the institutional and informal mechanisms through which regimes control knowledge flows;
- Differentiate between state-based (formal) and regime-based (informal) instruments of control;
- Identify the key actors involved in each stage of the knowledge ecosystem—production, mediation, and usage—and analyze their interrelations;
- Integrate empirical evidence from literature and expert interviews to validate the framework; and
- Generate actionable insights and policy recommendations for supporting autonomous, sustainable, and secure knowledge production in the region.

By doing so, the paper contributes to both theory and practice: it extends global debates on knowledge and power into non-democratic contexts and offers a diagnostic tool for practitioners working to defend civic knowledge spaces.

Building on this rationale, the paper develops and validates a conceptual framework that explains how Arab regimes exert power over the knowledge ecosystem. The key finding presented in this paper is that regimes and states strategically deploy a range of formal and informal mechanisms to exert control over the production, mediation, and usage of knowledge. Formal mechanisms, enacted through state institutions, include legal-institutional constraints, economic-financial incentives and restrictions, ideological-discursive narratives, and coercive-repressive actions. Informal mechanisms, enacted through regime-affiliated networks, encompass co-optation strategies, informal intimidation, ideological marginalization, and the creation of pseudo-civil society organizations. Together, these mechanisms profoundly shape civil society's capacity to engage in independent inquiry and evidence-based advocacy, determining which knowledge circulates freely and which is suppressed or repurposed to serve regime legitimacy.

Following this introduction, the paper unfolds in four main sections. Section 1 outlines the methodology, combining a systematic review of forty-three academic and non-academic sources with qualitative insights from seven expert interviews across six Arab countries. Section 2 presents the literature review, synthesizing five major themes that define the post-Arab Spring knowledge ecosystem: the mechanisms of state and regime control; the emergence and coping strategies of knowledge-oriented CSOs; the interaction between producers, mediators, and users of knowledge; the influence of foreign donors; and the double-edged impact of digital technology. Section 3 introduces the conceptual framework in detail, showing how regimes deploy both

formal (state-based) and informal (regime-based) mechanisms across the three stages of the knowledge cycle. Finally, Section 4 translates the analytical findings into a set of forward-looking recommendations directed at CSOs, donors, and policymakers, emphasizing localization of agendas, stronger mediation capacities, sustainable funding, and robust security measures.

Methodology

The methodology of this study was designed to offer a thorough understanding of the research subject by combining an extensive literature review with qualitative insights from expert interviews.

In analyzing the references selected for this study, a total of 43 sources were examined to establish their academic nature, geographic origin, authorship gender distribution, and publication timelines. The review identified 21 academic sources (49%), comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic book chapters, and 22 non-academic sources (51%), including think-tank reports, NGO statements, institutional assessments, and opinion or news articles. Among non-academic references, there were 8 think-tank reports and policy papers, 6 NGO-produced documents, 5 opinion/news articles, and 3 institutional assessments.

Authorship analysis revealed that women authored or co-authored 16 of the 43 references (approximately 37%), indicating notable but not dominant representation. Geographically, authorship was categorized into Global South and Global North based on institutional or individual affiliation. The distribution comprised 18 references (42%) originating from the Global South (primarily MENA, Africa, India), and 25 references (58%) from the Global North (North America and Europe).

Finally, the publication timeline of the sources was organized into three distinct periods: 5 references (12%) published before 2011, 22 references (51%) from 2011 to 2020, and 16 references (37%) between 2021 and 2025, indicating an emphasis on recent literature and contemporary analysis.

In addition to the literature review, seven interviews were conducted with knowledge producers in the Arab world to enrich and validate the framework through qualitative insights. The interviewees represented diverse profiles in terms of gender, professional status, and geographic coverage. Among the interviewees, three were women and four were men, ensuring a balanced gender representation. Professionally, the participants included senior professionals from think tanks, academic institutions, advocacy groups, and private sector consultancies. Geographically, the interviews covered multiple countries within the Middle East and North Africa region,

specifically Lebanon, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Morocco. Table 1 provides the names, profession, and country coverage of knowledge producers.

Table 1: List of the names, profession, and country coverage of knowledge producers

Name	Profession and Affiliation	Country Coverage
Fadi Adra	Partner at Strategy&; Leader, Government and Public Sector Practice	Saudi Arabia, UAE
Asma Ben Hassan	President and Co-Founder, Tunisia Inclusive Labor Institute	Tunisia
Nadim Houry	Director, Arab Reform Initiative (ARI)	Middle East and North Africa
Mohamed Mosbah	Founder and President, Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA)	Morocco
Nagla Rizk	Professor of Economics, American University in Cairo (AUC); Director, A2K4D; Leader, MENA Hub for Feminist AI Research	Egypt, MENA
Abir Saksouk	Co-founder, Public Works Studio	Lebanon
Nizar Saghie	Director, Legal Agenda	Lebanon, Tunisia

Literature Review

In the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring, the landscape of knowledge production and dissemination in the Middle East and North Africa underwent profound shifts. A “knowledge ecosystem” emerged in which various actors – from civil society organizations (CSOs) and think tanks to academia, media, and policymakers – struggled over the production, mediation, and use of knowledge about society and governance. Secular CSOs dedicated to research, advocacy, and policy analysis took on new prominence, attempting to inform public debate and reform. At the same time, Arab states responded with a mix of engagement and repression, dramatically affecting how these organizations operate. This literature review surveys how Arab states have affected and reacted to the post-Arab Spring knowledge ecosystem, with a focus on secular CSOs that produce, mediate, or use knowledge. It examines five interrelated themes: (1) the mechanisms of state and regime control over knowledge-oriented CSOs; (2) the emergence of these CSOs after 2011 and their coping strategies under pressure; (3) the interactions between knowledge producers, mediators, and users in Arab societies; (4) the influence of foreign donors on the knowledge ecosystem; and (5) the impact of new digital technologies on state-CSO relations. Throughout, special attention is given to insights from Arabic-language sources and contributions by women scholars and practitioners in the region. The picture that emerges is one of an embattled yet resilient knowledge sector: one where civic actors continue to “twist and turn to protect themselves from surveillance and repression” even amid renewed authoritarianism (Shami 2016). Ten years on, the legacy of the Arab Spring is evident in both the proliferation of new knowledge initiatives and the intensity of state efforts to control them. The following sections synthesize key findings and debates on each of the five themes, drawing on case studies from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, the Gulf states, and beyond, to chart the contested evolution of the Arab knowledge ecosystem in the past decade.

State and Regime Mechanisms of Control

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes in the Arab world have long maintained tight restrictions on civil society, and the post-2011 period has seen many states doubling down on legal and coercive controls over CSOs engaged in knowledge production. In Egypt, for example, the aftermath of the 2011 uprising saw an initial opening for independent NGOs and research centers quickly followed by an intense crackdown after 2013. The government enacted draconian NGO laws (notably Law 70 of 2017) that virtually “squeezed shut whatever limited space remained for nongovernmental groups”. Human Rights Watch warned that the 2017 law – which gave a security-dominated agency veto power over all NGO activities and funding – would “*drive the human rights community underground*” (Human Rights Watch 2017). Indeed, the Egyptian state has treated independent

knowledge-producing CSOs as security threats, using an array of tools to control or silence them. These include burdensome registration requirements, foreign funding bans or approvals, security agency oversight of research work, and harsh penalties for “unauthorized” activities. Authorities have frozen the assets of prominent NGOs, interrogated their staff, and prosecuted dozens of NGO workers in the infamous “foreign funding” case (Wilson Center 2019, Cairo Institute for Human Rights 2014). By 2014, what Cairo-based activists described as a government “war on civil society” forced some organizations to shut down or relocate abroad. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, for instance, moved its regional programs to Tunisia after Egyptian officials effectively banned its work, demanding all groups re-register under an oppressive law and barring Arab and international researchers from entry. Such measures exemplify how regimes invoke legal authority and brute force alike to manage and suppress CSOs that generate independent knowledge or critical discourse.

Legal and bureaucratic mechanisms of control are a common thread across the region, though their intensity varies by country. Jordan’s government, while less draconian than Egypt’s, has also tightened its grip on civic organizations under the banner of “maintaining stability.” The Law on Societies (No. 51 of 2008, amended 2009) requires all associations to register and pointedly forbids any that have “political goals,” a clause used to sideline policy-oriented groups (International Center for Not-For-Profit Law 2024). More recently, Jordan imposed strict oversight on funding: since 2015–2019 authorities have mandated that the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) pre-approve all foreign grants to local NGOs, ostensibly to prevent money from aiding “domestic terrorist cells and government dissidents masquerading as humanitarian causes” (Davis 2023). This so-called Foreign Funding Mechanism gives officials wide discretion to refuse funds and has done “little if anything to ease the restrictions” on civil society financing, according to Human Rights Watch in 2023. The effect is a financial chokehold: by controlling access to resources, the state can steer NGOs toward service delivery and away from sensitive research or advocacy not aligned with “state interests”. In addition to funding controls, Jordanian authorities employ vague laws on assembly, cybercrime, and anti-terrorism to surveil and stifle activists, including those in professional associations and research centers (Human Rights Watch 2022). Over the past few years, this has resulted in what observers call a shrinking “civic space,” where detentions, interrogations, and travel bans serve as warnings against crossing red lines (Human Rights Watch 2022). Even moderate policy research organizations must navigate a thicket of approvals for events and publications, lest they be deemed a threat to public order.

Morocco presents a somewhat different but instructive case. In contrast to the outright repression seen elsewhere, the Moroccan regime historically allowed a relatively vibrant NGO sector under King Mohammed VI’s reformist discourse, within limits. Many associations – including human rights groups and think tanks – operate legally under a liberal 1958 associations law (as amended)

(ICNL 2005). However, when CSOs became too effective in holding officials accountable, the state responded with targeted legal changes. A striking recent example is Bill 03.23 (2024), which amended the penal procedure code to bar NGOs from initiating corruption cases. Previously, Moroccan anti-corruption CSOs *“held the authority to initiate legal action against civil servants”* implicated in graft, but the new law stripped them of this role (Faouzi 2024). Domestic observers labeled this move *“a significant setback”* for civil society’s oversight function, noting it contradicted the spirit of the 2011 constitutional reforms that ostensibly empowered citizens’ groups (Patil 2025). The Moroccan government justified such constraints as preventing “abuse” of legal processes, yet critics argue they are intended to curtail CSOs that produce inconvenient knowledge (e.g. investigative reports on official corruption) and to reassert executive control over public narratives. Even in less overt ways, the state manages the knowledge sphere through bureaucracy: for instance, by withholding or delaying the routine approvals required for NGO activities and foreign partnerships. Still, Morocco’s approach has often been to co-opt and contain rather than crush. Authorities may tolerate research on social development or economic issues – sometimes even embracing CSO input – while quietly discouraging work on sensitive areas like the monarchy, Western Sahara, or high-level corruption. The passage of Bill 03.23 signals that when civil society’s knowledge-production threatens to translate into real accountability, the regime is ready to recalibrate laws to protect its interests.

In the Gulf states, independent secular CSOs are exceedingly few, and knowledge production is largely either state-controlled or conducted from abroad. Absolute monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates long banned unsanctioned NGOs, viewing them as potential conduits for political dissent. Instead, these states have created their own quasi-CSOs – often elite-funded think tanks and research centers – to channel and manage knowledge production in line with regime priorities. For example, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in the UAE, or the King Faisal Center in Saudi Arabia, produce research on policy issues but are led and funded by establishment figures, ensuring alignment with official narratives. After the Arab Spring, Gulf regimes intensified this top-down management of the knowledge sector. The UAE government in particular “recalibrated its approach” in 2011 by actively sponsoring a *“diverse think tank ecosystem”* as part of its security strategy (Botho 2023). New think tanks like the Emirates Policy Center (founded 2013 in Abu Dhabi) were allowed to operate with a degree of independence, but their mandate was essentially to reinforce the state’s agenda – for instance, by studying threats to Gulf regimes and convening forums that bolster regional security cooperation. Simultaneously, the UAE launched initiatives to build a “knowledge-based economy” and encouraged think tanks to focus on futurist and technocratic topics (innovation, AI, etc.), again under official patronage. The result is a controlled pluralism: multiple centers of knowledge production exist, yet nearly all either directly serve the state or exercise self-censorship to avoid political taboos. Any truly independent CSO that attempts to investigate human rights or

governance in the Gulf quickly faces repression. A stark example is the case of Emirati economist Nasser bin Ghaith, who was associated with a UAE research institute and was arrested in 2011 after criticizing authorities – he and other activists received heavy prison sentences, sending a clear message that unauthorized analysis of political affairs was intolerable. In Bahrain, the regime responded to the 2011 uprising by dissolving reformist associations and jailing intellectuals, effectively silencing secular civil society. Thus, while Gulf rulers may champion “knowledge society” rhetoric, they tightly circumscribe who can produce knowledge and which kinds of knowledge are permissible. Mechanisms of control range from formal NGO bans and royal decrees to more subtle tools like patronage networks, advisory council appointments, and surveillance of academics. Together, these ensure that any knowledge produced by CSOs in the Gulf either buttresses the regime’s legitimacy or remains marginal to public discourse. Across these varied contexts – Egypt’s coercive legalism, Jordan’s bureaucratic constraints, Morocco’s strategic co-optation, and the Gulf’s state monopolies on expertise – Arab regimes have shown remarkable adaptability in reasserting control over the knowledge ecosystem after the jolts of the Arab Spring. Common threads include the use of restrictive NGO laws, often invoking “national security” and “public order” to criminalize independent inquiry (Human Rights Watch 2017); prior restraints on funding and activities (such as Jordan’s funding approval system and Egypt’s all-powerful NGO regulatory authority) which allow selective strangulation of troublesome organizations (Davis 2023, Human Rights Watch 2017); and coercive intimidation, from surveillance and harassment to arrests, which creates a climate of fear. In many cases, regimes also deploy propaganda to delegitimize knowledge-oriented CSOs, branding them as foreign agents or elitist actors disconnected from “authentic” local values. The cumulative effect of these mechanisms is to manage the production of knowledge about society: channeling it into safe or state-sanctioned outlets and suppressing or discrediting knowledge that might fuel opposition or demands for accountability. As the next sections will show, however, this is only one side of the story. Civil society actors, for their part, have not simply folded under pressure; instead, they have found creative ways to survive, adapt, and continue their work, both inside and outside their countries.

Emergence and Coping Strategies of Knowledge CSOs

The tumult of 2011 gave rise to an efflorescence of new civil society initiatives across the Arab world, many of them focused on research, advocacy, and informing the public – in short, producing and sharing knowledge to advance social and political change. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and beyond, young activists, scholars, and professionals established NGOs, think tanks, and grassroots initiatives to document events, analyze policies, and propose reforms. This wave built on pre-existing networks but also brought a new generation (often with strong participation by women and youth) to the fore (Shami 2016). For instance, in Tunisia after Ben Ali’s fall, dozens of advocacy research NGOs sprang up to address transitional justice, constitutional

reforms, and transparency. In Egypt during the 2011–2013 opening, independent research centers like the *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights* and *Nazra for Feminist Studies* expanded their activities, publishing data on police abuses, gender violence, and constitutional amendments. Many of these organizations explicitly framed themselves as part of a revolutionary knowledge project – seeking to ensure that facts and analysis would guide the transition, and that citizens would have the information needed to hold authorities accountable. However, as regimes reasserted themselves (often violently, as in Egypt’s 2013 coup or Yemen and Libya’s conflicts), the nascent knowledge CSOs were forced to either shut down, scale back, or find new ways to persist.

A key coping strategy has been legal navigation and re-registration. When states impose restrictive laws, CSOs adapt by changing their legal status or geographic base. In Egypt, as the government moved to outlaw many independent NGOs, some groups preemptively registered under alternative legal frameworks (for example, as law firms or civil companies rather than associations) to evade the Ministry of Social Solidarity’s control. Others split into two entities – a small, registered office to handle formal compliance, and an informal team continuing advocacy work quietly. Research groups that could no longer operate as NGOs sometimes re-emerged as private consultancies or as unregistered “movements,” trading formal recognition for flexibility. A dramatic form of re-registration is external relocation: relocating offices to more permissive jurisdictions. We saw this with the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies transferring its headquarters to Tunis, where a progressive NGO law passed after the revolution provided a haven. Likewise, Egyptian women’s rights group Nazra for Feminist Studies, led by Mozn Hassan, after coming under intense pressure at home (office raids, asset freezes), explored registering part of its operations abroad to keep its work going. Several Syrian civil society research centers, facing extreme danger in Syria, re-established themselves in exile – for example, the *Syrian Center for Policy Research* moved to Lebanon, and a number of Syrian think-tank initiatives found footing in Europe. By operating transnationally, these organizations continue to produce knowledge about their home countries, albeit at the cost of being physically removed from their primary communities.

Another crucial coping mechanism has been networking and alliance-building. Arab knowledge-oriented CSOs have increasingly formed coalitions, both domestically and regionally, to pool resources and present a united front to authorities. In Egypt, when faced with the threat of mass closure in 2014, dozens of NGOs (secular and human rights-focused) banded together to issue joint statements and petitions – for instance, 23 Egyptian rights groups co-signed a memorandum to the Prime Minister protesting the proposed civic association law. Regionally, new networks arose to support knowledge exchange and solidarity. The *Arab Council for the Social Sciences* (ACSS), launched in 2013 and spearheaded by Lebanese and other Arab women scholars,

exemplifies this trend. Conceived by “concerned Arab social scientists” even before 2011 and catalyzed by the post-uprising openness, ACSS created a transnational platform for research funding, fellowships, and conferences connecting scholars and research NGOs across MENA. Its existence is itself a coping response to decades of academic isolation and state control: by building an autonomous regional infrastructure, Arab researchers aimed to strengthen capacities and ensure the task of interpreting regional developments is not left solely to outsiders. Another example is the emergence of the *Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship* at the American University of Beirut, which brings together activists and thinkers from multiple Arab countries to reflect on civil society challenges. These networks provide safety in numbers – it is harder for regimes to target a whole network than an isolated NGO – and facilitate knowledge-sharing about survival tactics (e.g. navigating laws, digital security). They also enable joint projects that amplify impact, such as comparative research across countries or coordinated advocacy campaigns. In Jordan, for instance, small NGOs formed alliances like the *Mosawa Network* (a coalition of over 100 women-led organizations) to collectively advocate for regulatory reforms and to share funding opportunities (Toukan 2023). By creating parallel civil society “ecosystems” that transcend borders, knowledge CSOs have carved out a degree of protection and continued relevance despite state restrictions.

Operating in exile or semi-clandestinely has sadly become the norm for many of the most outspoken knowledge-producing CSOs. Dozens of Arab intellectuals and NGO leaders departed their home countries in the past decade under threat of arrest or violence, continuing their work from foreign capitals. This brain drain has led to what some call a “civil society diaspora.” Cities like Tunis, Beirut, Paris, London, and Berlin host clusters of Arab expat organizations-in-exile. For example, after 2014 Cairo effectively expelled international pro-democracy NGOs and hounded local ones, Tunis became a hub for exiled Egyptian and Libyan civil society. Tunis hosted regional offices of groups like Nazra for Feminist Studies (Egypt) and the Libyan Forum for Civil Society, where they could convene meetings and publish reports free from censorship. Similarly, Syrian research and documentation groups (covering human rights, education, etc.) congregated in Gaziantep, Beirut, and European cities after 2012. While exile allows continued operation, it poses challenges: distance from the local context, reliance on external funding, and sometimes diminished legitimacy among domestic audiences who may perceive exiles as detached. Nonetheless, many exiled CSOs have found ways to stay connected – through online outreach, partnerships with discreet local actors, and periodic field visits when possible. Operating from the margins, as one Egyptian activist described, has become a necessary trade-off to keep the flame of independent inquiry alive. Some organizations adopt a low-profile at home while their exiled members speak loudly abroad, a dual-track strategy that avoids complete shutdown. For example, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights kept a legal registration in Egypt but also had staff

abroad who would brief international forums on Egypt's situation, thereby protecting the core work by splitting roles.

Women-led CSOs have been at the forefront of both knowledge production and adaptive strategies in the post-Arab Spring era. Women's rights organizations, in particular, blossomed after 2011, bringing feminist analysis and data into public debates on legal reform, violence against women, and social policy. Groups like *Nazra* in Egypt, *ABAAD* in Lebanon, and the *Jasmine Foundation* in Tunisia produced influential reports on gender-based violence, political participation, and economic inclusion. They often did so under hostile conditions, facing not only state suspicion but also societal biases. Remarkably, many of these CSOs are led by women who became prominent knowledge brokers. Their role has been crucial in broadening what "counts" as policy knowledge – for instance, introducing data on sexual harassment or unequal citizenship laws into national conversations that previously ignored these issues. When repression hit, women's organizations also demonstrated resilience. In Egypt, as noted, *Nazra* and others persisted despite being pushed "to the margins"; even after authorities froze *Nazra's* assets and shut its offices, its leader Mozn Hassan vowed to continue its research and advocacy informally.

Some women-led initiatives shifted to under-the-radar community work or partnered with international organizations to sustain funding when domestic sources ran dry. Moreover, women activists have been adept at coalition-building: they have connected with youth movements, human rights groups, and even sympathetic officials to create protective alliances. In Jordan, for example, women-led community-based organizations leveraged their social capital to navigate state bureaucracy, finding allies within ministries to sponsor their projects in exchange for toning down overtly political messaging. This savvy negotiation has allowed them to keep operating where more confrontational groups might be shut out. The increased visibility of women scholars and NGO leaders – such as Bassma Kodmani (co-founder of the Arab Reform Initiative think tank) and Seteney Shami (founding director of ACSS) – is itself a notable outcome of the post-2011 period. Their leadership signifies a gradual shift in the knowledge ecosystem: voices that were historically marginalized (women, younger professionals, non-Western-educated experts) have claimed their seat at the table. They bring new perspectives and methodologies, often emphasizing inclusive, community-grounded knowledge. In turn, their organizations frequently prioritize accessible outputs (e.g. Arabic publications, workshops for local communities) to ensure that knowledge is not just produced for elites or donors but reaches those who can use it on the ground. This orientation has helped some CSOs build a domestic constituency that can rally to their defense when they face state harassment, thereby strengthening their resilience.

In summary, the decade since the Arab Spring has seen the rise of a cohort of nimble, determined civil society actors who have *institutionalized dissent* in creative ways. They operate research centers out of people's living rooms when offices are closed; they register abroad when they

cannot at home; they share data and analysis via encrypted channels when public forums are denied. They form networks crossing borders and sectors, blending activism and scholarship, as a survival strategy and as a way to enrich their work. As Seteney Shami observed, despite “renewed authoritarianism, growing insecurity and violence,” the “*seeds that were sown continue to germinate*” – albeit with roots twisting to evade repression (Shami 2016). These coping strategies have not been without costs: there is fragmentation, loss of talent to exile, and often a disconnect from policy influence (explored in the next section). Yet they illustrate a fundamental point in the literature: Arab civil society, especially its secular knowledge-producing segment, is far from a passive victim of state control. Rather, it is an active agent, capable of learning and adapting. The adaptive behaviors observed – re-registration, networking, exile operations, and the prominent role of women leaders – all speak to a sector that, while embattled, continues to push the boundaries of permissible discourse and maintain the flow of alternative knowledge in societies where regimes often seek to monopolize truth. These CSOs have, in effect, created parallel knowledge infrastructures that challenge official narratives and keep critical inquiry alive in the Arab world.

Interaction Between Knowledge Actors

The knowledge in any society relies on linkages between those who produce knowledge (researchers, analysts, CSOs), those who mediate or disseminate it (media outlets, educators, translators), and the ultimate users or audiences (policymakers, practitioners, and the public). In the Arab states, these linkages have often been weak or fraught with barriers, both structural and linguistic. A recurring theme in the literature is the *disconnect* between independent knowledge producers – such as CSO researchers or academic scholars – and state policymakers who might implement evidence-based reforms. Likewise, the translation of research into public discourse faces challenges due to state dominance in media and education, as well as due to the specialized nature of much research. This section examines how CSOs, academia, media, and policy institutions interact (or fail to interact) in the post-2011 Arab context and identifies key impediments to integrating civil society knowledge into decision-making. It also highlights attempts to bridge these gaps, including bilingual publishing and new forums for exchange.

One critical relationship is between CSOs and academia as knowledge producers. In many Arab countries, public universities and state-run research centers were traditionally the main source of social knowledge, but they were often constrained by censorship, low resources, and bureaucratic inertia. The rise of agile CSOs and independent think tanks after the Arab Spring introduced a potential collaborative dynamic with academia – for example, joint research projects, conferences, or the hiring of academics as consultants for NGO studies. In practice, however, these two communities sometimes operate in parallel rather than in tandem. University scholars may

perceive CSO research as too policy-oriented or donor-driven, while CSO practitioners may view academia as too theoretical or inaccessible. That said, there have been fruitful partnerships: in the Gulf, some think tanks like the Sheikh Saud al-Qasimi Foundation in Ras al-Khaimah actively work with universities to “boost the research ecosystem” and involve students in policy research. In Lebanon and Jordan, professors frequently sit on the boards of research NGOs, lending academic rigor and credibility. The Arab Council for the Social Sciences has served as a mediator, bringing academics and civil society researchers together in conferences and working groups. An outcome of these interactions is a modest trend toward interdisciplinary and applied research. The upheavals of 2011 blurred lines between scholarly analysis and activism, leading some academics to step into public debates and write op-eds or briefings (for instance, economists analyzing subsidy reforms, or sociologists advising on reconciliation processes) (Catusse et al 2015).

Conversely, CSO researchers have sought to bolster their studies with academic methodologies, producing more rigorous reports on topics like election violence or youth unemployment. Despite these positive examples, a gap remains: knowledge produced within CSOs does not always feed into university curricula or state research agendas, and vice versa. This reflects a broader issue of poor networking capacity among Arab knowledge institutions that was noted even prior to 2011 (Jebari 2016). The Arab Spring moment did spur more exchange (at least temporarily), as “the importance of questioning the status quo” became manifest and scholars and activists alike felt compelled to explain unfolding events. But sustaining that collaborative energy has proven difficult amid political crackdowns and funding competition.

The interplay between CSOs, media, and the public is another vital component. Media – whether traditional press, TV, or online platforms – act as a mediator that can amplify CSO-produced knowledge to reach broader audiences and influence public opinion. After 2011, independent media in some Arab countries flourished briefly, creating new opportunities for CSO findings to be covered. In Tunisia, private radio and newspapers frequently interviewed civil society experts on issues from constitutional clauses to police reform, helping translate NGO research into layman’s terms for the public. In Egypt, the short-lived openness saw talk shows invite NGO representatives to discuss human rights reports. However, as regimes re-established media control (through ownership pressure, censorship, or intimidation of journalists), space for CSO voices in mainstream media shrank. By the late 2010s, in countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, virtually all major media toed the government line and rarely cited independent NGOs except to smear them. One Egyptian journalist lamented that by 2018 it had become “*hard to distinguish between propaganda and genuine comments*” on social issues in media, given the orchestrated narratives online and on air (ECFR 2022).

Governments have also directly censored knowledge dissemination – for example, Egypt blocked hundreds of websites (including those of human rights organizations and critical news sites like

Mada Masr) starting in 2017, preventing users inside the country from accessing the research and reporting on those sites. This forced CSOs to rely on mirror sites, social media, or email lists to circulate their work. Linguistic barriers compound the challenge: much high-quality research by Arab CSOs is published in English (often due to donor requirements or to target global advocacy), which limits its penetration among Arabic-speaking publics and mid-level officials. Conversely, research published in Arabic sometimes lacks wider impact because it may not be visible in international policy discussions or academic circles. The result is a fragmentation of audiences – English-language output gets read by foreign diplomats and elites, while Arabic output may reach activists and local media. Bridging this requires deliberate translation efforts and bilingual dissemination strategies, which some organizations have adopted. The *Arab Reform Initiative*, for instance, usually releases reports in both English and Arabic, and holds press briefings in Arabic to ensure local journalists can engage with the findings. Nonetheless, the asymmetry of languages remains a persistent barrier noted by observers: global knowledge production still skews to English, marginalizing Arabic contributions (Ragab 2017).

As a response, initiatives like the bilingual e-journal *Jadaliyya* (run by the Arab Studies Institute) emerged to ensure that analysis of regional events is accessible in Arabic and authored by local experts rather than only by Western academics. *Jadaliyya* since 2010 has served as a mediator platform, blending scholarly articles with journalistic style and publishing them in both languages. Its success – becoming widely read among intellectual circles – underscores the appetite for knowledge that crosses linguistic and societal divides.

When it comes to policymakers as users of knowledge, the record in Arab states is mixed at best. In democratic or transitioning contexts (Tunisia between 2011–2014, for example), there were genuine attempts to incorporate civil society expertise into lawmaking – such as parliamentary committee hearings with NGO experts, or the national dialogue engaging human rights activists in drafting the constitution. In authoritarian contexts, however, decision-making remains opaque and insular, often dominated by security institutions that are suspicious of outside input. One study notes that many Arab regimes historically viewed civil society as “an impediment” or at least irrelevant to governance, preferring top-down technocratic approaches (Anderson and Salloukh 2024). This attitude persists; as Lama Fakhri of HRW observed regarding Jordan, claims of “maintaining stability” are used to justify “closing space that every society needs” for open debate (HRW 2022). Even where governments solicit advice, they tend to favor state-aligned think tanks or consultants over independent CSOs. For instance, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 reforms involved hiring Western consulting firms and creating new government think tanks, rather than engaging local independent economists or sociologists. In Egypt, President Sisi has convened periodic youth forums and “national dialogue” meetings, but these are carefully managed to exclude genuine regime critics, and thus many serious civil society experts boycott them as mere window dressing.

The consequence is that a wealth of data and analysis generated by CSOs – on issues like poverty alleviation, education reform, or public health – is often underutilized in policy processes. A poignant example is in Egypt’s economic realm: NGOs and academic centers had for years warned about growing food insecurity and suggested policy fixes, but with civil society muzzled, the government missed early warnings and was caught off guard by the bread price protests that recurred (HRW 2017). The NGO law’s restriction of civic action “eliminates a path for Egyptian citizens to peacefully express dissent [and] hold the government accountable” on such socio-economic issues, as HRW noted, thereby depriving the state of a crucial feedback mechanism that could preempt unrest. There are, however, niches where policy uptake of CSO knowledge does happen. In areas deemed non-threatening or aligning with regime goals – such as entrepreneurship training, service delivery, or social entrepreneurship – governments may actively collaborate with CSOs. Jordan’s royal court, for example, has occasionally consulted local NGOs on education curriculum updates or tourism development (fields seen as apolitical). Morocco’s authorities have engaged with certain think tanks on economic policy and even allowed some critical voices in that domain, as long as the monarchy’s prerogatives are not questioned. Moreover, international donor programs sometimes create interfaces for policy dialogue that include CSOs; the EU and UN have sponsored “policy forums” in countries like Lebanon and Tunisia where ministry officials sit alongside NGO representatives to discuss sectoral strategies (e.g. in health or environment). While such forums can be perfunctory, they sometimes result in CSO recommendations being recorded in strategy documents or legislation drafts.

Structural barriers also impede integration of knowledge. One is the limited institutionalization of evidence-based policymaking. Many Arab bureaucracies do not have formal channels for incorporating research – e.g., there is a lack of parliamentary research services, independent policy units in ministries, or regular use of policy briefs. Non-state research thus has no clear entry point. Another barrier is trust and legitimacy. Regimes that question the loyalty of independent CSOs are unlikely to heed their advice. They may question the “objectivity” of CSO data, especially if funded from abroad, framing it as skewed to foreign agendas. This has led to a paradox noted by analysts: CSOs often produce high-quality studies on development problems, but governments prefer consulting reports from Western firms or multilaterals, finding those politically safer even if substantively similar. A related issue is public reception. While parts of the public respect CSO research (especially educated urban segments), others might distrust it if state media portrays NGOs as foreign-influenced. Public opinion surveys in some countries have shown mixed attitudes – for instance, citizens in Jordan or Egypt might appreciate NGOs’ community services but harbor skepticism toward those engaged in policy criticism, an ambivalence that regimes exploit. That said, where independent media and social media allow, CSOs have managed to sway public opinion on certain topics by getting their research out. Campaigns against gender-based violence, for example, benefited from NGO studies and infographics widely shared online in the Arab

Spring's aftermath, which in turn pressured governments to pass laws (as seen in Tunisia's 2017 law on violence against women, influenced by years of data advocacy from women's NGOs). This underscores that "knowledge uptake" is not a linear process from CSO to state; often, CSOs aim to first educate the public or specific constituencies (teachers, doctors, farmers), who then collectively demand policy change. The mediators in this process – journalists, social media influencers, community leaders – play a crucial role in interpreting and relaying CSO-produced knowledge in locally resonant ways. When those mediators are free, the ecosystem is healthier; when they are constrained, knowledge tends to circulate in closed loops among the already-convinced.

An interesting development to mitigate the producer-user gap has been the creation of policy research programs within academic or semi-academic institutions that interface with government. One example is the *Research and Policy-Making in the Arab World* program at AUB's Issam Fares Institute, which explicitly aims to "promote a culture of evidence-informed decision-making" and to document how research does or doesn't influence policy in the region (aub.edu.lb). By acting as a bridge – hosting roundtables with ministers and CSO experts, or training "knowledge brokers" – such initiatives attempt to make research more legible and accessible to officials. Another example is Morocco's Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), a state body that includes civil society representatives and produces reports on national priorities. Some of CESE's reports, such as on the new development model, integrated input from NGOs and think tanks, suggesting that structured advisory bodies can be a conduit for civil society knowledge if given the mandate. Yet, these remain exceptions in a region where, as one analyst put it, policy often proceeds "incoherent and cacophonous" with respect to incorporating social science knowledge, akin to a "tower of Babel" where multiple voices speak but few truly listen to each other (Catusse et al 2015).

In conclusion, the interaction among producers, mediators, and users of knowledge in Arab states is characterized by significant fragmentation. Linguistic divides (Arabic vs. English), institutional silos, and political suspicions all hamper the free flow of information and ideas from civil society to state authority and to society at large. The post-2011 surge in knowledge production by CSOs created a potential treasure trove of data and analysis on Arab realities, but much of it remains underutilized internally due to the described barriers. Nevertheless, efforts to bridge these gaps are visible: bilingual publications like *Jadaliyya* ensure local perspectives aren't lost in translation; policy forums and networks are bringing together researchers and officials in dialogue; and where independent media survives, it amplifies CSO voices to publics that need to hear them. The structural deficits – lack of trust, absence of institutional channels – will likely persist as long as political liberalization remains limited. Yet even under constraints, the knowledge ecosystem finds ways to circulate research in smaller circles. Arab researchers have embraced social media to bypass officialdom, publishing findings in Facebook infographics or Twitter threads for quick

public access. Podcasts and YouTube channels run by young Arab analysts are gaining popularity, effectively mediating knowledge to younger audiences outside traditional media. These innovations reflect the adaptive, somewhat underground nature of today's knowledge exchange in many Arab states: it is happening in alternative forums, often online or in academic-NGO hybrids, rather than in formal halls of power. As the next section will discuss, foreign donors have both helped and complicated this ecosystem, and technology (section 5) has been a double-edged sword in mediating knowledge.

Donor Influence on the Knowledge Ecosystem

Foreign funding has been a critical lifeline for Arab civil society organizations, especially those involved in research and advocacy, but it has also introduced complexities and tensions into the knowledge ecosystem. After the Arab Spring, international donors – including Western governments, UN agencies, and private foundations – ramped up support for civil society in the MENA region, hoping to encourage democratic transition and development. This influx of funding enabled the proliferation of new CSOs and think tanks and supported a boom in research projects on everything from governance reform to social entrepreneurship. Yet, as numerous studies have highlighted, heavy reliance on external funding can make CSOs “donor- driven rather than demand-driven,” potentially skewing their agendas away from local needs (Al Jayousi and Nishide 2023). Moreover, authoritarian regimes have weaponized the issue of foreign funding to delegitimize and restrict CSOs, branding them as agents of outside interests. In this section, we examine the impact of donor funding on the priorities and sustainability of knowledge-producing CSOs, the friction between donor objectives and grassroots needs, and the ways in which donor engagement has both benefited and challenged the autonomy of the Arab knowledge sector. We also explore debates on how CSOs might achieve more sustainable, locally rooted funding models to reduce vulnerabilities.

One immediate effect of robust post-2011 donor support was the expansion of CSO activities and professionalization. Organizations that previously operated on shoestring budgets suddenly had access to grants for capacity building, technology, and staff salaries. This allowed many CSOs to hire full-time researchers and analysts, improving the quality and quantity of knowledge output. Donor-funded initiatives produced valuable data – for example, EU-supported projects in Tunisia conducted nationwide surveys on public perceptions, and US-funded programs in Egypt trained think-tank fellows in policy writing. New think tanks like the *Arab Reform Initiative* and *Chatham House's MENA program* received substantial grants to churn out policy papers. However, this came with strings attached. Donors often set thematic priorities reflecting their own strategic interests: in the mid-2010s, for instance, funding was abundant for topics like countering violent extremism (CVE), women's political empowerment, and youth entrepreneurship – areas aligned with Western

security or development narratives. CSOs, needing funds, frequently calibrated their focus to fit these templates, even if other issues (say, rural poverty or labor rights) were more pressing locally. The result, as critics argue, was a degree of agenda distortion. In Palestine, A. Challand and others noted how NGOs became oriented toward donor priorities, leading to a “NGO-ization” that *“disconnected [them] from their constituents”* (Al Jayousi and Nishide 2023). In Egypt, small community groups rebranded as human rights or democracy NGOs to access post-Arab Spring democracy assistance, but this sometimes meant adopting unfamiliar language and logframes that didn’t resonate with the communities they served. Thus, upward accountability to donors began overshadowing downward accountability to local beneficiaries. It is important not to overgeneralize – many CSOs skillfully negotiated with donors to fund genuinely needed projects, and donors themselves learned to consult local actors more. Yet, the structural power imbalance often left CSOs feeling they had to *“chase the money”* and mold themselves to donor interests in order to survive (USAID 2016). This could lead to gaps in the knowledge ecosystem: areas that donors found sensitive (such as explicit political opposition or documenting abuses by Western allies) went underfunded, while trendier topics might be overfunded relative to absorptive capacity.

Donor funding also influenced methodologies and output formats. With grants came requirements for detailed proposals, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, and deliverables like policy briefs and workshops. For knowledge CSOs, this encouraged a more policy-oriented style of research, often favoring quick studies that yield actionable recommendations, as opposed to longer-term, grassroots knowledge gathering. Some have criticized this as the *“technicization and marketization”* of civil society – NGOs adopting business-like metrics and technocratic vocabularies at donors’ behest (Al Jayousi and Nishide 2023). One positive outcome, however, was improved documentation and transparency: many CSOs began publishing annual reports and financial statements to meet donor standards, which professionalized the sector. Donor-driven training programs enhanced skills in data analysis, advocacy, and media engagement among Arab CSO workers, indirectly strengthening the knowledge ecosystem. International funding also enabled regional convenings that might not have happened otherwise – for example, the Arab Social Science Conference series (with EU support) brought together researchers from across MENA, fostering collaborations and comparative studies. These are *“positive contributions”* in that they built capacity and networks that continue to bear fruit. Additionally, foreign grants often provided the *hardware* of knowledge work – computers, internet access, subscriptions – especially in conflict-affected or poor countries where such basics were lacking. The Arab Knowledge Report 2010/11 had highlighted the region’s deficits in research infrastructure (MBRF and UNDP 20) and The United Nations 2011); donor aid partially filled those gaps post-2011, at least for the NGO sector.

The flip side is sustainability. Donor funding is typically project-based and time-bound. Many Arab CSOs flourished on 2-3 year grants but struggled when those ended. For instance, a think tank in Libya might run an excellent EU-funded project on constitutional dialogue for two years, then face a funding cliff. Because most CSOs lack endowments or steady revenue, they must perpetually seek new grants, a situation that one USAID report described bluntly: *“Most CSOs are established first and foremost to access donor funding”*, creating a cycle of dependency (USAID Jordan 2016). When geopolitical winds shift, funding can dry up quickly. After the initial enthusiasm, some Western donors pulled back, especially as authoritarian restoration made democratic reform less feasible. Tunisia saw a tapering of civil society funds by the late 2010s; as one index noted, *“many foreign donors ceased their funding efforts”* or reallocated them during crises like COVID-19 (USAID 2021). This left Tunisian NGOs scrambling or downsizing. In Jordan and Lebanon, the massive influx of aid for the Syrian refugee response around 2014-2016 meant local NGOs oriented toward relief and research on refugees; but as those funds waned years later, organizations again faced existential threats. Donors themselves acknowledged this problem: in Iraq, international donors warned in 2020 that CSOs must *“find other, more sustainable sources of funding”* as humanitarian aid would decrease. Yet, finding local sources is challenging in environments with weak cultures of philanthropy and restrictive laws. In Jordan, domestic fundraising is stymied by regulation (you need government approval even to hold a charity bake sale) and by societal patterns of giving that favor traditional charities (like mosques or direct aid to families) over NGOs (Davis 2023). A former Jordanian minister, Mary Kavar, observed that local donations tend to be one-offs or tied to tangible assets (like donating to build a school or mosque), not the kind of sustained contributions needed to fund research NGOs. Similarly, corporate philanthropy in the region is limited and often directed by the state (e.g., compulsory CSR funds). Thus, CSOs find themselves in a financial vise: external donors may push them in certain directions and can withdraw support unexpectedly, while local funding is scarce and often politically constrained.

The dependence on foreign funding has also provided ammunition for regimes to crackdown. Russia’s “foreign agents” law narrative found echoes in the Arab world: governments like Egypt’s claim that foreign-funded NGOs serve foreign agendas and thus justify draconian laws requiring state approval for any external grants. This has had a chilling effect. Some CSOs, in order not to be tarred as foreign pawns, have declined funding or kept it secret, which in turn hurts transparency and trust. Public opinion research indicates that ordinary citizens sometimes view NGOs that get foreign money less favorably than those funded locally (Efrat and Yair 2024). Authoritarian rulers have exploited nationalist sentiment to pit the public against outspoken NGOs by highlighting their foreign ties, even when those NGOs are clearly working in the national interest (like fighting corruption or improving public health). This dynamic creates a dilemma for CSOs: they need funding to do their work, but by taking foreign funds they incur political risk and potential popular skepticism. Some organizations have tried to navigate this by diversifying their

donor base (so no single foreign donor dominates) and by being as transparent as possible about their funding and spending to build credibility. A few have experimented with crowdfunding and membership schemes. For example, *Mada Masr*, an independent Egyptian media outlet that also produces in-depth investigative knowledge, turned to reader subscriptions and contributions when traditional funding was cut off. Though such efforts usually cover only a fraction of costs, they represent attempts at “*more autonomous funding models*”. In countries like Lebanon and Tunisia (before 2021), where giving to civil society is less stigmatized, NGOs have had modest success raising local funds through galas or fee-for-service activities (e.g., consulting for private sector or training workshops). The vast majority, however, still rely on international donors for core support.

It is worth noting the positive contributions donors have made to the knowledge ecosystem, beyond material support. Foreign partners often bring comparative experiences and technical expertise that can enrich local knowledge work. For instance, European think tanks partnering with Arab ones through programs like Horizon 2020 enabled cross-pollination of research methods and topics (like introducing environmental policy analysis to some MENA CSOs for the first time). Donors also have convening power: a donor can persuade government officials to attend a workshop with civil society folks that the latter alone might not have been able to arrange. In some cases, donors have acted as *protectors* for CSOs – high-profile funding can deter regimes from targeting an NGO (since it would risk diplomatic fallout). An example is how EU funding and political backing for certain Tunisian NGOs in the 2010s gave them a shield of sorts under hostile later governments. Additionally, international funding has supported the translation of local research into global forums – enabling Arab CSO representatives to travel to UN or EU meetings to present findings, thereby putting pressure on their governments from outside. This kind of influence by proxy means that knowledge produced locally can feed into international policy toward the country (for instance, detailed human rights documentation by Syrian and Yemeni NGOs has informed UN resolutions and war crimes investigations).

The tension between donor interests and local needs, however, remains a central theme in the literature. Donors, even well-intentioned, have their own priorities which can create *misalignment*. For example, a community organization in rural Morocco might identify illiteracy as the key issue holding back development, but donors at that time might be more interested in funding a conference on parliamentary strengthening in Rabat. Or donors may emphasize quick results and success stories to show their taxpayers, pressuring CSOs to favor short-term deliverables over deeper, long-term community engagement. This can erode the local legitimacy of CSOs, as people see projects come and go without lasting change. Some activists speak of a “project syndrome” – where organizations hop from project to project, following donor fads, losing sight of an overarching mission or theory of change. Moreover, the presence of donor money can

inadvertently cause competition and fragmentation in the civil society field: groups compete for grants rather than collaborate, and this undermines the solidarity needed to collectively push back against state repression. Donors have recognized this problem and in some cases tried to encourage consortiums and coalition grants, with mixed success. A 2020 civil society index for the MENA region noted that *“most coalitions are still predominantly donor-driven”* – they come together when a funder requires a partnership and may not sustain beyond the project. Still, there are instances where donor pressure has nudged CSOs towards cooperation (for example, EU grant calls in Lebanon forced NGOs to form consortia to address the Syrian refugee crisis comprehensively, leading to broader networks that outlasted the funding period).

Looking forward, a major question is how Arab knowledge-producing CSOs can secure more autonomous funding. Some advocate for developing domestic philanthropy by engaging the wealthy Arab diaspora or Arab private foundations (several Gulf-based foundations, like the Asfari Foundation or Sawiris Foundation, have started funding independent research and civic projects). Others suggest social enterprise models: CSOs launching income-generating services related to their mission (e.g., a policy center offering paid trainings or consulting for socially responsible businesses). In a few countries, government grant programs for NGOs exist – Morocco has had mechanisms for state funding of certain associations, and Tunisia’s 2011 NGO law set up a fund – but taking government money can compromise independence and is rarely directed at critical work. A novel idea reconnects with Islamic traditions: reviving the concept of *awqaf* (endowments) for civic purposes. Historically, *waqf* trusts funded education and libraries in Muslim societies. Modern activists propose creating endowment funds whose yields could support research and advocacy in perpetuity, insulating them from political winds. This would require visionary donors and careful governance to ensure independence. While in the short term foreign funding will remain indispensable (especially in war-torn contexts where local resources are devastated), increasing local ownership of funding is seen as key to legitimacy and sustainability. As one Iraqi civil society leader commented, “if we had even 20% of our budget from local community contributions, the government couldn’t dismiss us so easily as ‘foreign agents’ – we would be rooted here.” Achieving that is challenging, but not impossible, especially as publics become more aware of the role civil society plays.

In sum, foreign donors have been both benefactors and inadvertent disruptors of the Arab knowledge ecosystem. They have injected needed resources and connected local CSOs to global knowledge circuits, often empowering voices that would otherwise be silenced. Yet they have also, at times, pulled CSOs into a transnational “aid economy” with its own imperatives and jargon, causing mission drift and dependency (Al Jayousi and Nishide 2023). The optimal scenario – donors supporting without dominating – has been elusive but not entirely absent. Some of the most impactful CSOs manage to skillfully “translate” donor support into locally grounded action,

effectively using foreign funds to achieve indigenous goals. These are typically organizations with strong leadership that can say no to misaligned projects and invest in their own institutional strength. They also practice financial transparency and diversify funding to avoid being at any single donor's mercy. The future of an autonomous knowledge ecosystem in the Arab world may well depend on expanding such models, finding a healthier balance where external assistance supplements rather than supplants local initiative. Until then, the tension between pleasing donors and serving communities will continue to shape what knowledge is produced and prioritized – a reality that any analysis of Arab civil society must contend with.

Impact of Technology on State–CSO Relations

Technology – particularly the rise of digital platforms and communication tools – has profoundly influenced the dynamics between Arab states and civil society since the Arab Spring. In 2011, social media and mobile technology were famously touted as catalysts for the uprisings, enabling activists to organize and disseminate information outside state control. Over the subsequent decade, both CSOs and regimes have harnessed digital tools in an evolving contest: on one hand, technology offers CSOs new avenues to produce, share, and archive knowledge, build networks, and mobilize support; on the other hand, states have developed sophisticated means of digital repression, including surveillance, censorship, and information warfare, to constrain online civic activity. This section explores how digital platforms have expanded or restricted CSO activities in the knowledge realm, the strategies of digital repression (surveillance, cyber laws, narrative control) employed by regimes, and ways technology has enabled alternative knowledge dissemination and advocacy even under authoritarian conditions. The story is one of a double-edged sword: the same tools that empower civil society also empower states, and the balance has shifted over time.

In the early 2010s, the advent of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and widespread smartphone adoption caught many Arab regimes flat-footed. Governments “seemed unable to respond effectively as activists and young people freely shared information...circumventing traditionally powerful state-controlled media” (Lynch 2022). This freedom to communicate enabled the documentation of human rights abuses and the rapid spread of protest calls. Citizen journalists and bloggers – often affiliated with CSOs or social movements – suddenly had platforms to reach mass audiences. Iconic examples include the videos of protests and crackdowns in Tunisia and Egypt that went viral globally, shaping narratives in real time. Digital platforms also hosted new independent media startups (e.g. *Hespress* in Morocco, *Syria Untold*, *Mada Masr* in Egypt) which blended reporting and research in innovative ways. For knowledge-centric CSOs, the digital space offered a way to publish reports without needing official newspapers or journals. An NGO could release a policy brief as a PDF on its website, share the link on social media, and

potentially have thousands read it – a far cry from earlier days when printing and distributing hard copies could be easily sabotaged by the state. Furthermore, social media allowed direct interaction with the public: organizations held Facebook live sessions to explain new laws, tweeted infographics of their findings, or used WhatsApp groups to disseminate citizen guides (for instance, guides on legal rights during protests circulated widely in 2011–2012). This period led some commentators to hail a coming era of digitally empowered civil society countering authoritarian information monopolies.

However, as the Al Jazeera essay by Haythem Guesmi trenchantly argues, *“ten years after the onset of the Arab revolutions, Facebook, Twitter, and Google have turned into powerful enablers of vast disinformation campaigns, harassment, censorship, and incitement of violence against activists...”*. Authoritarian regimes learned quickly and repurposed these very platforms for their own ends. One major facet of digital repression is surveillance. States invested in advanced spyware and monitoring systems to keep tabs on online dissent. The use of spyware like NSO Group’s *Pegasus* in the Middle East is well-documented – journalists and civil society figures from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and other countries have had their phones infected, enabling security agencies to read messages and listen in on calls. Emirati activist Ahmed Mansoor, for example, was targeted with Pegasus; he noted that finding spyware on his phone was *“as bad as someone encroaching in your living room...you begin to learn that maybe you shouldn’t trust anyone anymore”* (Lynch 2022). This kind of pervasive digital surveillance creates a climate of paranoia and self-censorship among CSO communities. Governments also exploit weaknesses in telecommunications: many require internet service providers to hand over user data or intercept communications. In some cases, states have simply shut down internet access at critical moments (Egypt’s complete internet blackout during the 2011 uprising being a notorious instance) to cut off coordination among activists – though such blunt tactics are used sparingly given the economic costs.

Another aspect is cyber legal control. Over the past decade, numerous Arab states passed cybercrime or anti-cyber-terrorism laws that criminalize a wide range of online expression. Jordan’s 2015 cybercrime law, for instance, has been used to arrest activists for social media posts under broad offences like “disturbing public order” (HRW 2022). The UAE’s cybercrime law has clauses against “spreading false information” that have landed online critics lengthy prison terms. These laws effectively extend existing repressive laws into the digital sphere, giving authorities tools to prosecute what people say on Facebook or Twitter as if it were published in print or spoken at a rally. Combined with extensive monitoring, such legislation means any CSO that publishes a critical piece or even an investigative report risks legal retaliation if it gains traction online. In Egypt, the 2018 cybercrime law empowered the state to block websites deemed a threat to national security; within months, countless NGO and independent media sites were inaccessible

inside Egypt. Thus, the once-open internet has become increasingly balkanized by state-imposed filters.

Perhaps the most insidious tactic is online propaganda and harassment, often via *“social media manipulation”* and orchestrated trolling (Lynch 2022). Authoritarian governments and their allies deploy armies of bots and loyalists on social platforms to drown out dissident voices and sow confusion. For example, researchers have documented how Saudi Arabia and the UAE ran influence operations on Twitter to discredit Qatari and Turkish narratives, or to delegitimize protest movements in countries like Libya and Sudan by spreading rumors. In domestic contexts, activists and CSOs frequently find themselves targeted by abusive online campaigns. Women activists in particular face threats and smear campaigns on social media, often mobilized by regime-affiliated accounts, aiming to intimidate them into silence. Over time, these tactics create what analysts call a *“hostile environment”* online, where genuine civic discourse is hard to distinguish from state-planted propaganda. The psychological toll leads many to disengage from public online conversations, a chilling effect noted in several reports. States also have contracted private firms to manage their online image – for instance, evidence emerged of firms running Facebook pages that masqueraded as grassroots forums but subtly pushed pro-regime narratives or attacked critics. Twitter’s 2019 purge of tens of thousands of fake accounts linked to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE revealed the scale of these covert operations. The net result is that digital public spheres in many Arab countries have become extensions of regime control, rather than liberation. Big Tech companies have been slow and uneven in responding to these abuses, and in some cases, they have even cooperated with regimes (knowingly or not) – such as Facebook’s opaque standards that sometimes led to over-removal of content from activists under the guise of moderating hate speech, or the notorious case of the ToTok app in the UAE, which turned out to be a government surveillance tool masquerading as a secure messaging app.

Despite the dark turn of digital repression, technology still provides avenues for resistance and alternative knowledge dissemination. CSOs and activists have adapted by improving their digital security (using encrypted apps like Signal, employing VPNs to bypass censorship, etc.). Tech-savvy groups train others in these tools, creating a community of practice around staying safe online. The diaspora and exile communities, in particular, leverage digital connectivity to remain involved. A Syrian civil society coalition in exile can hold a Zoom strategy meeting with colleagues inside Syria and global allies, something physically impossible. Cloud storage and collaborative platforms allow NGOs to preserve important data (like human rights archives) outside the reach of local raids or confiscation. Social media, while policed, is still leveraged in creative ways: activists launch hashtag campaigns that gain international trending, forcing global media to take note even if local state media is silent. One example is the #SaveSheikhJarrah campaign by Palestinian activists in 2021 that brought attention to evictions in East Jerusalem – its viral spread pressured even

hesitant Arab governments to address the issue publicly. Similarly, campaigns for political prisoners in Egypt and Saudi (e.g., #FreeAlaa for Alaa Abdelfattah in Egypt, or campaigns by ALQST for Saudi detainees) managed to break into international news via persistent online advocacy, despite being repressed domestically. These cases illustrate how transnational digital advocacy can amplify knowledge that regimes want suppressed – effectively routing around the points of control.

Digital platforms have also enabled the emergence of new voices and hybrid formats of knowledge production. Traditional CSOs are now supplemented by online collectives and citizen initiatives that may not be formal NGOs but contribute significantly to the knowledge ecosystem. For example, *Daftar Ahwal* in Lebanon is an online open-data initiative that crowdsources and visualizes government budget data for public use. In Egypt, anonymous Facebook pages have sometimes acted as whistleblowers, leaking documents or videos that investigative CSOs then analyze and publicize (albeit carefully). During the Iraq protests of 2019, Facebook live streams from Tahrir Square in Baghdad documented violence in real time, forcing officials to respond to evidence that would otherwise have been denied – essentially holding them accountable with digital proof. Such citizen-driven knowledge often feeds into the work of formal CSOs and media. The boundaries between producer, mediator, and user become blurred: a protester with a smartphone becomes a producer (filming an incident), social media is the mediator, and the public or international community becomes the immediate user of that knowledge – potentially then pressuring policy-makers.

The role of digital media as knowledge repositories is another plus. Online libraries, archives, and learning platforms in Arabic have grown. For instance, the *Rowaq Arabi* journal (published by CIHRS) made its archive of human rights research freely accessible online, significantly broadening its reach. MOOCs and webinars on civic topics proliferated in the late 2010s, often organized by regional networks or universities, effectively educating a new cohort of civil society actors via digital means. Technology thus helps circumvent the state's stranglehold on formal education curricula by providing alternate learning channels. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends: when physical meetings halted, CSOs moved seminars and trainings online, some reporting even higher attendance from diverse regions than in-person events could achieve. This demonstrated a resilience – activists quipped that while regimes could shut down streets or offices, “*they can't shut down a Zoom room as easily.*” Of course, states can interfere with internet or surveil those rooms, but widespread disruption of every online gathering is logistically and politically costly for regimes that also depend on the internet for economic functioning.

Digital technology has also introduced *new battlegrounds of narrative*. The concept of state-controlled narratives now extends to cyberspace: regimes invest in dominating trending topics, pushing sponsored content, and flooding platforms with their version of events. Yet the internet's

open nature means these narratives are contested in ways that traditional state media narratives (on TV or print) were not. A single well-researched Twitter thread by a respected local expert can undermine a government's false statistics by presenting incontrovertible evidence to an audience of thousands, including journalists and diplomats. We have seen examples such as Sudanese and Algerian activists during their 2019 protests using social media to fact-check and counter government claims immediately. These online truth-squads often draw from data collected by CSOs (e.g., statistical evidence of election fraud or documentation of casualties). In essence, technology gives civil society a toolkit for rapid response knowledge production – analyzing and broadcasting findings in near real-time, which is a new phenomenon compared to the slower report cycles of the past.

However, one cannot ignore the sobering reality that, as of the mid-2020s, many analysts conclude that regimes have largely won the digital battle in much of the Arab world. The initial euphoria of the "Facebook revolutions" has given way to the grim recognition that Big Tech platforms have become, or always were, profit-driven entities often willing to accommodate authoritarian demands (e.g., removing "anti-government" pages under vague community standards, or geo-blocking content). Activists now call for more regulation of these platforms, or alternative platforms, to ensure they cannot be so easily abused by dictatorships. The European Council on Foreign Relations in 2022 termed the Middle East's digital landscape an "Iron Net" of repression: an array of tools from spyware to AI-driven censorship are creating a next-generation authoritarianism. Civil society's counter, besides pleas for international tech governance, is to keep innovating – using technology's flexibility to stay a step ahead. This might mean migrating to new encrypted platforms as old ones become compromised, developing in-house technical expertise to detect and expose state hacks (as researchers did with ToTok in the UAE), and forming global coalitions to hold tech companies accountable for complicity in oppression. Notably, women and marginalized groups have used technology to carve spaces for themselves: Arab women activists have online networks for feminist knowledge exchange (closed Facebook groups or forums) that provide support and information outside patriarchal controls. These digital safe spaces have been crucial in sustaining movements like #MeToo in the Arab context or in documenting sexual harassment (e.g., Egypt's Assault Police Instagram account, which led to real legal action).

In conclusion, technology has radically transformed state–CSO relations: it opened a new frontier that initially advantaged civil society, then increasingly advantaged states, and now remains a contested domain. Digital platforms expanded CSOs' reach and enabled "*alternative knowledge dissemination and advocacy*" that was previously impossible – from live documentation of abuses to global solidarity campaigns. At the same time, regimes armed themselves with digital repression capabilities to an extent that some experts speak of "digital authoritarianism" becoming a core pillar of regime survival (Piovesan 2023). Surveillance and online harassment

have made the work of independent CSOs more dangerous and psychologically taxing, even as the internet provides them essential tools. The net effect is complex: in some countries, online civic space is heavily suppressed (e.g., nearly all prominent Saudi activists are either jailed or silenced despite being very active online before), whereas in others, activists manage to maintain a vigorous online presence (e.g., Kuwait and Lebanon still see robust online debate, albeit facing trolling and lawsuits). Importantly, digital repression often extends beyond borders – exiled activists are spied on or hacked by their home governments, showing that technology enables authoritarian reach into diaspora communities (Anstis and Deibert 2025). This has compelled closer cooperation between exiles and domestic activists in terms of security and strategy. Ultimately, technology neither guarantees liberation nor guarantees total control; it is an arena of struggle. As one study noted, these tools are “not a fair fight” – activists play catch-up with fewer resources. Yet the mere fact that a lone activist can still occasionally outwit a state online is testament to the power technology can confer on individuals and small groups. For the knowledge ecosystem, digital tools remain indispensable for research (open data, remote sensing, etc.), for dissemination (social media, blogs), and for networking (collaborative platforms). The hope is that continued innovation, combined with international pressure for digital rights, will keep carving out spaces where truth can be spoken to power, even if through encrypted whispers or bursts of hashtagged outrage. The lesson of the past decade is sobering but not fatalistic: technology has shifted advantage back and forth, and its story in the Arab world is still being written.

Conclusion

A decade and more after the Arab Spring, the knowledge ecosystem in the Arab world stands as a terrain of contestation between resilient civic actors and entrenched authoritarian regimes. This literature review has traced the thematic currents shaping this contest: the legal and coercive *mechanisms of control* by which states seek to regiment civil society knowledge production; the *emergence and adaptation* of secular CSOs through strategies like networking, legal acumen, and operating from exile; the fraught *interactions among knowledge producers, mediators, and users*, often hampered by mistrust and structural barriers; the double-edged influence of *foreign donors*, at once enabling vital work and complicating autonomy; and the transformative *impact of technology*, which has opened new frontiers for both empowerment and repression.

Several overarching insights emerge. First, the Arab state’s determination to manage and often suppress independent knowledge has, if anything, intensified in the post-2011 period. From Cairo to Rabat to Riyadh, authorities have promulgated laws and practices to supervise what CSOs can do, say, and even think. Civil society organizations that produce research or challenge official narratives are viewed through a security lens – seen not as partners in development, but as potential threats to regime stability. This securitization of knowledge is exemplified by moves like

Egypt's wholesale NGO crackdown, Jordan's micro-management of NGO funding, Morocco's curtailment of NGO legal standing, and the Gulf states' preemption of independent thought via state-sponsored "knowledge economy" initiatives that co-opt expertise. Yet, repression has not meant the elimination of civic knowledge. Paradoxically, the very pressures exerted by regimes have spurred CSOs to innovate and professionalize, forging new pathways to continue their missions. The review shows a sector that has been forced to become agile – much in the way a plant grows around obstacles toward sunlight, Arab knowledge organizations have reconfigured themselves to survive in narrower civic spaces. The coping strategies highlighted (relocation, re-registration, alliances, etc.) reveal a learning process within civil society, often aided by cross-border solidarity. In this, the role of women has been prominent, adding a gendered dimension to the knowledge ecosystem that challenges both patriarchy and authoritarianism from within.

Second, the flow of knowledge from civil society into public policy remains a critical weakness in most Arab states. A recurring theme is the *disconnect* between the robust analysis produced by CSOs and its uptake by rulers and institutions. Authoritarian governance, by its nature, is allergic to independent voices, leading to a tragic scenario where regimes may miss out on solutions to societal problems that civil society could offer, simply because those solutions come from unauthorized sources. The fragmentation between Arabic and English discourse further impedes a shared conversation on policy. Nonetheless, there are niches of engagement and examples of knowledge making a difference – often through indirect routes like international advocacy or via public pressure generated by media. The ecosystem thus functions, but sub-optimally; it is as if a rich library of knowledge exists in the country, but the decision-makers have locked the door to it. Improving the synergy between producers, mediators, and users of knowledge is a task that scholars and reformers identify as crucial for the region's future – one that requires both political will (to open up civic space) and cultural shifts (to value evidence-based debate over hierarchical decrees).

Third, external actors – donors and international networks – have significantly shaped the post-2011 knowledge landscape, for better and worse. Western and multilateral donors injected resources that made possible many of the CSO gains in capacity and output. Without this support, the burgeoning of think tanks, women's organizations, and advocacy groups after the Arab Spring would likely have been far more modest. Yet, with funding comes influence, and with influence comes friction. Many Arab CSOs operate in a delicate balance, leveraging donor assistance while trying to remain responsive to their communities and true to their missions. The literature underscores a need for donors to do no harm – to coordinate better, to reduce onerous conditions, to listen to local priorities, and to support core capacities rather than just short-term projects. Encouragingly, some adjustments in donor approaches have been noted (e.g., more flexible funding during COVID-19, support for coalition-building). Still, the quest for sustainability

looms large. As long as civil society's knowledge work is largely underwritten from abroad, regimes will exploit that fact to marginalize it. Building indigenous support – socially and financially – for knowledge CSOs is arguably the next great challenge if these organizations are to weather the long authoritarian winters that have set in after the Arab Spring autumn.

Finally, the digital revolution's impact on state–CSO relations has proven to be a marathon, not a sprint. If the Arab Spring was the sprint that showed the power of online mobilization, the ensuing decade was the marathon in which regimes and activists settled in for a long-term race. At present, regimes appear to have gained the upper hand in controlling digital space within their territories. However, the digital sphere by its nature cannot be completely sealed. Knowledge finds new routes to travel – whether through encrypted channels, diaspora voices, or next-generation platforms that emerge. Activists have, in a sense, been compelled to become tech-savvy, adding “digital security specialist” and “online journalist” to their repertoire of skills. The intersection of technology and civic activism will continue to define possibilities for dissent and reform in the Arab world. As one conference on the topic concluded, the future of civil society in the region will depend on “*who masters the new tools*” – the worry being that states have more resources to do so, but the hope being that youthful populations and global connectivity give civil society a fighting chance.

In wrapping up, it is clear that the knowledge ecosystem in the Arab states is dynamic and contested. The period post-Arab Spring has been one of two steps forward, one (or sometimes more) steps back. There have been notable gains in the breadth and sophistication of knowledge produced by Arab civil society – from detailed human rights documentation to serious policy research – much of it spearheaded by secular, locally-rooted organizations and often with women at the helm. These gains, however, operate under constant threat from state repression and are uneven across the region. Countries like Tunisia initially showed what a more open knowledge ecosystem could achieve (with think tanks influencing legislation, etc.), though recent reversals there under President Kais Saied cast uncertainty on that legacy. Elsewhere, in more closed states, even incremental cracks in the wall of censorship can be significant – for example, the continued existence of a few independent research centers in Morocco or Kuwait that manage to push the envelope on public discourse.

The literature reviewed paints neither an overly optimistic nor purely pessimistic picture, but rather a nuanced one: authoritarian regimes have proven adept at adaptation and continue to constrain civil society's role in knowledge, yet civil society has not been extinguished and continues to adapt in turn, driven by a genuine commitment of many activists and experts to seek truth and progress for their societies. As Mohammed Bamyeh's report on Arab social sciences observed, there is a tension between *universalism and specificity* in Arab knowledge (Jebbari 2016) – Arab intellectuals engage global ideas but also root them in local context and struggles. The post-2011 generation

of CSOs embodies this, connecting internationally (in methodology, funding, solidarity) while trying to remain relevant locally. They keep alive the hope that knowledge – rational, researched, critical knowledge – can someday play a guiding role in Arab governance, fulfilling the revolutionary chants for “bread, freedom, and social justice” with informed policies and an engaged citizenry.

In conclusion, the knowledge ecosystem after the Arab Spring has been a crucible testing the resilience of civil society and the ingenuity of authoritarianism. If the first decade is any indication, the struggle will persist. But knowledge has a way of seeping through cracks. As one Arab proverb says, “القوة الحق” (al-haqq fawq al-quwwa) – truth is above power. The CSOs and activists documented in this review, through their courage and adaptability, are keepers of that truth. They ensure that, even in the darkest times, there is evidence, memory, and analysis to light the path forward. The bibliography that follows, comprised of reports, studies, and voices from the region, stands as a testament to the rich body of knowledge that Arab civil society continues to produce against the odds. It is now up to both local actors and the international community to heed that knowledge and support its producers, for they are essential to any future where Arab societies are governed with accountability, transparency, and wisdom.

Conceptual Framework

Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge provides a critical foundation for understanding how knowledge is deeply embedded within and shaped by power structures. Foucault (1980) posits that power determines what is recognized as valid knowledge while simultaneously using that knowledge to sustain and legitimize existing systems of authority. This dynamic reveals a reciprocal relationship: power dictates the creation, dissemination, and acceptance of knowledge, while knowledge, in turn, reinforces the structures and norms through which power operates. In this way, regimes manipulate knowledge to maintain authority, suppress dissent, and define the boundaries of political and social acceptability. This relationship is particularly significant in understanding how regimes manage the knowledge-to-policy process, transforming knowledge into a tool of control.

Building on Foucault’s insights, Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) further underscores that knowledge is not an objective or neutral entity but is socially constructed within specific cultural, historical, and political contexts. These contexts shape and constrain the knowledge that is produced and disseminated, often aligning it with dominant ideologies and political interests. By constructing societal understanding in their favor, regimes embed their power within the seemingly apolitical domain of knowledge. Gramsci’s (1971) concept of cultural hegemony complements this perspective, illustrating how regimes not only use coercive

mechanisms but also shape ideological and cultural norms to legitimize their dominance. Through knowledge, regimes cultivate a shared worldview that makes their power appear natural and unchallengeable.

These theoretical underpinnings provide a framework to examine or unpack the different stages through which knowledge transitions into policy or power. Knowledge production, mediation, and utilization represent distinct but interconnected stages in this process. Knowledge creation involves generating evidence and insights; mediation entails interpreting and translating knowledge into actionable formats; and usage refers to embedding knowledge into policy decisions or broader socio-political actions.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the intermediaries and networks that facilitate these transitions. Bandola-Gill and Lyall (2022) underscore the pivotal role of knowledge brokers—individuals or institutions that act as intermediaries between knowledge producers and users. These brokers are tasked with interpreting, translating, and embedding knowledge into decision-making processes, ensuring that it is both relevant and actionable. Their effectiveness, however, is deeply influenced by the surrounding political and institutional context. In democratic settings with robust institutional frameworks, knowledge brokers may enjoy autonomy and wield considerable influence. Conversely, in authoritarian or fragile states, their functions are often constrained or co-opted to align with regime priorities, limiting their ability to operate independently.

Weber and Yanovitzky (2022) highlight the integral role of networks in facilitating the movement of knowledge through the stages of production, mediation, and usage. They argue that networks enable the exchange of knowledge by connecting diverse actors and fostering collaboration. However, the effectiveness of these networks depends on the broader policy ecosystem, which shapes how knowledge is shared and utilized. While Weber and Yanovitzky focus on the structural and relational aspects of networks, their insights suggest that network functionality can be hindered by contextual factors such as institutional capacity, policy priorities, and resource availability. This underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between networks, knowledge flows, and the environments in which they operate.

However, much of this recent scholarship assumes environments characterized by Western liberal democracies, where institutions—despite their imperfections—provide a relatively stable framework for the interplay of knowledge and power. In these contexts, democratic norms and civil society participation offer opportunities for pluralistic knowledge creation and mediation. Yet, there is a significant gap in examining how these processes unfold in regions marked by strong regimes and fragile institutions, such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In such contexts, knowledge creation, mediation, and usage often operate under the shadow of authoritarian

governance, where state control, institutional fragility, and constrained civic spaces profoundly shape knowledge systems.

Before we unpack these stages, we make a distinction between regimes and states so we can capture a nuanced relationship between states and regimes on the one hand the knowledge eco-system on the other hand. Following the work of Heydemann and Lynch (2024), it is imperative that we bring regime into the analysis especially due to its “centrality” in understanding Arab states. We define regimes as “rules, norms, and practices that structure politics”. The regime can impact the knowledge eco-system actors using state institutions like the police, judiciary, ministries, as well as through non-state governance mechanisms.

This framework explores how regimes and states, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, constrain each stage of the knowledge-to-policy process—Knowledge Production, Knowledge Mediation, and Knowledge Usage—to control the flow of information and influence policy outcomes. Here, the state is understood as the framework of interaction among knowledge users. In democratic contexts, the state fosters an inclusive, balanced policy process among diverse knowledge users. In authoritarian regimes, however, the state actively shapes, limits, or even engineers these interactions to maintain control over society and prevent opposition.

Based on the above, we develop a detailed analytical framework to examine the dynamic relationship between Arab regimes or states and civil society organizations involved in producing, mediating, and using knowledge. The framework identifies three interconnected stages within the knowledge ecosystem—knowledge production, mediation, and usage—and clarifies the primary actors occupying each stage. It also introduces a typology of mechanisms through which regimes strategically exert control, distinguishing between formal mechanisms enacted via state institutions and informal strategies employed outside official channels. This approach elucidates how authoritarian contexts shape the landscape within which civil society and other knowledge actors operate and influence policy outcomes.

The Knowledge Ecosystem: Stages and Actors

The knowledge ecosystem encompasses interdependent processes through which knowledge is created, disseminated, and utilized within society. The following sub-section defines each stage and maps out the profile of key actors.

1. *Knowledge Production*

Knowledge production is the foundational phase of the knowledge ecosystem involving systematic generation of data, empirical studies, policy analyses, and critical scholarship intended to inform policy formulation, societal behaviors, and political debates. The profile of the key actors are as follows:

- Academic Researchers and Independent Institutions: Universities, scholarly research centers, and independent analysts generating critical, empirical, or policy-oriented research.
- Civil Society Organizations (CSOs): Independent think tanks, advocacy NGOs, human rights organizations, and grassroots research initiatives that produce issue-based or advocacy-driven knowledge to inform public discourse or policy advocacy.
- Political Parties and Ideological Movements: Entities that produce explicitly ideological or politically motivated knowledge aimed at influencing policy agendas, mobilizing supporters, or validating political narratives.
- Consultancies and Professional Research Firms: Commercial research entities contracted by governments, international organizations, or private firms, producing targeted and tailored knowledge, often framed to meet specific policy or business interests.

2. *Knowledge Mediation*

Knowledge mediation involves the interpretation, translation, packaging, and dissemination of research and knowledge outputs to broader societal actors, including policymakers and the general public. Effective mediation makes knowledge accessible, relevant, and actionable in policy contexts. The profile of the key actors are as follows:

- Media Organizations: Both independent media outlets offering critical or alternative narratives and state-controlled media that propagate regime-sanctioned messages.
- Advocacy Organizations and NGOs: Civil society actors strategically translating complex knowledge into advocacy campaigns, educational initiatives, and policy recommendations designed to influence public opinion and policy agendas.

- Journalists, Bloggers, and Policy Advisors: Individuals who distill, interpret, and frame research findings to enhance public awareness, shape policy discourses, or advocate policy reform.
- Knowledge Brokers: Institutions or specialized individuals explicitly tasked with facilitating knowledge flows between producers and users, ensuring knowledge translation meets the practical needs of policymakers or other stakeholders.

3. *Knowledge Usage*

Knowledge usage refers to the integration of mediated knowledge into concrete policy decisions, administrative actions, political strategies, and broader societal practices. This stage determines the extent to which knowledge meaningfully informs or influences policy outcomes and social change. The profile of the key actors are as follows:

- Government Policymakers and Officials: Decision-makers within state institutions utilizing mediated knowledge to inform, justify, or legitimize policy choices.
- Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Unions: Organized entities employing mediated knowledge to support advocacy, advance political interests, or influence policy debates and outcomes.
- Social Movements and Grassroots Activists: Civil society groups and networks leveraging knowledge to mobilize collective action, demand policy change, or push for accountability and reform.
- International Actors (Donors, Foreign Governments, International Organizations): External stakeholders who shape domestic policy agendas through targeted funding, conditional assistance, policy advocacy, and technical cooperation.
- Broader Public and Citizen Groups: General societal actors whose behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, and political actions are shaped directly or indirectly by accessible mediated knowledge.

Typology of Regime-State Mechanisms of Control

Arab regimes influence the knowledge ecosystem through both formal and informal mechanisms. The following typology, which is based on findings from interviews with knowledge producers across the Arab region, differentiates clearly between mechanisms enacted through formal state institutions and informal mechanisms enacted by regimes outside formal state channels:

The four formal mechanisms enacted through state institutions include the following: First, legal-institutional measures such as laws and bureaucratic regulations governing NGO registration, research permissions, media licenses, and censorship rules explicitly designed to restrict

independent knowledge actors. Second, economic-financial mechanisms also play a critical role, where formal state-controlled financial restrictions, selective resource allocations, funding regulations, or economic incentives are strategically used to influence behaviors and limit the independence of civil society organizations. Third, ideological-discursive mechanisms involve the dissemination of official state narratives through educational curricula, state media, and governmental campaigns aimed at legitimizing regime authority, marginalizing oppositional voices, and reinforcing conformity among the public. Fourth, coercive-repressive mechanisms include formal state repression characterized by surveillance by state security institutions, judicial persecution, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and violent actions targeting individuals and organizations engaged in critical or independent knowledge production, mediation, and usage.

Moreover, the four informal mechanisms enacted by regimes outside state channels involve the following: First, informal-network (co-optation) mechanisms, where regime-affiliated networks use patronage, selective financial or political rewards, and informal privileges to co-opt independent actors, effectively neutralizing or redirecting their efforts away from regime-critical knowledge production. Second, informal intimidation and threats, such as unofficial harassment, informal surveillance by regime proxies, and threats by non-state affiliated groups (including regime-backed militias and influential local elites), induce widespread self-censorship and compliance among knowledge actors. Third, informal ideological-discursive mechanisms leverage informal religious, cultural, or social authorities to delegitimize independent knowledge producers, framing them as threats, traitors, or external agents, thus marginalizing critical discourse. Fourth, social engineering and informal organizational creation involve the establishment of informal, regime-supported organizations, media outlets, or forums that mimic genuine public participation, diluting and marginalizing the influence of independent civil society.

How are the mechanisms operationalized across stages?

This section operationalizes how Arab regimes and states strategically deploy both formal (state-based) and informal (regime-based) control mechanisms within the knowledge ecosystem's distinct yet interconnected stages—Knowledge Production, Mediation, and Usage. Each stage is analyzed in detail, demonstrating clearly how these mechanisms influence actors and dynamics within the ecosystem. Across these three interconnected stages, regimes strategically employ formal and informal mechanisms to shape the knowledge ecosystem. Constraints imposed in the Knowledge Production stage reduce the pool of critical, independent knowledge. At the Knowledge Mediation stage, regimes further limit dissemination and public exposure to independent knowledge. Finally, in the Knowledge Usage stage, regimes systematically ensure that mediated knowledge supports established interests, marginalizing critical voices and limiting

the transformative potential of evidence-based policymaking. Table 2 synthesizes the formal and informal mechanisms across the knowledge ecosystem.

1. *Knowledge Production*

Arab regimes strategically influence knowledge production through both formal and informal mechanisms, significantly shaping the scope and independence of research activities within society. Formal mechanisms implemented through state institutions include restrictive legal frameworks, targeted economic control measures, and coercive practices such as surveillance

and judicial persecution. Informal mechanisms involve co-optation via regime-affiliated networks, intimidation tactics, and ideological marginalization to discourage independent or critical research.

Formal Mechanisms

Legal-Institutional Mechanisms: Regimes utilize formal state legislation such as restrictive NGO registration laws, mandatory approvals for research topics, and stringent regulations regarding international collaboration. These laws impose bureaucratic burdens and legal vulnerabilities on independent researchers, academics, and civil society organizations. Violations, often ambiguously defined, result in sanctions, closures, or severe legal penalties, discouraging independent knowledge production on politically sensitive issues.

Economic-Financial Mechanisms: State authorities explicitly manage resource distribution through selective allocation or withholding of state funding, grants, or subsidies. Financial support often privileges research institutions and think tanks aligned with regime narratives, economically marginalizing critical research institutions, and reducing their capacity to produce independent analysis.

Coercive-Repressive Mechanisms: Formal state coercion manifests through surveillance conducted by state security institutions, interrogation of researchers or activists, judicial harassment, and legal persecution under national security or defamation laws. Prominent scholars or civil society researchers who produce politically critical work risk imprisonment, fines, or harassment, creating a broader climate of self-censorship.

Informal Mechanism

Informal Co-optation: Informal patronage networks or regime-affiliated elites use personal relationships and informal incentives—such as access to decision-makers, informal privileges, or preferential financial treatment—to co-opt independent researchers or institutions. This reduces

critical analysis and redirects research agendas toward regime-friendly topics, limiting independent knowledge production.

Informal Intimidation and Threats: Regime proxies, informal security actors, or affiliated militias issue informal warnings, threats, or intimidation aimed at independent knowledge producers. Such actions induce widespread self-censorship and compel researchers to avoid topics viewed as politically sensitive or threatening to regime interests.

Informal Ideological Marginalization: Informal religious, cultural, or social authorities affiliated with regime interests publicly label critical or independent knowledge producers as traitors, agents of foreign influence, or threats to national unity, thus isolating and delegitimizing their research within society.

2. Knowledge Mediation

Arab regimes utilize a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to control the mediation of knowledge, critically shaping the dissemination and framing of information within society. Formal mechanisms employed by state institutions include restrictive laws, targeted economic strategies, and direct coercive actions aimed at media outlets and advocacy groups. Conversely, informal mechanisms involve the creation of regime-aligned platforms, subtle intimidation tactics, and ideological campaigns designed to marginalize independent mediators.

Formal Mechanisms

Legal-Institutional Mechanisms: State institutions enforce strict media licensing requirements, censorship laws, digital content regulation, and restrictive NGO communication policies. Media outlets face closure, fines, or prosecution for disseminating unauthorized information or independent narratives, directly constraining critical mediation of knowledge.

Economic-Financial Mechanisms: State-controlled economic mechanisms allocate advertising revenue, subsidies, and state-funded media contracts selectively, favoring regime-aligned media entities while economically marginalizing independent media outlets, advocacy groups, and knowledge brokers, severely limiting their influence.

Coercive-Repressive Mechanisms: Formal state repression involves surveillance, judicial persecution, arbitrary arrests, detention, or physical violence targeting journalists, bloggers, media professionals, and advocacy NGOs who disseminate critical information. Such coercion restricts independent mediation channels and generates fear among knowledge mediators.

Informal Mechanisms

Informal Creation of Regime-Aligned Mediation Platforms: Regimes establish informal media networks, online influencers, advocacy groups, and NGOs ostensibly independent but informally affiliated or funded by regime proxies. These groups strategically dominate mediation platforms, marginalize authentic independent voices, and flood public discourse with regime-friendly narratives.

Informal Intimidation of Mediators: Regimes deploy informal threats or harassment through proxies, local elites, or unofficial militias to pressure journalists and NGOs into self-censorship or silence. Such informal coercion creates uncertainty and risk around critical mediation, limiting dissemination of alternative narratives.

Informal Ideological Campaigns: Informal social, religious, or ideological networks delegitimize independent media and advocacy groups as culturally or morally suspect, foreign-funded, or politically dangerous. Informal discursive marginalization reduces public trust in independent mediators and marginalizes critical voices.

3. Knowledge Usage

Arab regimes shape knowledge usage through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms, influencing how knowledge informs policies and societal change. Formal mechanisms, executed via state institutions, include legal barriers excluding critical actors from policy discussions, selective economic funding ensuring regime alignment, and ideological campaigns that justify existing policies and marginalize alternatives. Informally, regimes employ social engineering to create regime-friendly civil society organizations, utilize patronage networks to co-opt influential societal figures, and leverage ideological marginalization to delegitimize independent knowledge users.

Formal Mechanisms

Legal-Institutional Mechanisms: State structures formally exclude critical or independent actors from policy deliberation platforms, advisory councils, or public hearings. Institutional rules deliberately limit participation to regime-approved groups, ensuring controlled and predictable policy outcomes.

Economic-Financial Mechanisms: Selective state funding of political parties, unions, think tanks, and civil society organizations ensures regime alignment in knowledge utilization. Regime-

aligned entities gain disproportionate economic and political influence, effectively crowding out independent policy recommendations.

Ideological-Discursive Mechanisms: State media outlets, educational curricula, and official policy campaigns shape public discourse to justify existing regime policies, legitimizing state authority and marginalizing critical policy alternatives. State-sponsored narratives constrain knowledge usage to reinforce regime legitimacy rather than foster meaningful societal or political change.

Informal Mechanisms

Social Engineering and Creation of Pro-Regime Civil Society: Regimes informally establish pseudo-civil society groups, councils, or unions loyal to regime interests to simulate genuine societal engagement. These informal entities control and shape policy debates, crowding out authentic civil society participation and ensuring outcomes favorable to regime stability.

Informal Patronage Networks (Co-optation): Regimes selectively empower loyal civil society leaders, intellectuals, and union representatives with informal economic incentives, political influence, or privileged access to policymakers. This informal co-optation directs knowledge usage toward reinforcing regime legitimacy and suppresses critical advocacy.

Informal Ideological Marginalization: Regime-affiliated informal authorities (cultural, religious, local elites) label independent knowledge users—such as critical political parties, unions, or civil activists—as illegitimate, unpatriotic, or socially disruptive, marginalizing their policy proposals and limiting their societal impact.

Table 2: Mechanisms across the knowledge ecosystem

Mechanism Type	Knowledge Production	Knowledge Mediation	Knowledge Usage
Formal Mechanisms			
Legal-Institutional	Restrictive NGO laws, research approvals	Media licensing, censorship, digital content regulation	Exclusion from policy deliberations and public hearings
Economic-Financial	Selective funding and resource allocation	Selective media funding and subsidies	Selective funding of aligned groups and think tanks
Ideological-Discursive	Official narratives and educational curricula	Official state media narratives	State-sponsored narratives legitimizing policy choices
Coercive-Repressive	Surveillance, judicial harassment, imprisonment	Surveillance, arrests, violence against journalists	
Informal Mechanisms			
Informal-Network (Co-optation)	Patronage networks, informal incentives	Creation of regime-aligned media and advocacy platforms	Patronage and informal privileges for loyal civil society
Informal Intimidation and Threats	Threats, harassment by proxies	Threats and harassment of journalists and NGOs	
Informal Ideological Marginalization	Labeling critical actors as foreign agents, traitors	Delegitimizing independent media and advocacy groups	Marginalizing policy proposals and critical activists
Social Engineering and Informal Organizational Creation		Creation of pseudo-independent mediation entities	Creation of pro-regime civil society groups and councils

This framework which unpacks the knowledge eco-system serves to develop and test hypotheses in different countries, sectors, and periods. It allows us to identify the key actors in each of the three phases and assess the mechanisms through which the regime, the state or the regime through the state can impact the knowledge produced, mediated, and used in a specific context. Through this framework, we seek to examine four streams of work that needs to be further explored:

The first stream is how regimes through state institutions affect or shape the actors that produce, mediate, or use knowledge. Regimes may not necessarily constrain all the actors across the knowledge value chain. Hence, we need to examine, for instance, under what conditions do they constrain the work of knowledge mediators and users but not knowledge producers.

The second stream is how regimes through non-state institutions shape the work of the actors across the knowledge value chain. In this instance, how do regimes challenge the actors in the value chain through other means.

The third stream focuses on how the actors across the knowledge value chain are operating to fulfill their respective work considering the constraining conditions set by the regime and the state.

The fourth stream of work is how these actors within and across each of the phases interact with each other.

A Way Forward for Effective Knowledge Production in the Arab Region

To build a more effective knowledge ecosystem in the Arab region, collaborative action among civil society organizations (CSOs), local institutions, and international stakeholders is essential. Addressing the constraints posed by formal state controls and informal regime practices requires strategic responses focused on localization of knowledge agendas, strengthening mediation capacities, ensuring sustainable funding, and reinforcing holistic security measures.

1. **Localization of Knowledge Agendas** CSOs and international stakeholders should prioritize research agendas that reflect local priorities and realities. This involves supporting participatory processes to define research questions and fostering community-driven initiatives. Building local analytical capacities through tailored training, mentorship, and culturally relevant methodologies ensures that research remains credible, impactful, and resilient to external pressures.
2. **Strengthening Knowledge Mediation** Given the constraints from state censorship and informal marginalization, enhancing knowledge dissemination and mediation is critical. CSOs should strengthen their capacities in strategic communication and advocacy to effectively convey complex research findings. Partnerships with independent media and proactive outreach strategies will amplify voices that are otherwise marginalized, ensuring that valuable insights reach policymakers and the broader public.

3. Sustainable Funding and Institutional Resilience Sustainable, long-term funding from diverse sources is crucial for CSOs to transition from survival mode to strategic institutional development. Predictable funding facilitates planning, talent retention, and organizational stability. CSOs are encouraged to form strategic coalitions and networks that enhance collective resilience and increase their capacity to withstand external pressures from regimes.
4. Security and Protection In the context of ongoing surveillance, legal persecution, and informal intimidation, security must be a priority for CSOs and their supporters. Organizations should develop comprehensive security protocols, including digital safety and risk management training. Establishing rapid-response support networks, legal aid, and international solidarity channels will provide necessary protections to sustain independent knowledge production and advocacy efforts.

By implementing these strategies, CSOs and international partners can jointly cultivate a robust, autonomous, and impactful knowledge ecosystem, effectively countering existing challenges in the Arab region.

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2. Civil society trajectories after 2011: How has the Arab Spring impacted civil society dynamics in the MENA region

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Introduction

When reflecting on the last decade, it's clear to see that the Arab Spring¹ is far from over. The popular uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, coupled with ongoing political and socio-economic tensions across the region, show that no political equilibrium has been found.

However, while the Arab Spring is not over, the moment of 2011 is. As beautiful as it might have been, it would be a mistake for internal and external actors in the region to remain stuck in that moment. Seeking to understand changes in the region through the same lens of the pre 2011 era, as if nothing has changed over the last decade, would be a mistake. The Arab Spring in its two waves has brought about far-reaching transformations to state institutions, political actors as well as to dynamics within civil society. One cannot study civil society in the MENA region with the same tools of the pre-2011 era. Many deep transformations have taken place since then, including the very composition of civil society itself after 2011.

While civil society influenced the waves of the Arab Spring, the Arab Spring has also influenced civil society, and its dynamics in many ways. This impact needs to be analyzed to come up with new conceptual tools to make sense of these new dynamics and to foresee their future paths. This research study main aim is to understand how the Arab Spring in its two waves has influenced civil society in the MENA region. What new tools must be used to understand these changes? What recommendations can be made in this regard to donor agencies?

This research covers six main cases. Two cases belonging to the first wave of the Arab Spring (Egypt and Tunisia), and two other cases belonging to the second wave where sectarian regimes have been challenged by protesters (Lebanon and Iraq), and two cases that were to a certain extent immune to deep political transformations (Morocco and Jordan).

The paper is divided into 3 main parts, in addition to the conclusion and the recommendations. The first part offers a review of literature on civil society in the MENA region and the question of political change. While the second part analyzes the main characteristics of the Arab civil society after the Arab Spring. And the third part discusses new dynamics/ challenges facing civil society in the post 2011 phase. Methodologically, the paper has relied on more than 50 in depth interviews with civil society groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, and Jordan, as well as on participant observations whenever that was possible, in addition to previous research on the topic.

Civil Society and democracy in the MENA region: a literature review

Literature on the third wave of democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe highlighted the role of civil society as an important actor leading to transitions to democracy.² Hence, and based on this argument, many have argued that international donors should encourage the development of civil society in the MENA region in order to allow for democratization to take place.³ Along such an approach, international organizations encouraged states benefiting from their support to ensure cooperation between government and non-governmental agencies. As a result, an influx of civil society actors emerged in the MENA over the last four decades.⁴

However, despite the huge increase in civil society organizations in most of the MENA authoritarian countries since the 1980s, these countries haven't seen a transition towards democracy, as it was predicted. This puzzle captured the attention of scholars interested in political transformation in the MENA, leading them to wonder how these authoritarian regimes survived the presence of civil society organizations, unlike the case with old regimes of the third wave of democratization. In their answer to this question, researchers have shown how political regimes in the region used a corporatist strategy according to which business associations, labor movements, non-governmental organizations and charity groups are all coopted into state institutions. As argued by Sean Yom, the expansion of the associational sector in the MENA region was more a function of autocratic rulers' strategy of controlled liberalization and not a means of empowering societies⁵. Along the same line, Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac examined civil society in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, and Lebanon, and they showed how authoritarian

constraints structure civil society dynamics in the region in ways that strengthens rather than weakens authoritarianism⁶.

However, with the of Arab Uprisings in its two waves in 2011 and 2019, the debate over the role of civil society in transitions to democracy has come back to the front after a decade of criticism. While previous research correctly accounted for the mechanisms that prevented traditional civil society groups from mounting a significant challenge to authoritarian regimes in the MENA, this same research failed to account for unconventional forms of civil activism that played an important role in popular mobilization during the Arab Spring.

By focusing solitary on traditional civil society groups, this trend in the literature failed to understand changes within societies in the MENA leading to the Arab Spring. Hence, there was a need to redefine the concept of civil society to include what Cavatorta calls "alternative dynamics of activism that remained somewhat hidden"⁷, or what Benoit Challand describe as the "counter-power of civil society" to describe civil society initiatives that don't belong necessarily to the organized form of civil society. Through a comparative analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Palestine, Libya, Iraq and Syria, Challand argues that what we have witnessed in 2011 is the emergence of the counter-power of civil society in which the invocation of a new political imaginary has been a powerful weapon in dislodging autocratic regimes⁸.

What's new about civil society after 2011

There are plenty of new modes of engagement that challenged authoritarian regimes in the region, ranging from individual writings to mass participation to non-political events to artistic expression. While much research analyzed the organized presence and role of civil society, little attention was paid to analyzing unconventional forms of civic and political participation, especially by young people, and the impact of such initiatives on political transformations. And even if political transitions in all Arab Spring countries failed, one cannot ignore new realities about civil society, and how the Arab Spring impacted its dynamics in the post 2011 era.

Informal forms of civil society

According to recent studies, young people worldwide are more likely to engage with unconventional initiatives like developing virtual civil society, protest movements, participating in demonstrations or crowd funding than traditional forms of civil initiatives⁹. Youth in the MENA region are no exception to this rule. These alternative forms of activism were discussed in an edited volume on *Youth in the Arab World and Non-traditional Means of Participation from Virtual Spaces to the Revolution* in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, and Bahrain. The different chapters in

the book argue that repression in these different cases has created non-traditional means to resist it. While Arab youth sought refuge in virtual spaces to avoid state repression, the Arab Spring showed how this type of virtual activism transformed overnight into street activism¹⁰.

The Arab Spring and its aftermath highlighted the need to offer a new definition for civil society that include this new type of non-traditional means of participation. Nadine Sika offers a definition that brings traditional and non-traditional actors. According to Sika, civil society in the MENA region include three main categories. The first is informal networks of university students, youth campaigns and unemployed youth. The second category is non-governmental organizations, which include community based and faith-based organizations. The third is political organizations, which include political actors such as political parties or foundations sponsored by the state. The first category is the one that establishes new and unconventional methods of civic and political participation, while the second and third categories are the ones that work closely with state institutions and are largely dominated by political regimes¹¹.

Sean Yom, like Sika, underlines the importance of including informal forms of civil society when defining civil society in the MENA after the Arab Spring. In the past, civil society referred to formal organizations and groups with established leadership, hierarchical infrastructure, financial sustenance, and an ideological affinity. However, following these same criteria in defining civil society in the MENA region after 2011 would be misleading. Yom argues that we must free ourselves from this "formal, and mostly western driven, definition of civil society" to be able to capture "a far more complex and promising" picture of civil society in the MENA region, or what he calls "hidden spaces of resistance not captured by the formal sector"¹².

However, despite the need to focus on the role of these new civil movements, one should not ignore the interaction between these new initiatives and the traditional ones during the Arab Spring, in particular, human rights associations. In Morocco for example, civil society associations opened their offices for the 20th of February movement to meet. In fact, it was at the headquarters of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights that youth of the February 20 Movement held a press conference on 17 February 2011 during which they announced their list of demands¹³.

Also, while acknowledging this impact of these "newcomers" that came with the Arab Spring, one should not ignore the more traditional components of civil society, including the coopted civil society organizations that dominated the scene before 2011. As one Lebanese civil society activist puts it:

One shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking about civil society as a group of progressive individuals. In Lebanon, there is all these association connected to the Lebanese Phalangists or to Hezbollah. They are also considered as part of the civil society in the country¹⁴.

In other cases, political regimes created their own civil society organizations. As explained by the founder of a Moroccan women association:

The work of associations in Morocco has been greatly affected since the launch of what was called the National Initiative for Human Development, where the state worked through its various institutions to create a stream of associations to benefit from the program's funding and to direct them in the process of selecting activities and spending operations in a way that ensures the continuity of the *Makhzen* (deep state) structure of society and guarantees rent and corruption for the servants of the regime through the funding provided to associations and cooperatives.¹⁵

This is also the case in Egypt, where the regime created the National Alliance for Civil and Development Work (NACDW). Although the NACDW Law was only issued in August 2023, the activity and official establishment of this alliance preceded the issuance of the law by about a year and a half, as the alliance was launched, and its activities began in March 2022 with a membership of 34 charitable institutions in all governorates of Egypt¹⁶.

New generation of civil society activists

This informal sector of civil society discussed previously has flourished during the years of the Arab Spring creating a new generation of civil society activists that are likely to have deep impact on civil society dynamics during the post 2011 phase.

Mohammed Agati argues that after the decline in the intensity of the popular mobilizations in the region, a qualitative and structural change was observed in the structure of civil society, as a significant portion of members of these popular mobilizations joined civil society organizations. The impact of youth coming from waves of popular mobilization on the capabilities of these organizations is evident, as they not only gave these organizations the spirit of youth with its initiative and enthusiasm but also brought community experiences from the field. These new memberships did not only engage through existing organizations but also established their new organizations. In Tunisia for example, this new generation of actors created their own initiatives, in many cases also refusing to engage with the traditional organizations of civil society. One may say that a "new" civil society in the region established new structures and organizations that went beyond the pre 2011 traditional civil society activities¹⁷.

This new generation of civil society activists could be also seen in cases that were not part of the Arab Spring, as is the case in Morocco for example. According to Asmaa Falhi, after 2011, strong popular movements of a regional and territorial nature emerged, based in the historically marginalized areas of Morocco, carrying demands for social justice, the right to share wealth, and

to social development. These movements can be considered a continuation of the February 20 movement. One could argue that the February 20 movement constituted a space for learning and networking that made it possible to select local leadership independent of all forms of traditional political organization¹⁸. The political opening that followed the 20 February movement in Morocco offered a good environment for civil society to work. Moroccan civil society groups refer to it as "the democratic margin" after 20 February. According to the executive director of a research institute that seeks to offer space for debates and dialogue among youth:

The February 20 movement in Morocco came in the wake of the Arab Spring events, calling for constitutional and judicial reform, and we found ourselves at the heart of its demands. Likewise, the reform process that Morocco witnessed after these events was responsive to these demands, which we had been researching and discussing before February 20. However, perhaps after February 20, we had more room to work, given that the discussion became more open regarding these issues, and many young people participated in the forums and meetings organized by the center¹⁹.

This same point is shared by a Tunisian environmental activist who argues that the wave of freedom after 2011 allowed civil society in Tunisia to prosper. "Our popular mobilization transformed into a new environment. Our organization, and many others, were established during this phase"²⁰.

In Lebanon as well, popular mobilization opened a room for youth to explore and join civil society initiatives. That was stressed by the founder of a civil society organization in Tripoli in reference to the October 2019 uprising at Al-Nour square in Tripoli. The uprising offered civil society the opportunity to engage with its own local society without restrictions:

We saw young people interested in attending discussions, like for example at the tents in Al-Nour square. It has become a safe space for young people to join and know more about their rights. That was a positive change. Youth became aware they are citizens, and they have a role to play...they became more aware of the importance of their participation in political and social debates.²¹

This new generation of civil society activists in the region has three main characteristics, that distinguish it from older generations: first is the strong presence of women, second is their political position outside traditional polarizations, and third is its transnational character.

one main characteristic of this new generation of civil society activists is the **growing presence of women** among it. Within this new generation of civil society activism, there is a noticeable increase in the number of female activists involved in civil society organizations in countries that did not have high rates of women in this field. Unlike previous episodes of popular mobilization,

women have been present in all squares of the Arab Spring countries, leading one researcher to call it "the Arab Feminist Spring", with the visible and remarkable role women, young and old, Muslim and Christian, religiously conservative and liberal, veiled and unveiled, rich and poor, are playing ²².

This phenomenon has continued with the second wave of the Arab Spring in 2019. In Iraq for example, women played an important role during the October 2019 uprising. According to an Iraqi feminist activist: "There is before and after 2019. Women today play an important role in civil society. they established their own organizations"²³.

The director of an Iraqi women association stressed the same point:

Our organization was in the squares with others in 2012, as well as during sit-ins in 2016, and of course during the 2019 revolt... We took advantage of these moments of popular mobilization to convince protesters to adopt women demands. In 2019, protesters called for general demands for all Iraqis. With the continuation of the *Hirak*, we had an influence. We start seeing signs like "women's voice is not to be ashamed of" , as well as signs calling for laws to punish domestic violence...We helped introducing a feminist path to this popular mobilization...The outcome to us became clear when we witnessed the first feminist march on 13 March 2020...we helped increasing the awareness of women rights among protesters...We noticed an increase in the voting for women candidates after the October 2019 uprising. For example, in the conservative city of *Nasriyah*, one female candidate won with 28000 votes. These votes came from October 2019 *Hirak*.²⁴

A second characteristic of this generation is **their positioning outside polarization lines**, be it political (secular versus Islamic) or sectarian (Sunni versus Shia or Christian versus Muslim). As argued by the director of regional research institute that works with a network of young Arab youth in different countries, this generation is "less constrained of both organizational and ideological constraints and are more able to communicate across ideological lines" ²⁵unlike the older generation of Arab civil society activists.

In Iraq and Lebanon, this generation that joined the October 2019 uprisings rejected sectarian politics in both countries. One of the main slogans in Tahrir Square in Bagdad was "We want a Homeland" against the sectarian political regime that ruled Iraq since 2003. In Lebanon as well, as argued by Turkmani, The October 2019 uprising electrified public discourse and carved spaces for alternative political imagination on collective care, resistance, professional associations, and people-led demands. These spaces moved beyond the 8 March and 14 March dichotomies²⁶. According to a Lebanese activist from Saida, quoted in Turkmani, "The mass protests did

something very powerful. It brought us together and allowed us to imagine an alternative world; a world of togetherness, one not destined to doom and sectarianism."²⁷

Similarly in Egypt and Tunisia, these youth refused to fall into the secularist- Islamist polarization. They insisted on defending democratic values, regardless of the identity of regime in power. As argued by one Tunisian human rights activist:

Before 25 July [2011] we always defended the right to protest and to peaceful assembly... Those who were previously in power before Kais Saied [Ennahda] used to blame us for protesting the state, and they used to call us saboteurs. Now that things have changed, and they are no longer in power, they are supporting the same people they used to criticize before. They used to call us saboteurs and agents for foreign powers, today they support us and appreciate our work to defend freedom²⁸.

The third characteristic of this new generation of civil society activists is their strong **transnational character**. This new generation has known a high level of mutual influence among youth in the different countries in the MENA region. These external linkages make old notions of civil society, with their strongly domestic flavor, antiquated²⁹.

Such a characteristic had a positive impact during the first year of the Arab Spring. The popular mobilization in Tunisia inspired other groups in the region to follow the same path. Protesters learned tactics of political resistance across borders. However, the failure of the Arab Spring in one country has also impacted civil society activism in other countries. The setbacks of some experiences, as is the case in Syria, Yemen and Libya, had a negative impact on the activity and discourse of civil society in other cases as is the case in Jordan for example. In the context of the Arab Spring, large protests erupted in Jordan since its beginning. Protests took various forms influenced by the patterns of protests in Arab countries, from sit-ins and peaceful marches to workers strikes, and broad expressions on Facebook and other websites, and the formation of youth and political movements that issue their positions through statements and direct speeches to the King, and submit proposals and recommendations for seminars, workshops, and meetings. However, the fall of countries such Libya and Syria into civil wars, has led civil society groups in Jordan to fear the consequences of radical political change in the kingdom. Some youth activists have become fearful of the consequences of stirring too much unrest at a time when over a million Syrian refugees are straining public resources, military interventions against the Islamic State have begun to cost Jordanian money and lives, and the entire Levant seems ready to collapse inwards upon its colonial borders.

The Arab Spring didn't last for long, as argued by many civil society groups in all cases covered by this study. Most of them complains about the increasing state control in recent years.

Nonetheless, despite its political failure, and the return of authoritarian policies, the Arab Spring has created new forms of civil action, as well as a new generation of civil society activists in the MENA region.

Anwar Mhajne argues that restrictions in recent years do not necessarily make civil society in the region irrelevant. Civil society groups played a vital role in shaping grassroots responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in different countries of the MENA. These groups continue to be integral to efforts to improve their communities' economic and social conditions, even though the space in which they operate continues to shrink³⁰. Along with the same argument, Khaled Hroub argues that the future of the region will be shaped by the outcome of the conflict between two forms of resilience: a bottom-up resilience of organized political opposition and civic activism shaping up in various familiar or novel forms, and a top-down authoritarian resistance reinventing itself at local and regional level. Hroub argues that, if we have learned something from the last decade, it's "the enormous and renewed capacities of the people despite all repressive odds internally and shameful neglect externally". The Arab Spring has created structures and agents that are likely to impact the future of the region. As stressed by Hroub, "the resilience of Arab civil society, its manifestations, inherent energies, sudden and surprising moves and creativity of its youth has certainly become part of that future."³¹

Challenges in the post Arab Spring era

The post Arab Spring phase has brought new challenges and dynamics to civil society in the region. We mapped three main challenges connected to three levels: to the society, to the state, and to politics.

Relation to Society: Crisis of Legitimacy

Civil society organizations, particularly those defending social and political rights, played an important role in the Arab Spring in both its first and second wave. In most of these cases, counterrevolution forces tried to discredit the work of civil society organizations in the region as being funded by "the West" to drive Arab societies into chaos. Many civil society activists referred to this issue in interviews as "diabolizing the civil society". The fall of countries such Libya, Yemen, Syria and Sudan into civil wars has given power to such counterrevolution narratives.

One decade after the experience of the Arab Spring, large parts of Arab societies look suspiciously to civil society organizations and held them responsible for what happened since 2011. As expressed by one civil society activist working with local communities in the governorate of Menya

in Upper Egypt, "foreign funding has been a burden. It impacts our legitimacy when working with local societies. The first question people would ask us is who is funding your work"³²

This crisis of legitimacy has been aggravated by the Israeli war on Gaza, and the western support to Israel after 7 October 2023. As expressed in a number of interviews, it became more difficult for civil society groups to convince local communities that western countries that support the killing of Palestinians in Gaza, are interested in their wellbeing. According to Samir al-Aitta, civil society organizations in the Arab region are suffering from an existential question. The activity of many of them is dependent on funding from American or European donors, including state institutions. However, what is happening in and around Gaza has placed them before one major challenge. How can these organizations, which defend humanitarian and democratic values, accept funding from countries that have been accused by the International Court of Justice of complicity in the crime of genocide³³.

Civil society organizations who cooperate with western donors found themselves in a difficult position between needed western funding to their activities and western support to Israel that delegitimize their discourse. Some of them have ended their cooperation with western foundations. In Tunisia for example, Tunisian civil society activists refused to cooperate with the Tunis office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung because of what they considered as the foundation "silence" towards the Israeli war crimes in Palestine³⁴. In Egypt, Germany cut funding to an anti-human trafficking program operated by the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance (CEWLA) after its chair called for a stop to Israel's assault on Gaza. In reaction to this German decision, Hossam Bahgat, head of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), said that his organization would no longer cooperate on development projects with the German government³⁵.

The head of a civil society group in Jordan said that training programs funded/ or supported by American organizations are often avoided by people. She adds "They ask us who could you cooperate with them. How could we attend training funded by them. Even our own employees avoid using any materials with American logos on it"³⁶. Another Jordanian civil society employee said:

Even those who claim to defend human rights, women rights, environmental rights, we hear them saying nothing about the war on Gaza. Some of them are even supporting Israel. We decided not to collaborate with any organization supporting the war on Gaza. As we boycott any products from companies supporting Israel, we will do the same with boycotting any organization supporting Israel³⁷.

In Iraq, German foundations refused to cooperate with NGOs which signed statements of solidarity with Palestine³⁸. Iraqi civil society activists spoke during fieldwork of a blacklist created by the EU of civil society organizations supporting Palestine³⁹.

The executive director of a Tunisian NGO working on socio-economic rights insisted that the problem with western donors goes beyond funding, but it's more a disagreement over values and principles:

It is not about funding...you can always find money. But the problem is that it [their attitudes] harms the core of our work... how could I convince Tunisians about the importance of democracy, freedom, and freedom of expression, if they see that in Europe and the world these values don't apply. They [donors] make my job harder. Hence, the dispute is intellectual...than just a [dispute] over funding contracts⁴⁰

Similarly in Tunisia, the director of one Tunisian NGOs said It's not only about our societies "but we ourselves (NGOs) lost our faith in international organizations"⁴¹. One Tunisian environmental activist said sarcastically

Western funding institutions got confused after 7 October. They didn't understand why Tunisia civil society activists, that are not even Islamist, support the Islamic armed resistance in Palestine. They wondered about where all their money went over the past years⁴²

Even in the case of the Nobel prize laureate the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), German syndicates reduced their funding to their projects with the Union because of its pro-Palestine stands⁴³

This is the case in Lebanon too. One Lebanese urban activist said:

Donors who used to contact us all the time to hear our opinion regarding issues in the region, as we are the "locals". After 7 October, no one tried to contact us as if we ceased being "locals". We tried to put pressure on these donors. We even contacted other [Lebanese] organizations taking funds from these same donors to put pressure on them...we are now discussing alternative sources of funding, not to rely on these donors⁴⁴.

For almost all Arab civil society activists interviewed for this research, the 7 October showed the double standards of western institutions, and the wide gap between discourse and actions.

This same dilemma has been already facing Palestinian civil society organizations since the Oslo agreements in 1993. The writings of Nora Lester Murad, as well as her experience in establishing

the Dalia association to create an alternative to international aid through a community directed fund, is important to look at in this regard⁴⁵.

Civil society activists interviewed highlighted another consequence of this crisis of legitimacy. According to many of them, raising doubts about civil society legitimacy makes it easier for political regimes to restrict their work. The more legitimate civil society is, the harder it becomes for state institutions to restrict its work. One reason for the state easy crackdown on civil society organizations in the MENA region, is due to these concerns about their legitimacy within their local society. Regimes, and its media outlets, take advantage of foreign funding to defame NGOs operating the region. In Iraq, they call civil society groups who accept funding from western governments "children of embassies"⁴⁶, while in Lebanon, some refer to them as "soft arms of the US"⁴⁷, or just the "coffee break" groups in the case of Tunisia. This narrative aims at ridiculing the work of these civil society organizations, and to harm their legitimacy within society. While from their side, Arab NGOs don't have media tools to answer these accusations⁴⁸.

Relation to the State: to cooperate or not?

In relation to the previous point on legitimacy, the relationship between civil society groups and state institutions also rises. While State institutions in the MENA have always tried to control civil society groups, fieldwork findings suggest that civil society groups have themselves an interest in cooperation with state institutions in recent years to gain access to local communities and avoid administrative obstacles that have been aggravated following the failure of the Arab Spring.

While the post 2011 phase has seen new characteristics, it includes also old features of the pre 2011 phase such as state cooptation of civil society groups. Research on civil society in the MENA has often addressed this issue. In her work, Nadine Sika gives the example of the Mohammed Safadi foundation, that was established by the Lebanese Minister of Finance for helping developmental organizations. In the cases of Morocco and Jordan too, regimes directly support charity organizations. However, while literature has focused on regimes cooptation of civil society organizations, little has been written on why these organizations would accept such a "deal".

Fieldwork results challenge the common "easy" assumption that civil society organizations would follow the rules of political regimes out of fear or for material interests, and offered a different picture about these groups interests, as well as their perception of their own mission within the society to understand their relationship with political regimes. In some cases, under the facade of supporting political regimes, civil society organizations would still maintain certain leverage over incumbent regimes, as is the case in the relation between Egypt's largest religious association Al-Gam'iyya al-Shar'iyya and the political regime after 2013.

Al-Gam'iyya al-Shar'iyya is Egypt's oldest and most powerful Islamic organization. The organization shifted from a decidedly apolitical to political stance during the transition between 2011 and 2013, lending its strong support for Islamist parties during the electoral cycles during this time. Yet since 2013, it has been closely aligned with the state. Al-Gam'iyya al-Shar'iyya even joined the state sponsored National Alliance for Civil and Development Work, and plays an active role within it. On the face of it, this alignment would appear to be enforced, but a deeper look into the movement itself, its history, ideas, and actions, indicates a level of strategic adaptability, indicating its prioritization of its key goals - enhancing the material wellbeing of Egyptian citizens - over ideological dogmas. Deeper investigation of Al-Gam'iyya al-Shar'iyya and its history, its ideological approach, indicates that it reflects a development organization first and foremost, and therefore shows strategic adaptability according to the political context in which it finds itself⁴⁹.

Another example from Egypt is the Ministry of Social Solidarity project on Promoting citizenship values in villages most affected by sectarian incidents. This program has been working in 44 of the villages most affected by extremism and sectarian events in Minya Governorate since September 2020, with the aim of strengthening social protection measures and social integration for citizens of all religious and social backgrounds and developing awareness of the values of citizenship and respect for diversity. The Ministry of Solidarity chose to carry out this project in cooperation with Islamic and Christian civil society organizations. This cooperation between the ministry and civil society groups allowed these groups to ensure the collaboration of local leaders and the trust of the public in the villages. Most of these groups argue that if it was not for the collaboration with the ministry of social solidarity, it would have been very difficult to implement this project in Menya⁵⁰.

Civil society organizations react to their environment, and their relations with the state are not only an external imposition but are negotiated according to the political context. Civil society organizations might accept to cooperate with state institutions so that they can function and work efficiently without being cracked down upon. Some research takes out agency from civil society actors who cooperate with state institutions and present it as only instruments in the hands of the ruling regimes. However, such a perception seems rather simplistic, and fails to see the complex relation between state institutions and those perceived as "coopted" civil society organizations.

The crisis of legitimacy led civil society groups to seek cooperation with state institutions. As one Jordanian civil society activist said: "Cooperating with state agencies give me strength and increase trust in my work when dealing with donors and partners"⁵¹. Similarly, one Iraqi civil society activist argues:

Before 2019, there wasn't much cooperation with state institutions. However, after 2019, we became keener on having state agencies included in our activities, so that they know what exactly we are doing, and our goals. At the end we as an

organization we would like to protect ourselves. We want to prove to them we are not against the state. We would like to keep this relation to protect us, but without restraining our activities. It's a difficult balance, but we are trying to maintain it⁵²

Another Iraqi civil society activist adds "We are not necessarily the shadow of the state, but it's good to work close to state institutions."⁵³ Similarly, a Moroccan civil society activist working on enhancing living conditions for women living in poor neighborhoods in Casablanca claimed that "working with the state is essential, and the better the relationship, the easier it will be to implement activities."⁵⁴

In the case of Lebanon, the issue is more about influential political groups, than state institutions, since state institutions are often weak. However, the logic of civil society activists is the same. They only replace state institutions with political parties. According to one Lebanese civil society activist:

To be able to work, we need to work with facts on the ground. If there are certain political powers in the area where we work. We need to take this into consideration. If we would like to carry on with our work⁵⁵.

In sectarian contexts, as is the case in Lebanon, and Iraq, political parties perceive the work of civil society groups as competing with them. According to an Iraqi civil society activist:

They [sectarian powers] think we are trying to steal their audience. They would prefer to be the only voice talking to their audience and not having other voices competing with them. We are competing over the same public⁵⁶.

Cooperating with state institutions is often a survival strategy adopted by NGOs working in offering services to local communities (welfare activities/ cultural and artistic associations). They need to make certain concessions to keep their activities running. If they clash with state institutions or powerful political parties, they might lose all their work. It's more of a rational choice, assessing costs and benefits. However, this is not the case for NGOs that have a clear political agenda, such as Human Rights groups, where they see their work in total contradiction with state institutions, and hence they see no benefit in cooperating with governmental agencies. As one Tunisia activist puts it "the (Tunisian) state is restricting political freedoms, and we are defending political freedoms, hence we are on the opposite side to the state"⁵⁷

Cooperating with state institutions is more of a survival strategy. However, this strategy adopted by some civil society groups shouldn't be mistaken with pro-regimes associations. As discussed earlier, these are organizations created by political regimes to maintain a foot within civil society, and they act as agents for political regimes. In all cases studied, regimes create their own civil

society groups, and in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, influential political parties have also their own civil society groups, as already mentioned in the section on the definition of civil society.

Relation to Politics: the blurred lines between the apolitical and the political

The restoration of authoritarianism in many of the Arab Spring countries has pushed activists to look for “safer” forms of activism⁵⁸. These initiatives seek to change its society, but through safe activities, and while avoiding clashes with political authorities. Even if these organizations or initiatives are apolitical, they offer a space for people to meet and discuss, and in moments of opportunity, they can get easily mobilized. As argued by Sean Yom,

strategies of abeyance can sustain emotional energies and diffuse politics of activist networks during periods of mobilizational reformation, giving the illusion of inactivity when critical voices are searching for transformable circumstances.⁵⁹

In Egypt, many initiatives focusing on documenting and safeguarding cultural heritage have flourished over the last years. While at first, these groups seem to be purely cultural with no political aspect to it. Attending events organized by these initiatives have revealed two main aspects that challenges this first impression. First, many of those who attend these events, are themselves part of what we described earlier as the “generation of the Arab Spring”. These activities, in particular cultural tours, seemed to be a way of walking around the city, meeting, and discussing in a safe type of activity. The second aspect is how sometimes explaining certain historical events can be linked to the current political debates in Egypt. For example, in one of these tours, the tour guide was explaining the history of one palace in the neighborhood of Garden city in Cairo that use to belong to the first Egyptian dean of the faculty medicine, and minister of health Ali Pasha Ibrahim (1880-1947), and while talking about the life of Ibrahim, she mentioned he was the son of a peasant. This information started a discussion among the group on social mobilization in the past and now, and if it’s possible now for someone from a working-class family to reach a similar post⁶⁰.

These new initiatives include also neighborhood associations, such as Zamalek Association for Development and Shubra’s archives. Shubra's Archive is a community archive devoted to the production of participatory archives and socio-historical research in the neighborhood of Shubra, in Northern Cairo. This initiative has attracted a number of youth and offered them an opportunity to interview people about the neighborhood and its past. While Zamalek Association for Development, although it dates to 1980s, has attracted in recent years a number of the “25 January generation” who decided to devote part of their time to safeguarding the historical neighborhood of Zamalek, and in particular its green spaces.

In relation to the first question of legitimacy, lack of foreign funding, although a challenge, strengthens the legitimacy of these initiatives. In addition, some of these initiatives have also combined charity work with their own activities which has strengthened their image among local communities, as for example with one of the cultural initiatives in Cairo that raises funds regularly to buy meals for poor families in its neighborhood.

While the activities of these initiatives are apolitical, its members are aware of how politics influence even the tiny problems they face in their neighborhood. As explained by one of the members of these organizations, "the relation between what we do, and politics is clear to all of us. There is no doubt about that. We fully understand the impact of politics on the smallest challenges we are facing in our neighborhood"⁶¹.

In Morocco as well, youth who were part of the 20 February movement established cultural and artistic initiatives to find new platforms to connect with their society. One of these initiatives is *Al-Mahkour* theatre, a form of the Theatre of the Oppressed⁶². This initiative seeks to continue the struggle of the 20th of February movement for change through art. According to Hosni Mukhlis, one of the founders of this initiative, the difference between the 20th of February movement and *Al-Mahkour* theatre is that "while in the movement, we had the loudspeaker and people watched us, in our theatre, we gave the loudspeaker to the people to express their opinion". He argues that the 20th of February movement failed because "it could not build bridges of communication with the general public, therefore, the Arab world needs to make the people's voices heard in artistic, alternative and stimulating ways."⁶³

This link between political struggle and art is also stressed by a Tunisian activist, member of a cultural foundation in the city of Gabès, south of Tunisia:

We cannot talk about citizenship without talking about art, and we cannot talk about art without mentioning citizenship...Art is a mean for resistance, it's a mean to raise awareness, to allow people to think differently, to reimagine their neighborhood and their society, differently... Art is able to create hope in this moment full of challenges⁶⁴.

Despite their apolitical activism, these initiatives got engaged in political struggles. In Egypt for example, when the Egyptian regime decided to demolish parts of historical Cairo tombs to clear space for new highways, cultural initiatives found themselves engaging in a political struggle to prevent the regime from demolishing historical monuments. They opposed these plans publicly, explained the importance of these monuments to the larger society, and mobilized it to stand against it.

In Tunisia as well, environmental initiatives in the governorate of Gabès found themselves in clash with state interests. This is the case of the movement Stop Pollution, launched in 2018, and is seeking to put pressure on the Tunisian government to dismantle the polluted units at the Tunisian Chemical Group industry, a public company operating phosphate mines since the 1970s in Gabès⁶⁵. In describing the relation between his environmental movement and the state, one activist said sarcastically “our relationship with political power is not up and down, but between down and lower than the down”⁶⁶.

Lebanon offers another example of this link between apolitical initiatives and political struggles. Different civil society initiatives/groups, that haven’t been directly political, found themselves part of the October 2019 uprising. Organizations that work on protecting public spaces or on the right for housing for example, found themselves mobilized during this moment. One Lebanese civil activist working on urban questions said:

I am not sure if it’s about our organization, or us as individuals...it’s difficult to make this distinction between individuals and the organization in moments of popular mobilization...We don’t want our organization to be isolated from the *Hirak*...we participated in the uprising...we took part in discussions that are related to urban questions in the different squares⁶⁷

This difficult distinction between individuals and their organizations highlights the importance of the concept of the Arab Spring generation, as a useful conceptual tool to understand the relation between civil society and politics in the region in this post Arab Spring era.

Conclusion

Although the Arab Spring failed to ensure political transition to democracy, this political defeat is only one side of a larger impact these waves of uprisings have had on societies in the MENA region. This paper tried to understand what impact the Arab Spring had on civil society. Relying on both desk research and more than 50 in-depth interviews with civil society groups in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon and Iraq, this research mapped changes to both the civil society itself, as well as to dynamics and challenges facing civil society in this post Arab Spring era.

The main question this paper raises is how the Arab Spring has influenced civil society in the MENA region. The answer is twofold.

First, when it comes to civil society itself, the Arab Spring has witnessed an increasing role for informal types of civil activism. It was initiatives from “hidden spaces of activism” that led to this wave of popular mobilization in the first place. And through this phase, a new generation of civil

society activists has been formed. This generation has been spread over different civil society initiatives and groups, including charity or what might seem like apolitical activities. Even if they don't act as one coherent actor, the impact of this generation is seen in their different types of activities.

Second, the post Arab Spring has raised questions/challenges to civil society groups about their relationship to societies, state institutions, and politics. The main issue in their relationship to society is the question of legitimacy. Questions about legitimacy is an important challenge that seems difficult to analyze post 2011 civil society without looking into it. As for their relation to the state, the question has been how to manage their relationship with state institutions in politically repressive environments, and if cooperating with state institutions might offer them an opportunity to carry on with their activities. When it comes to the relationship to politics, the question is mainly about the boundaries between apolitical and political initiatives, and how apolitical types of activism, such as protecting cultural heritage and environmental justice, might turn overnight into direct political struggles.

The Arab Spring has created a new generation of civil society activists and initiatives. Even if the Arab Spring has been defeated, this generation hasn't been defeated yet. They are exploring different ways of dealing with political setbacks, and their challenges. Studying civil society in post Arab Spring phase need to keep changes to both civil society itself, and these new challenges facing it into consideration to make sense of the current political situation in the region, and its future paths.

Recommendations

Support project ideas to counter this wave of post Arab Spring populism.

Findings

Interviews with civil society activists in the MENA region show that this post Arab Spring phase has seen a large wave of populism that aims at "diabolizing" civil society actors, as "agents of the west" that seeks to "divide our societies". Civil society groups have been trying to resist this wave of populism by seeking innovative ways to reach their societies, as well as offering support for vulnerable communities within this populist environment as is the case with migrant communities and reaching different religious and ethnic communities to build trust among them.

Recommendation

Donor institutions should give priority at this moment to project ideas that could resist this wave of populism, such as:

- Initiatives of dialogue and cooperation among civil society groups belonging to different religious and ethnic groups, particularly in deeply divided societies as is the case in Lebanon and Iraq.
- Initiatives of support to migrant communities, including de-constructing the populist narrative against them.
- Initiatives offering alternative media platforms for civil society groups to express their ideas and counter populist narratives.
- Initiatives focusing on factchecking to deconstruct populist misinformation in the media.
- Initiatives focusing on researching how civil society resisted populism in other cases (Latin America for example)
-

Create dialogue platforms for members of the Arab Spring generation to share their experiences.

Findings

Research findings show that the Arab Spring has seen the emergence of a new generation of civil society activists. Even if the Arab Spring has been defeated, this generation hasn't been defeated yet. They are exploring different ways of dealing with political setbacks, and their challenges. Members of this generation have gone into different paths after the failure of the Arab Spring: cultural, charity, in addition to those who remained committed to their work on political and socio-economic rights.

Recommendation

Donors shouldn't look at civil society in the MENA region with a strict organizational lens but should also find innovative ways of bringing members of this Arab Spring generation together, even if they are engaged in different sectors within civil society. This is of course a shared responsibility with these young people themselves to also suggest and design projects that could bring those engaged in charity, development, environmental and art initiatives together. One example of such projects could be creating dialogue platforms where these civil society voices could meet and share their different responses to the failure of the Arab Spring, and their experiences in surviving it.

Strengthening the legitimacy of civil society organizations

Findings

Research findings show that the issue of legitimacy is a major challenge for civil society groups in the region during this post Arab Spring phase. Political regimes in the region often tries to discredit the work of civil society as being funded by “the West” to implement a “hidden agenda”. Such a narrative has impacted parts of Arab societies that are looking suspiciously to civil society organizations and their activities. This crisis of legitimacy has been aggravated with the Israeli war on Gaza, and the western support to Israel after 7 October 2023. As expressed several times during our interviews, it became more difficult for civil society groups to convince local communities that western countries that support the Genocide in Gaza, are interested in their wellbeing.

Recommendation

Donor institutions need to keep this issue of legitimacy in mind when cooperating with civil society organizations and initiatives in the MENA region. They should take measures to strengthen the legitimacy of civil society groups with whom they are cooperating. These measures could include:

- Donors’ attitudes towards the Palestinian cause is one major issue that could strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of civil society organizations within whom they are working. It’s important for donors to show publicly that they support the same universal values for the Palestinians, as they do with everyone else in the MENA region, and elsewhere.
- Donors should not punish civil society organizations for showing their support to the Palestinian cause.
- Instead of following a model where a western donor support a civil society organization in the MENA region, donors should invest in supporting cooperation among civil society groups in the Global South (Africa, MENA, Latin America). This approach will allow these civil society groups to learn from each other’s experiences, while at the same time, it will strengthen the legitimacy of these groups within their local communities.

Distinguish between NGOs working with the state, and those working for the state.

Findings

Research findings show that cooperating with state institutions is often a survival strategy adopted by NGOs working in offering services to local communities (welfare activities/ cultural and artistic associations). These organizations need to make certain concessions to keep their activities running. However, this strategy adopted by some civil society groups shouldn't be mistaken with organizations created by political regimes to maintain a foot within civil society. In all cases studied, political regimes create their own civil society groups, and in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, influential political parties have also their own civil society groups.

Recommendation

Donors need to distinguish between NGOs cooperating with state institutions to keep their activities running, those NGOs created by political regimes when deciding on their funding.

Invest in supporting cultural initiatives.

Findings

Research findings point out to an increase in cultural initiatives in this post Arab Spring phase in the region. The restoration of authoritarianism in many of the Arab Spring countries has pushed activists to look for "safer" forms of activism. These cultural initiatives seek to change their societies, but through safe activities to avoid clashing with political authorities. While these initiatives might seem apolitical at first, they offer a platform for this Arab Spring community to meet and have an influence within their local communities.

Recommendation

Donors should invest in supporting these cultural initiatives that are working towards changing their societies through culture and art. They can do so by funding regional projects that bring these different initiatives together to share their experiences and their lessons learned. These projects could also go beyond the MENA region to include initiatives from the Global South. As mentioned earlier in the paper, one theatre initiative in Morocco was inspired by the Brazilian Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed.

Invest in programs that bring together humanitarian assistance with political and civil awareness

Findings

Research findings show that civil society groups working on political and civil rights suffered in moments when donors shifts their priorities to focus on humanitarian assistance, and not on protecting political and civil rights. In a different part of the research, civil society groups highlighted the need to take local societies priorities in basic services into account designing programs to support them. One cannot talk to villagers who lack clean water about values of religious tolerance for example.

Recommendation

Based on these two observations, donors should invest in projects that bridge humanitarian assistance with programs on political and civil awareness. Funding this type of project will achieve two goals. It will, first, ensure the continuity of funding for programs focusing on values such as political and social rights, religious tolerance, citizenship even in moments of humanitarian crisis. And second, offering basic services to local societies increases the legitimacy of civil society groups operating in these societies.

Don't compete with local organizations

Findings

Civil society organizations in the region complained during fieldwork about donor institutions opening their own local branches in the region, which end up competing with other local civil society organizations, not supporting them.

Recommendation

Donor institutions shouldn't compete with local partners through their local offices in the region and focus instead on supporting civil society organizations in the region.

Endnotes

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3. Understanding and Investing in the Knowledge Production and Dissemination Community of Practice in and for the MENA Region

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Introduction

Particularly in the past decade, researchers, analysts, and advocates in and from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have faced significant obstacles in knowledge production and dissemination. Some of these challenges have come about as a result of measures by government authorities seeking to control the narrative, while others have been inherent to the nature of the space itself in light of limited resources, as well as regional developments, whether war or economic crisis. Even those working from diaspora and exile have not been immune from these challenges.

In this paper, we seek to address three key questions: (1) What are the primary barriers to knowledge production and dissemination in and for the MENA region? (2) What are some of the innovative and responsive ways in which knowledge producers have mitigated these challenges? And what lessons can be learned from their experiences? (3) What should donors and knowledge producers be doing to support and advance knowledge production and dissemination in and for the MENA region?

Methodology

A literature review for this paper revealed that there are very few publications on knowledge production and dissemination in the MENA region, or indeed, on the global south generally. One of the main sources of information was a volume developed by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) dedicated to this very issue; though the publications in the volume revealed greater insights and in-depth analysis on some MENA countries, such as Lebanon and Tunisia, and more limited insights from countries like Egypt and Syria. Generally, the issue of knowledge production and dissemination has been largely overlooked for the MENA region, as several interlocutors for this

research expressed a strong interest in informing this work, with one focus group participant stating, “this is a rare opportunity to express in a transparent way what we need.”

In addition to conducting an extensive literature review to inform this paper and build on existing research, we collected firsthand data by hosting two virtual focus groups of 10 to 12 participants each. Focus group participants included journalists and media professionals; members of civil society organizations; and academics and scholars. Participants were equally distributed inside the region and in diaspora and exile; and men and women were represented equally. Participants came from the priority focus countries of Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Syria, and Lebanon. All findings from the focus groups have been anonymized to respect the confidentiality and security of participants. To fill any remaining gaps from the literature review and focus groups, a handful of one-on-one interviews, including with select diplomats and policymakers, were also conducted. The findings from these interviews have similarly been anonymized.

Primary Barriers to Knowledge Production and Dissemination in MENA

Funding challenges

One of the main issues creating barriers in knowledge production in and for the MENA region is the challenge of securing adequate funding that meets the needs of knowledge producers and is responsive to knowledge gaps. Focus group participants frequently reiterated the challenges posed by the inadequacy of the funding they receive. This issue is especially prevalent among local civil society organizations (CSOs) who receive far less funding than their international counterparts or receive a fraction of project funding through subgrants from larger organizations. A point of frustration with this setup is that the larger organizations managing subgrants sometimes provide very little support or contribution to the project, despite receiving a larger share of the funds and having far more capacity than local organizations. For example, international organizations usually have teams dedicated to applying for project funding and reporting to donors, whereas these capacities are lacking in most local organizations, and there is little cooperation between the grantee and subgrantee to fill these gaps, unless such cooperation is made explicit or stipulated by the donor.

Additionally, the project funding that local organizations receive is usually strictly allocated, with much of it earmarked for events, conferences, or activities; very little is budgeted for staff salaries. This results in a handful of staff being forced to take on several roles within an organization and working exhaustive hours to implement all of the required activities. Many such employees report

experiencing burnout as a result of this cycle and eventually leave this field of work or move on to larger organizations where the salaries are higher and the benefits are more competitive. This leads to high turnover and a loss of knowledge and expertise in local organizations. Local organizations struggle to compensate for these losses. Focus group participants noted the lack of investment towards training and building the capacities of a new generation of knowledge producers and researchers as a significant challenge. Several focus group participants also highlighted the need for training on new technologies, such as OCR (optical character recognition) or artificial intelligence tools, which can allow for much more efficient data collection and management.

As an example, the MENA region has been plagued by endemic government corruption, which in turn results in violations of social and economic rights. Realizing this and the importance of doing work to counter corruption, improve financial governance, and offer alternative policies to deliver on inclusive economies for the region, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) built and launched an Inclusive Economies program to cultivate a community of practice able to produce knowledge, offer policy solutions, and bring about economic reform. TIMEP's program was fortunate to be awarded core funding for a preliminary three year period, but should that funding not be renewed, or project funding only be offered, much of the critical foundational work invested in to build a dynamic and responsive program may lead to a dead end.

Another funding-related challenge that focus group participants have highlighted is insufficient flexibility on the part of donors despite the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the MENA region. Relatedly, there is often insufficient flexibility around how developments in the region may necessitate updates to project goals and activities. The context in the region is constantly changing with one crisis superseding another, forcing local CSOs to shift focus frequently. One focus group participant explained "you could have a project on criminal justice, but then an entirely different criminal procedure code comes about and you need to pivot your work. The region needs flexible donors that respond to dynamic developments." Some donors additionally fail to engage with the projects they fund or express an interest in learning from project outcomes, leading one participant to question whether donors, in fact, read the reports derived from these projects. The result is often repeated calls for projects that have already been completed, instead of the provision of funding for new projects to build on previous efforts.

Finally, as this paper is being finalized in the first quarter of 2025, the U.S. government, which is the world's largest donor, including on knowledge production and related democracy, human rights, and civil society activities, has taken significant and unprecedented steps to cut foreign assistance. Preliminary reports in February 2025 suggest that more than 92 percent of USAID foreign assistance contracts and more than 60 percent of U.S. State Department foreign assistance contracts have been terminated.¹ Though it is too early to determine the impact of these steps on

knowledge production in and for the MENA region, early analysis has already documented significant implications.² The sector is expected to face severe implications as a result, including but not solely, the halting of essential activities, the furloughing and firing of large numbers of employees and contractors, permanent organizational closures, significant economic harms, and serious security risks.

Bias toward Western credentials and research agendas for knowledge production

Another obstacle to effective knowledge production that was highlighted in the literary research and echoed by the focus group participants was the implicit bias of donors and even fellow knowledge producers in the field who tend to favor Western credentials and institutions over local expertise and entities. This bias is evidenced through the way in which funding is allocated and to whom. Despite the study of public policy being well-established in the MENA region, national universities often have less opportunity to contribute to and engage in policy development than their “international private counterparts, which engage more deeply in cooperation agreements with government entities and transnational policy analysis networks, and thus establishing themselves as more solid sources of policy knowledge.”³ Meanwhile, MENA experts in local universities, policy centers, and civil society organizations find that the type and scope of the work that they can get funding for is limited by the priorities of donors, as “funding institutions, such as European governments, set the research agenda through approval of only those research projects that fit into the grand narratives and political goals of these states.”⁴ As such, academia in the MENA region has been impacted by the prevalence and reliance on project-based funding, which “has led to greater precarity of researchers, transformed universities into ‘academic enterprises’, and aligned research agendas with funding agency priorities.”⁵

Focus group participants raised similar concerns, arguing that many researchers leave the MENA region whether because of government restrictions or due to the prevalence of greater opportunities for research and knowledge production abroad. Those who remain in the region must often conform to a Western-centric approach to producing research in order to secure or maintain funding opportunities. As one participant put it “it is hard to find Arabs that are not European in their minds,” while another added that those knowledge producers that live and work in the West have learned to “culturally translate” themselves in their outputs in a way that is palatable to donors.

The issue of brain drain is also a central challenge experienced by knowledge producers, who noted how the decreasing number of researchers in the region translates to less field research. This is especially critical for research that relies on data derived from local communities and

marginalized groups, where the lack of local interaction with affected populations means that their experiences are not adequately reflected in final research outputs. In terms of knowledge dissemination, it was noted that donors usually look for outputs to be produced in English, which creates a barrier for reaching Arabic speakers and engaging Arabic researchers.

This obstacle was echoed by several participants in the focus groups who face a lack of responsiveness from donors on the needs they identify in terms of research, knowledge gaps, and the technology and training needed to effectively produce knowledge on certain issues. One participant stated “we need to decolonize the field of research production, including even the topics that we pick. We need to step away from the biased approach and look into a wider scope of knowledge.” Rather than a give-and-take where donors sit with local knowledge producers to understand the needs and respond accordingly, the reality is one where researchers, local CSOs, international CSOs, and think tanks are often competing for the same donors or project funding. This frequently results in duplicative work on topics where funding is plentiful and pervasive knowledge gaps where funding is scarce or unavailable.

Another issue along the same vein is the discrimination and sidelining that many MENA researchers and scholars in the West face when they do attempt to conduct research that is outside of the mainstream or that takes a critical approach:

“We become the problem, we become historical subjects who see racism everywhere. Western academia does not need critical immigrant scholars; we are unwanted, to be discarded, declined, rejected and simply unapproved. Neoliberal western academia needs tokens to sustain the illusion of diversity and data miners to gratify their incessant need for information. We are constantly disappointing serious researchers who cannot begin to find answers to the pressing questions of their complicated realities, and when we speak up, we become the problem: the defiant colleagues, the insubordinate. ungrateful immigrants.”⁶

One focus group participant had a similar experience; she initially worked as a researcher and activist in Egypt, but had to go into exile due to government repression, only to then face discrimination and the “weaponization of anti-colonial narratives” by her Western colleagues in academia. MENA scholars who are frequently met with such lack of acceptance by their peers and rigidity by donors are likely to either change career paths or conform their work to the mainstream. In either case, this allows gaps in information and understanding to persevere indefinitely.

Along a similar vein, focus group participants with an academic background also mentioned the difficulty of translating their work into English so that it may reach a broader public audience. One participant stated, “the assumption that everything needs to be in English is privileged and poses a challenge, especially as we co-design [research projects] with other people.” Not only is the

research and writing usually completed in English, but academic articles also employ high-level technocratic language that is difficult to decipher for non-academic audiences.

Lack of access to data and information

Access to information and data can be difficult even in the most democratic and transparent countries. This access in the MENA region is often especially difficult for several reasons, including the opacity of information from government entities, government-imposed restrictions on independent surveying and data collection, outdated state surveys and censuses, a lack of diversity and qualifications among researchers and data collectors, and a lack of proper data management and information sharing.⁷ The problem of inaccessible data is not limited to MENA governments, but also prevalent among multinational organizations, such as UN bodies or larger international organizations, despite the fact that the data these entities possess is beneficial to the public and critical to inform better policies.⁸

ACAPS, an organization dedicated to producing humanitarian data and analysis, produced a thematic report on issues with the information ecosystem in Syria where it noted several obstacles to accurate and holistic knowledge production. One issue, for example, is that there are far fewer female enumerators and researchers in Syria than their male counterparts, resulting in knowledge gaps around the gendered experiences of women in the context of a prolonged conflict and humanitarian crisis.⁹ But the common thread running throughout ACAPS' report is the lack of sufficient and meaningful inclusion of local organizations and expertise. The report notes, for instance, that humanitarian research produced by UN agencies and international CSOs often dominate the narrative and are readily accepted by donor countries, despite having little inclusion of other expertise, such as academics or local researchers and analysts.¹⁰ While these organizations use Syrian researchers for data collection, they are not included in research design or planning; "in the context of the Syrian crisis, centralised, remote, and top-down programme management frequently results in organisations treating local workers like subcontractors, not equal partners."¹¹ The lack of diversity in this approach can lead to skewed results or gaps in information and leave local organizations and civil society feeling sidelined and marginalized.¹²

These problems were echoed by focus group participants, one of whom stated that "data is the enemy of governments in the MENA region," and described how access to data and information is made to be difficult on purpose. Another participant gave the example of Jordan, where several laws and regulations have been enacted to restrict access to statistics from government bodies. This allows Jordan and countries with similar legislation to control the narrative and undermine any data that contradicts this narrative.

Other participants raised the issue of scarcity in empirical data, especially data that is searchable online, as several MENA countries, including Syria and Lebanon, still use paper archives for much of the information they store. Others have made information available only in PDF form, requiring data scraping and filtering to be done manually, which is time consuming, inefficient, and costly. Furthermore, focus group participants stated they have had difficulty with data scraping and filtering because the technological tools that facilitate data collection are limited to certain languages; additionally, the same tools are not as effective for data collection and analysis in Arabic. One focus group participant described how the organization she works with had to go through archives in paper form and use optical character recognition (OCR) technology to extract the data and then manually filter it. Many organizations are unable to replicate such intensive efforts, particularly as they require significant funding over a longer period of time to yield a successful outcome.

The censorship and siloization of knowledge producers due to government repression

In several MENA countries, democratic progress and the meaningful inclusion of knowledge producers in governance and policymaking have come hand in hand. Similarly, democratic regression has correlated with increased isolation of knowledge producers. One focus group participant stated that “for a period of time in Tunisia, there was a basic level of confidence between CSOs and government actors,” but now that CSOs have been demonized by the state, cooperation is no longer viable. He added that data derived directly from the field has become a luxury of the past; “during the transition in Tunisia, we used to have amazing research...but now we have an issue at the root, which is the quality of the data.” He continued to explain that field research under an increasingly-authoritarian regime is declining sharply due to increased threats to the safety of the researchers and the community members who are the subjects of research.

A researcher from Lebanon noted that the political context in the country has been making the work of researchers and analysts more difficult, especially on the subject of refugees, where Lebanon has quite a poor track record. For example, in early 2024, a Syrian CSO worker in Lebanon was interrogated and his family was harassed by Lebanese security forces for his work. Soon after, refugee-led organizations in Lebanon told the researcher that they could not sign any open-letters or statements about the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon; otherwise, they could similarly face retaliation. Not only does accessing refugee camps now require the approval of security agencies, but refugees themselves are reluctant to speak with researchers as they fear potential abuse from or deportation by security forces. The researcher also noted that there are similar issues conducting research in Jordan “particularly on things related to Israel and related to the security apparatus.” While conducting research in Jordan, she faced challenges interviewing CSO

workers on the Syrian refugee population; they tended to shift the conversation to humanitarian needs and avoided directly answering questions on Jordan's human rights violations or abuses against refugees. This tendency was also more prevalent among Jordanian nationals than Western nationals working in the country, which she believed was due to the higher likelihood of arrest or retaliation against Jordanian citizens; Western nationals are less likely to be targeted.

Many governments in the MENA region also make the work of knowledge producers and civil society organizations more difficult and dangerous as they censor certain information and discourse from circulating. One participant stated that "most of the countries that we are working on have very restrictive laws regarding the flow of information." Another noted that this has been especially the case when working on digital rights and surveillance, adding that "it takes work to ensure that identities are preserved, and rights are protected." Focus group participants emphasized the prevalence of censorship around human rights issues in Egypt as a major obstacle to knowledge production, stating that this has led to "a big gap in caliber and expertise when it comes to research production." They further explained that many researchers with strong expertise and skills have left Egypt and now work from the diaspora or exile. They also explained that in the context of growing repression in the country, recruiting and training a new generation of local researchers is very difficult due to the risks they face and the lack of resources and support for their capacity building.

These obstacles are even more prevalent for knowledge dissemination, especially within the countries experiencing repression or the countries with authoritarian systems of governance. In these environments, spreading knowledge that is at odds with perceived government narratives or interests poses major security risks. One focus group participant stated, "freedom of speech is the number one haul when it comes to knowledge production and dissemination, with censorship affecting countries all across the region." Where her human rights work previously relied on local media outlets to take her organization's findings and disseminate them to the public in a way that was accessible, this cooperation has now become extremely limited. She says, "with lack of freedom of press and the few outlets that we have that produce good journalism being blocked, it makes it much harder so we cannot rely on our natural habitat," to disseminate this information. Now, her organization relies on the few independent media groups that are still operating, and is looking for ways to reach audiences directly, circumventing state news and media agencies.

Authoritarian or repressive regimes also pose another challenge - the spread of misinformation and propaganda, which jeopardizes the entire knowledge ecosystem and can result in intercommunal tensions or violence. This has been exemplified in the Lebanese government's spread of misinformation regarding Syrian refugees, where a combination of a deteriorating economy, a lack of job opportunities, and historical sensitivities allowed for the Syrian refugee community to become easy scapegoats for the government's failures. Many from the Lebanese

public were persuaded by this misinformation, resulting in rising civil tensions and attacks and harassment campaigns against Syrian refugees.¹³

The siloization of knowledge produced in academia and disruption in access to academia

Knowledge producers, especially in academia, have tended to function in a relative silo due to various challenges in the MENA region. In academia, experts with degrees and accolades undertake important research projects and publish impressive academic articles that are ultimately read by a handful of fellow scholars who are usually working in the same field; these articles are seldom cross-cutting with other disciplines or able to reach the public.¹⁴ While this is a problem across much of academia, including outside of the MENA region, it is especially the case in countries with restrictive or authoritarian governments, as authorities only accept knowledge that is partisan to the official state position and policy, resulting in censorship and self-censorship.¹⁵ “The isolation of sociologists and economists, along with the inequities surrounding their work and the limited spaces for thoughtful debate, have robbed these fields of their ability to self-direct and engage meaningfully with those committed to resistance and change.”¹⁶

While there has been a push in recent years for academics to “leave the ivory tower for more diversified paths, where knowledge is translated, exchanged, and used for/with the public and reciprocally informs research,” there has also been a shift towards the commodification of knowledge by academic institutions, state apparatuses, and government affiliated media, whereby the knowledge that is encouraged to be produced and disseminated depends on whether institutions and governments can profit from it.¹⁷ This commodification allows these institutions to steer the direction and content of the knowledge that is produced or disseminated, giving the impression of openness to information, while actually limiting what can be known by the public.¹⁸ In the case of universities, this often takes the form of administrative bottlenecks as the publication of academic articles is promoted and its importance overemphasized, while efforts made to share knowledge beyond academia are unacknowledged.¹⁹ On the other hand, government agencies and state-run media can control who speaks publicly and what is allowed to be said, whether by curating who is invited to meetings and television interviews, or even “deleting and altering parts of their speech or disseminating forms that conform to their agendas.”²⁰ These factors leave academics feeling that their participation is empty or tokenized.

In countries experiencing conflict, even access to academic institutions and the ability to pursue higher learning have been disrupted. The war in Sudan, which began in April 2023, has resulted in the destruction and damaging of universities and higher learning centers, as well as the mass displacement of knowledge producers, including students, academics, and advocates - with many

now living in exile. These circumstances “have led to a complete standstill in teaching and research activities that will have economic implications outlasting the war itself.”²¹ Some displaced students have also faced difficulties resuming their studies in their countries of refuge as they are unable to access their academic records or face discrimination. In Egypt, several schools for Sudanese students have been closed by the government based on arbitrary reasoning.²²

In the Syrian context, almost fourteen years of conflict prior to the fall of the Syrian regime resulted in the damaging and destruction of many schools and prevented students and academics from accessing education. The division of the country between the areas previously under the Assad regime’s control and areas under the control of other de facto authorities also resulted in divergences in the curriculum being taught across the country.²³ Both during and prior to the conflict, the Assad regime often administered curricula that favored the regime’s narrative and versions of history, resulting in the spread of misinformation at best, and propaganda at worst.²⁴ One researcher recalled her Syrian colleagues discussing the misinformation they were taught in schools, and how their parents warned them not to ask too many questions in front of peers, teachers, or colleagues, as they never knew who might report them to the authorities. These circumstances not only affected what knowledge was disseminated, but also the very foundation of what could be known.

Knowledge production in the context of the war on Gaza

Before October 7, 2023, knowledge producers in the MENA region were already facing a series of challenges which affected their ability to produce and disseminate knowledge. Many knowledge producers struggled to get policy makers to engage with their analysis and to take up their policy recommendations - be it local or foreign officials. A prominent example of this has been the repeated attempts of Lebanese civil society to appeal to the international community to establish an independent investigation into the Beirut Port Explosion through the UN Human Rights Council. This appeal has fallen on deaf ears, despite significant knowledge produced and disseminated that demonstrates a pattern of evasion of accountability and lack of opportunity for justice through domestic mechanisms and means in Lebanon:

“In our many meetings seeking an independent investigation, we have had to counter many excuses for inaction: “It’s not the right time.” “This is not a human rights issue.” “Give the domestic investigation a chance.” And each time, we have produced evidence to rebut those excuses.”²⁵

Knowledge producers in the MENA region have long faced the risks of reprisal, harassment, abuse, or worse, at the hands of authoritarian or repressive governments. However, the risks they face have now increased exponentially since the plausible genocide in Gaza, due to a global regression

in respect for human rights and international law. Where knowledge producers once relied on the support of donor countries and foreign stakeholders to ensure their safety should they face persecution for their knowledge production, this support is no longer reliable. While these stakeholders may still try to intervene, their influence on the actions and violations of Global South governments has significantly deteriorated. One researcher who conducted interviews with diplomats and foreign officials said that several of them noted their more limited ability to impact policies and violations in the MENA region as a result of their country's unconditional support for Israel's bombardment of Gaza. Focus group participants described how local government officials now feel immune to criticism for their own violations, as they see their foreign government counterparts supporting mass violations when committed by one of their allies.

Additionally, focus group participants described how the general public in the MENA region are staunchly opposed to Israel's wars on Gaza and Lebanon, and are well aware of Western support for these wars. This has colored their perspective on organizations and institutions receiving funding from these same Western governments, with some knowledge producers now being viewed with suspicion in light of the funding they receive or the partnerships that they have. One focus group participant stated that her employment with a university that is perceptibly American has become a challenge in her work. Several local organizations in the MENA region have even opted to stop receiving funding from certain donor countries for knowledge production activities, particularly Germany and the United States. These organizations have taken a position that does not allow them to receive funds from states' complicit in violations of international law; furthermore, they are fearful as to how they may be perceived by beneficiaries or the general public for taking such funding given the political moment.

Responding to the MENA Region's Knowledge Production and Dissemination Challenges

While the challenges impacting the MENA region's knowledge production and dissemination are significant, those at the heart of this work have come up with innovative and responsive ways to mitigate and address these challenges. Their experiences are critical to informing and shaping this paper's final recommendations on what donors and fellow knowledge producers should be supporting and doing to further advance knowledge production and dissemination in the MENA region.

Creative approaches to research

In countries in the MENA region where authoritarianism and repression are significant challenges impeding knowledge production and dissemination, knowledge producers have gotten creative on how to operate in a difficult space. How materials are framed is one such way. One focus group participant who worked on Syria prior to the fall of the regime said that framing interview requests and questions in a manner that does not produce additional harm is essential. Her team was able to elicit critical insights in interviews on the issue of enforced disappearance in Syria, for example, by focusing the research on single mothers instead, many of whom happen to have missing loved ones. Some knowledge producers have, at times, resorted to anonymity. Lebanon-based independent media and investigative journalism outlet Daraj, for example, says that 20 to 25 of its contributors use pen names to protect their identities.²⁶ Others still have had to move their researchers and/or knowledge production activities to diaspora and exile. Egyptian researcher Mohamed Mandour documents how in the Egyptian context, there are individual researchers in diaspora and exile who have continued their work by pursuing jobs at international think tanks and research centers; some who have established new think tanks of their own abroad; and others who have continued working for MENA-based organizations abroad either remotely or by opening additional branches or chapters.²⁷

MENA knowledge producers also put in place do-no-harm policies and physical and digital security practices to ensure that those conducting the research, those informing it, and those receiving it are kept as safe as possible in the face of government repression. This includes working with digital security consultants and digital rights organizations to hold training workshops for their team members, and it includes collaborating with professionals to set work policies informed by best practices. One European-based focus group participant who heads a MENA knowledge producing organization explains how it's been critical for them to adopt new technologies to keep their team members safe. They've also worked to develop their internal capacity to use technological tools to identify and archive disinformation. "But it did take a lot of capacity, and it lowered the scale that we were working at as a result," he notes.

Maintaining an independent research agenda

In the MENA knowledge production space, maintaining independence and creating policies and systems to ensure that funding does not drive topic choice or content is a priority for many. Describing one Egyptian initiative in her research, Mai Amer highlights a "preference for support from institutions that respect the project's integrity and share its vision,"²⁸ as a baseline for how to decide whether a funding opportunity should be pursued.

Knowledge producers have taken a variety of different approaches in this regard. Some MENA knowledge producers pursue government and foundation grants alike, while publicly disclosing the source of funding to their interview subjects, partners, and/or readers. Some only pursue grants where donors commit to or are known not to interfere in project design and implementation, particularly on the content side. Many times, these knowledge producers are also making a discretionary determination on which funding sources are “less bad” than others; some knowledge producers have a written criteria to make this assessment. Others refuse foreign government funding entirely.

And others still have tried to supplement their funding with income-generating activities. Anthropology in Arabic, which is featured in Amer’s research as an example, charges participants to attend its workshops.²⁹ “While [independent Lebanese media outlet] Daraj is primarily funded by various global donors, it strives to produce commercially driven content to diversify its revenue sources and aims, according to its founders, toward total financial independence in the next few years.”³⁰ Other independent media outlets, the Lebanon-based Public Source among them, have begun setting in place a strategy to gain financial independence through memberships and subscriptions.³¹ Describing this phenomena which they document in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, Dr. Fatima el-Issawi and Nicholas Benequista write: “These projects have asserted their independence from power holders by developing business models that are not reliant on political funding and business interests. Most of these news websites are funded by a mix of international donations, advertisement, and subscriptions revenues.”³²

Accessing information in difficult contexts

Particularly, but not solely in a closing space, access to data and information is a significant challenge. One Egyptian focus group participant describes how the government has been working to “erase the archive since 2011 and particularly things related to the January 25 revolution.” She describes the efforts in response to some knowledge producers who are archiving information on their own in an institutional way, alongside others who are investing in archival software and purchasing access to archives around the world. She notes that more of this archival work is needed and is critical for historical record keeping, memorialization, and contemporary research.

Another experience worth spotlighting in response to access to information challenges is the work conducted by organizations who leverage freedom of information laws to put forward a culture of transparency and to democratize access to information. In Lebanon, for example, the Gherbal Initiative requests information on an annual basis from various government entities; whenever possible, they publish this data and make it accessible for researchers, knowledge producers, and journalists. Their work has been impactful in pushing government entities to better adhere to the country’s Access to Information Law and in sharing data collaboratively with others in the field.

The process is not without its challenges however; “their 2022 report states that just over half (108; 53 percent) of the administrations contacted (204) responded to requests, and only 28 of those (44 percent) provided complete answers.”³³

In Egypt, the example of 10 Tooba is an instructive one on how independent knowledge producers can access difficult-to-find data in a restrictive environment in which policy analysis often comes from the point of view “of the government or of international financial institutions and donor agencies.” When first conducting research on public spending on housing, transportation, and urban utilities, Yahiya Shawkat and Ahmed Zaazaa write that they developed a methodology of research “based on our belief that the data we needed existed if only we looked hard enough for it: we trawled government agency websites and manually copied rows of numbers from PDFs into manageable Excel spreadsheets. The effort paid off and in turn established our methodology of data gathering and analysis tools that could be applied to other socioeconomic sectors by scholars or activists.”³⁴

Even in repressive or difficult environments in which engaging with and disseminating knowledge to national governments may be difficult, knowledge producers in the MENA region have sought to share and disseminate knowledge with non-traditional targets within these governments. One focus group participant who works on Jordan and Lebanon noted that even when national governments have been resistant to civil society collaboration or exchange on policy issues, municipalities and syndicates have been alternative targets that are often more willing to engage on a case-by-case basis. She says that it’s important “not to give up totally on anything governmental, because there are some pockets within governments that could be useful...We can find some people who are similar to us within the government and empower them to be able to take good action.” Another focus group participant agreed and said that in her experience in Jordan, certain ministries have been more amenable to feedback, and they have opened up consultations in which knowledge producers can participate. She cites the example of the data protection law, where researchers and civil society were invited to engage, share their research and insights, and provide feedback on the law.

Addressing biases in research

In the knowledge production space, there is still a bias and preference toward research coming from a disinterested, Western, and English-speaking knowledge producer. MENA knowledge producers have taken a number of steps to indigenize research and invest in MENA talent. For example, when conducting research about a particular impacted community or group of people, some knowledge producers have opted to select researchers from said-community or to meaningfully embed researchers into those communities. Alternatively, others have incorporated

impacted persons into the research process, creating a pathway for them to provide, collect, and analyze data.

Being close to the research is an asset, many participants in the focus groups argued. One participant gave the example of climate change in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, where mitigation and adaptation policies must be informed by a facts-based understanding of the habits, practices, and day-to-day lives of impacted people; this requires nuanced and deep-dive research into these groups. Another participant described how at her organization, which is headquartered in the United States but works on Syria, the English-speaking, US-based researcher on the research team serves as more of an editor, rather than the research lead. By doing so, the organization creates space for those closer to the research and those present inside the MENA region to shape the direction of the research, structure the outline, and take leadership on drafting.

Focus group participants agree that it's important to invest in the capacity of local researchers in the MENA region, through individual investment and through the creation of networks and collaborative spaces. Research fellowships have been an effective tool to do so and have empowered young and rising talent from the MENA region to produce high-impact analysis, build a name for themselves in the field, and connect with other researchers in the space. Organizations, conferences, and programs that bring together researchers are critically important too.

One Tunisian researcher and focus group participant cited the example of the Arab Political Science Network (APSN) as an excellent model for collective action among MENA researchers to "facilitate the exchange of information directly among researchers inside the region, without having to rely on external actors." He adds: "We should exchange data...we should exchange our experiences," and he hopes that similar networks will be created across different fields. This collaboration is not only important to build capacity and support indigenous talent, but also to ensure that efforts are not duplicated in an already-difficult field, says a different Tunisia-based knowledge producer who works on political economy issues. She explains: "We need to centralize the research of NGOs, because even in Tunisia, there's duplication of research and efforts that happen throughout the years. Websites are down half the time. Sometimes reports are not published. We have seen a lot of projects that come in and do the same work again and again."

An example from within Tunisia that has been studied with great interest is that of Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), which has a methodological approach that "brings together young researchers from the humanities, social sciences, legal studies, and economic fields in a unified space" and ultimately is intended to "nurture a new cadre of researchers deeply committed to human rights, providing a platform for their work, struggle, and networking. This approach seeks to pave a pathway for activism through the lens of critical knowledge."³⁵ This type of coordination is happening not only on the country level, but on the regional and global ones

as well. Anwar Mhajne writes, "To navigate government restrictions, civil society actors are also building global networks to document abuses in the region and to share ideas and strategies. Such exchanges of information and expertise among global activist networks has helped MENA NGOs to develop new methods for ensuring accountability."³⁶

Making research accessible

Another key challenge that MENA knowledge producers are actively contending with is that of dissemination - ensuring that research and analysis reaches the right audience for the research in question, be it other researchers and knowledge producers, the general public, or the policymaking community. Knowledge producers in and on the MENA region have attempted a number of different things to ensure that their research reaches the right audience. First, they have used different tools to engage with non-academic readers. In a survey of grantees of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences on the ways in which academics and practitioners disseminate knowledge: 27 percent of respondents write op-eds, 10 percent write policy briefs, 40 percent participate in civil society workshops and lectures, 42 percent use social media, and 8 percent disseminate their research using television and radio.³⁷

One focus group participant who works on Iraq and Syria describes how the organization she runs has worked to present the data it collects in creative and different formats. This has included "leaning into narration and auditory knowledge because people also consume videos and podcasts and we can reach them that way." Others have invested in translation, ensuring that outputs created by MENA knowledge producers are available in English, Arabic, and at times, French. In doing so, they ensure readability by consumers around the world, while continuing to cater to a local audience inside the region. Others have also worked to ensure that research coming from the English-speaking world is translated into Arabic to ensure accessibility and dialogue between the two worlds.

Recognizing that the vast majority of knowledge production around the world and on the MENA region is being produced in English, the head of one independent media outlet based in Lebanon describes how her team has worked to deconstruct, break down, and present in an accessible format English-language research and policy papers into Arabic. They have worked on making their formats more friendly and presented the topics in a language that is more accessible. As a result, she says, "we have reached a bit of a wider audience," though noting that the "noise of social media" continues to be a significant distractor. Another founder of a different media outlet, also based in Lebanon, reacts with her comment and notes: "Amid the noise, people are looking for gem content, not just doom scrolling, so there is an opportunity here." He states that there have been success stories worth noting from the feminist knowledge production space, which has

been able to reach the everyday public and drive the conversation with a feminist language and framing.

When knowledge producers have put audience engagement as one of the key objectives of a project or strategy, rather than an afterthought following the completion of the research, they have tended to see tangible success. One Lebanon-based focus group participant says that working with a marketing company from the beginning of the process and keeping the audience in mind on day one has been an effective strategy for them. In one instance, the outlet that she runs had produced 4,000 words of writing on LGBTQI+ issues and then worked with a marketing company to produce four videos made up of 250 words each. Though there was some hate speech on the posts once the videos were released to the general public, there was also a dynamic conversation among many users. “We saw higher viewership and higher engagement,” she says. They had similar success when replicating this model on the issue of climate change.

Another focus group participant who works at an Egypt-based human rights organization weighs in that for her organization, it’s not just about getting high engagement numbers, but rather, about reaching the right people. She says: “Some issues are going to impact a larger group of people, and some are going to impact a smaller group, and this is okay.” She says that it’s equally important to invest “in a loyal audience who is engaged; make them a part of the community and understand their profile and who they are.” A focus group participant who works on Iraq and Syria says that in her experience, the data-driven organization which she runs has not had to remove nuance from the content it produces on social media to reach significant audience numbers. “We bet on the intelligence of people,” she says, explaining how they have gotten positive engagement on social media, particularly Twitter, and how people have been able to consume information.

Cross-publication has also been an important strategy for knowledge-producers looking to access new audiences. “When we collaborate with different outlets and organizations, we reach new and different audiences,” said one Lebanon-based focus group participant. She did caveat this by saying however, that effective collaborations require extra work that is not always possible, buy-in at the director level, and engagement by both parties to the collaboration. In her experience, when done right, it’s been “worth it in terms of numbers, visibility, and impact.” Another Egypt-based participant agreed but added: “You should be strategic with partnerships and very clear on what to expect. You need to associate with people who you are comfortable associating with,” she added, referencing the changing landscape particularly following October 7, 2023.

Recommendations for Donors on Knowledge Production and Dissemination

The challenges uncovered in this paper as well as the techniques developed and deployed by knowledge producers to overcome them helps us identify a number of recommendations for donors and fellow knowledge producers to strengthen knowledge production in the MENA region as well as to improve the dissemination of knowledge produced. In addition to the material discussed thus far in the paper, these recommendations are grounded in conversations with policy makers who engage civil society. These recommendations are also grounded in the authors' own experiences working to translate the knowledge being produced throughout and about the region into tangible policy advice and working to encourage policy makers to act on that advice, while integrating locally grounded analysis in their own assessments.

CSO-driven funding priorities

Many of the knowledge producers and CSOs we engaged in focus groups and interviews cited the challenge of being forced to fit their work into the funding priorities identified by donors. At times, these donors have little to no expertise in the region and area of work. As a result, some CSOs and knowledge producers feel the need to design projects and pursue work that they doubt the value of. They do so in order to be able to secure funding necessary to stay afloat and retain their staff. Further, when topics are trendy, there is a lot of duplication in knowledge production, while other important topics receive little to no attention. This is not a productive use of human and capital resources.

Donors should reduce their focus on trying to set the agenda for the region's knowledge producers and civil society and instead increase collaborative project and program design into their workflow. Ultimately, CSOs and knowledge producers are the experts in their respective areas of work and while donor feedback and collaboration should be a part of the process, donors should develop priorities for programs and projects in direct collaboration with their civil society partners and allow civil society to lead the way. In most cases, CSOs and knowledge producers will be better positioned to capture an array of valuable variables that should inform priorities. They are generally more aware of recent developments and changes on the ground that affect their contexts, as well as the priorities of stakeholders they are engaged with and engaging. They are best able to assess how changes impact risk, but also to create opportunities for impactful knowledge production.

To whatever extent possible, donors should invite their civil society partners to come to them with program and project ideas, rather than ask them to fill predetermined calls for funding. In order for this to be actionable, donors will need to adapt their funding models to allow for more collaborative project and program design and move away from prescriptive, narrow project models.

Rather than set priorities for knowledge producers, donors can work with partners to develop well designed theories of change grounded in their expertise and experience. Those theories of change in turn can guide the activities of partners and over time can be tested, allowing grantees and donors alike to learn which theories of change foster impactful work and share those observations with partners.

To the credit of the donors funding this paper and the other papers that are being produced in this series, this project is a good step and opportunity for civil society to redefine how priorities are set. It is also an opportunity for donors to bring back these ideas and work with colleagues to integrate them into efforts to redesign donors' approach and relationship with partners.

Sustainable and adaptive funding

Financial precarity is a major challenge cited by the knowledge producers that we spoke with. Not only is this a challenge in terms of securing sufficient funding, but also in terms of the uncertainty of constantly needing to reapply for funding and identify projects that CSOs could fulfill, so as to retain staff and keep the lights on, both figuratively and literally. Moreover, many donors are reluctant to adequately fund salaries and overhead costs, particularly via project funding, despite the fact that for many CSOs, staff salaries are their biggest cost and most valuable asset. An emphasis on project-based funding can exacerbate this precarity as well. Further, focus group participants often noted that realities and needs can change quickly, and it is often difficult to secure approval for reappropriating funds from donors that have been strictly allocated to specific purposes, even when funding these activities may no longer make sense. This can result in a waste of funds, as well as missed opportunities.

Donors should continue to transition their emphasis in funding to core funding and reduce their focus on project-based funding. Secure and sustainable CSOs and knowledge producers are better able to plan long term and take advantage of opportunities that require long term commitments and investments. They are also better positioned to be agile and adaptive to our often fast-changing environments. For project-based funding, clear and efficient means for reprogramming funds should be in place to ensure adaptive funding that allows for partners to maximize impact as they navigate dynamic challenges in the dynamic and ever-changing MENA region.

Invest in people, tools, and technology

A number of focus group participants highlighted the limited resources for training and education for staff, and a growing brain drain due to a combination of repression and inadequate resources. They also noted the lack of funding for tools and technology, such as optical character recognition (OCR) and other data gathering technology, in a region where many public records and documents are still in paper form. While donors alone cannot counter these challenges alone, they can work with partners to significantly improve opportunities for knowledge producers in the region and support them in accessing the technology necessary for advancing their research.

Donors should work to increase resources devoted to long term training for knowledge producers. This can include support for scholarships, fellowships, and training programs. This creates opportunities for personal growth and helps knowledge producers train new colleagues as others choose to or are forced to relocate abroad. Investments in educational and training opportunities, as well as access to the latest research tools and technologies, are essential for ensuring that knowledge production is sustainable and efficient.

Democratize access to funding

Many CSOs and knowledge producers that we spoke with discussed hurdles that smaller, local CSOs experience in accessing funding due to the burdensome and costly requirements for applying for and reporting on grants, as well as biases among donors who privilege larger international CSOs and Western credentials. Oftentimes, CSOs and knowledge producers are forced to act as subcontractors and sub-grantees for larger CSOs who retain a large share or even the bulk of the funding, while making a minimal contribution beyond soliciting and managing the grant. Larger groups like these can also afford to invest in full-time staff who focus on securing and reporting on grants, while smaller CSOs with limited staff lack the capacity to have teams devoted to such tasks.

Donors should streamline funding applications and prioritize funding streams that go directly to CSOs working on the ground or those that are actively partnering with CSOs and knowledge producers on the ground. They should avoid an emphasis on funding streams to larger CSOs which act primarily as a contractor, rather than a genuine partner with local groups. Donors should also invest in donor capacity to engage with CSOs in Arabic to reduce language barriers that privilege Western language training and limit the access of knowledge producers who don't speak a Western language. This could help advance the recommendation articulated by those interviewed who wanted to see a decolonization of knowledge production in terms of the language knowledge is produced in, as well as how topics for knowledge production are selected.

Communication and dissemination cannot be an afterthought

When discussing the challenges in disseminating knowledge, CSOs and knowledge producers cited a variety of issues. Many CSOs work in environments with various levels of government censorship and restrictions. Additionally, there are often insufficient platforms available to publish and distribute CSO findings and publications. Donors often seek English language content, but the domestic audiences of most MENA knowledge producers are primarily Arabic speakers. Moreover, irrespective of language barriers, much of the content that certain CSOs and knowledge producers publish can be challenging for a lay audience to understand, as this content is often dense, academic, and technical. Some focus group participants highlighted that they encounter a lack of clarity in terms of target audiences and inadequate experience and capacity to adapt framing when target audiences are identified. CSOs face difficulty securing sufficient funding to produce more engaging content, which is often cost intensive.

Without effective and well-targeted dissemination, the knowledge produced will have limited impact, failing to benefit relevant stakeholders. Addressing this requires both a committed strategy and targeted investments. Donors should work with partners to strengthen their in-house communications capacity. Oftentimes, communications capacity is funded through a patchwork of portions of different grants. Projects rarely have the necessary funding directly going to communications, marketing, and dissemination, despite it being essential for impact. Donors should mainstream conversations about and support for communications. They should discuss in detail with partners how they plan to communicate, the audiences they seek to target, and what resources they realistically need to operationalize their plans successfully. More funds should be made available not only to support in-house communications capacity, but also to contract the development of multimedia content that makes content more accessible and engaging for CSOs' and knowledge producers' respective target audiences. CSOs should be encouraged to consider whether having designers, animators, and other communications specialists as contractors or staff members make sense. Funds need to be available to support their ability to engage these specialists.

Focus group participants were consistent in their recommendation that more spaces for publishing and showcasing knowledge was needed. They identified insufficient spaces overall but also noted that available spaces often fail to adequately engage target audiences, especially when the national public is the intended audience. Donors should continue to support independent media platforms and invest financial and in-kind, technical support to work with media outlets to become more mainstream and reach a wider general audience when aligned with their missions.

Aside from funding, donors can help by deepening their own capacity to help partners connect with mainstream outlets to place op-eds, be quoted in interviews, and otherwise disseminate knowledge through existing widely-read and viewed platforms. This will help bridge gaps between the findings and work of civil society and public discourse, strengthening the impact of knowledge producers and their work.

Finally, communications should not be siloed and limited to communications specialists. Donors should fund and make available training sessions and workshops to ensure that knowledge producers understand and integrate communications priorities into their work and planning. Staff-wide communications training sessions and workshops should include thinking about who their audience is, understanding their audience's priorities, and planning how to frame their content to connect with their audience and their respective priorities.

Deepen ethical guidelines

Knowledge producers in the MENA region struggle enough with censorship and restrictions imposed by their own governments; however, following October 7, 2023, in particular, there was a tightening by some donors, particularly those with governmental affiliations, on content that was critical of Israel. Moreover, foreign funding from states that have backed Israel as it conducts mass atrocities in Gaza and Lebanon can endanger CSO partners and harm their reputations domestically.

Donors should establish clear anti-reprisal policies that protect partners from politically-motivated actions that cut off funding for CSOs and knowledge producers due to disagreements on their governments' foreign policy views. They should, to what extent possible, establish independence between themselves and governments that fund them, both to strengthen their ability to guarantee such anti-reprisal protections, as well as to reduce reputational risks for partners. Normalizing such institutional independence now is also important for slowing likely political interventions as the election of far-right governments is currently on the rise.

Collaborating with other donors to coordinate

Focus group participants and interviewees have received funding from a diversity of donors, but they have also experienced many of the same obstacles and challenges in their dealings with donors across the board.

As such, it is highly recommended that donors hold meetings and discussions amongst each other to share feedback, exchange lessons learned, coordinate on areas of mutual interest, divide and conquer on areas not already covered, and establish codes of conduct when appropriate.

Recommendations for Donors on Programmatic Priorities

In addition to the above recommendations for donors on best practices vis-a-vis funding knowledge production and dissemination across the MENA region, the authors of this paper would also like to highlight a few programmatic priorities on which there is insufficient knowledge production and that merit additional funding. These examples are, by no means, exhaustive; however, they are meant to offer some paradigmatic options for engagement in the current moment.

Political and economic reconstruction

Several countries in the region are emerging from economic or political crises and/or war. Lebanon and Syria, for example, have new governments and are embarking on sensitive political transitions, while working to rebuild after war and displacement; in Syria's case, this reconstruction is also taking place following the fall of a 54-year brutal regime. Gaza is navigating a tenuous ceasefire, while Palestinians will be faced with pressures to renegotiate governance structures and attempt to rebuild in the wake of Gaza and amid intensifying violence in the West Bank. Sudan, Yemen, and Libya are all in various stages of civil conflict and political turmoil that will require both political and economic reconstruction and recovery in due time.

The need for policy solutions grounded in sound research informed by the needs and aspirations of communities on the ground are vitally important as both national policy makers and their international partners work to navigate challenging transitions with the aim of durable stabilization that sets countries on the path to peaceful, inclusive futures. Research is needed to inform what justice-oriented transitions and reconstruction processes look like for each of these contexts, to understand what the priorities of those most impacted look like, and to offer a way forward. This includes research on institutional and governance reform; legal institutions that can protect the rule of law; inclusive and accountable governing systems; and realistic, yet inclusive economic reforms that can stabilize the state's finances, while ensuring the inclusion and protection of vulnerable groups to foster environments conducive to durable transitions. Donors should look to support this work for ongoing transitions and in anticipation of future ones when the opportunity arises.

Incorporating Sudan into the MENA region

Though knowledge production and dissemination in and on the MENA region is under-funded across the board and there are many deserving country contexts in need of donor attention and support, one area that the authors of this paper find to be severely under-funded in MENA programming is that of Sudan.

More often than not, governments, CSOs, and multilateral organizations situate Sudan in Africa and exclude it from the MENA region. While Sudan is, of course, an African nation with strong links across the continent, it is also a MENA country and a member of the Arab League. It is also impossible to comprehensively understand Sudan's context and challenges without examining its links to the MENA region, which requires that MENA departments and CSOs be included in the analysis and discussion of Sudan.

Sudan - much like Lebanon and Iraq - underwent a popular uprising in 2019. And Sudan - much like countries across the MENA region today - is experiencing conflict that is exacerbated at the hands of regional powers from across the MENA region. Understanding Sudan is critical to understanding the modern MENA region and vice versa, and so, it is essential for donors to support knowledge production that delves deeper into Sudan as a part of the MENA region to enhance understanding of an oft-ignored context. Furthermore, it is essential for donors to support knowledge production that incorporates Sudan comparatively when identifying lessons learned and producing region-wide analysis on the greater MENA region.

Mapping external actors

Throughout the region, external powers are influencing in-country and across-region developments and can play existential roles in fueling conflicts, influencing the economy, and shaping political power. While the role of external actors is often considered on a case by case basis, one area that is ripe for greater knowledge production is understanding the motivations, actions, and impact of external powers across the MENA region. This includes but is not limited to Gulf countries and countries within the Global North.

Knowledge producers are increasingly finding it important to map and understand the practices of regional actors and begin to understand to what extent there exist broader strategies in their efforts to shape events and power dynamics throughout the region. Despite this, they often lack the resources and funding to track, study, and delve into a new country context. These external actors are key to resolving military conflicts, achieving political settlements, and securing inclusive and durable economic reforms.

It is important for donors to support cross-cutting multidisciplinary analysis in this vein, to facilitate knowledge exchange on this issue among different stakeholders, and to support knowledge producers as they expand their capacities in this area. Doing so will help inform concrete and actionable policy recommendations that may prove essential for unlocking solutions to many of the region's most durable challenges.

Investing in policy advocacy experience

There often exists a disconnect between the rich body of knowledge produced in and about the MENA region and the policies pursued in and towards the region. Many knowledge producers produce knowledge in formats that don't easily reach or resonate with policy makers, while their work is highly relevant to policy making and could strengthen policy in a number of ways. Donors should consider working with groups that have developed policy advocacy experience to assist in filling this broader gap in the knowledge production space.

Programming can include developing materials on how to frame and structure policy relevant-knowledge to increase its resonance with policy makers; how to develop actionable policy recommendations that allow for operationalizing the findings of knowledge producers; how to identify and engage with relevant policy makers to convincingly communicate analysis and recommendations that can be integrated into policy decisions; and how to develop and sustain advocacy campaigns. In addition, training sessions on advocacy can be funded to increase the in-house advocacy capacity of CSOs and expand the pool of organizations with the capacity to translate their knowledge production into policy. Investing in training a new generation of advocates through policy-oriented fellowship opportunities offers a sustainable model for growing the community of knowledge producers capable of reaching and influencing policy makers to ensure that the needs and aspirations of the region are centered in policy discussions about the region. Finally, donors should support partnerships between organizations with robust advocacy experience and knowledge producers. Activities in need of support include consultations, the hosting of delegations, and the organization of virtual and in-person policy briefings through their networks.

Recommendations for Knowledge Producers and CSOs on Knowledge Production and Dissemination

The following recommendations constitute a form of knowledge sharing between CSOs and knowledge producers for the purpose of learning from one another on how to navigate the array of challenges they encounter in their work, as well as how to increase the reach and impact of their work. These recommendations are based on the insight of focus group participants, as well as interviews with policy makers who regularly engage with civil society.

Targeting and framing are essential for policy impact

Policy makers we spoke with noted the importance of thoughtfully identifying the right officials to target, depending on the policies that CSOs aim to inform or influence. Policy makers said that, at times, CSOs would target officials who have little influence or oversight over the issue they wanted to discuss just because they were present in the same city; this was especially so for groups with a presence in Brussels. These policy makers noted that, at times, the most influential targets were actually in their respective capitals and that knowledge producers should do more work to reach officials in capitals, if they aim to successfully impact decisions being taken. Some policy makers also noted that pressure from legislatures is powerful in influencing the priorities of foreign or finance ministries and suggested that knowledge producers and CSOs should consider engaging directly with legislators who may be interested in the points they seek to raise and the recommendations they would like to deliver.

Framing was also an important issue raised by these policy makers. Policy makers noted that knowledge producers and CSOs should frame their issues and recommendations with the priorities of the respective governments that they are engaging in mind. By way of example, one diplomat noted that when it comes to Gaza, knowledge producers and CSOs will be most impactful if they link the war in Gaza to two of the top concerns in European capitals - migration and radicalization - adding, "speak to their core interests."

Policy makers noted that concise, knowledge-forward briefs with implementable recommendations are the most effective in driving the policy conversation. One diplomat suggested that many policy makers are overworked and at times, lazy. Recommendations that are crafted with the priorities of decision makers in mind are ideal. The diplomat reiterated the value of recommendations that can be "copy-pasted" repeatedly during an interview. General

recommendations that lack specificity are much less likely to be transmitted up the chain of command.

Reliance on data and statistics is also extremely helpful for summarizing and elucidating key points. Whether poverty figures or political prisoner estimates, policy makers find tangible data easier to understand and more “catchy,” as one official put it. Knowledge producers and CSOs should keep in mind that senior policy officials have limited time and cover a wide range of issues, so the more concisely that government officials briefing their bosses can summarize the key problem and proposed solutions, the more likely it is for a knowledge producer’s information and recommendations to make it into a briefing of senior officials.

The length and format for impactfully disseminating knowledge production varies depending on the goal. When knowledge producers seek to directly impact specific policy decisions, briefs and recommendations that are concise, easy to digest, and simple to summarize are key. For impact on longer term assessments, such as assessments of risks for asylum seekers, long-form reporting on conditions in individual countries with detailed data is impactful and important. Further, in terms of dissemination, one diplomat noted that it can be impactful for local CSOs to work with larger organizations, such as UN bodies or international organizations to get their knowledge cited by them; these larger, international entities are viewed by many governments as credible sources that can be most readily cited in official reports, added the diplomat.

Complementarity between diaspora and local CSOs and knowledge producers

There exists a plethora of challenges for CSOs and knowledge producers working in the MENA region, many of which are detailed in this paper. Local groups face high levels of repression, major funding challenges and restrictions, language barriers, and discrimination by donors and policy makers, among other issues. These combined challenges contribute to a growing brain drain that further weakens the ability of knowledge producers to find and retain qualified staff. In addition to aforementioned recommendations to donors, there are also solutions developed by civil society themselves that can help mitigate some of these challenges as well.

As pressures in the region have led a growing number of knowledge producers to relocate to the diaspora, many diaspora groups have emerged with strong local ties and contacts who are learning to leverage their new locations to strengthen their impact. The mainstreaming of safe and secure communications platforms and virtual meetings over the past five years have significantly strengthened the level of communication and coordination between local and diaspora groups. This comes with a series of benefits.

Diaspora groups are often able to platform and disseminate knowledge produced in the region with decision makers globally in real time. Diaspora and local groups should strategize on messaging, priorities, and opportunities, while deepening their networks in their respective locations. The networks that diaspora groups are building can help improve the access of local groups and the knowledge they produce to international halls of power, increasing their potential impact on decision makers engaged in the region.

By strategically collaborating with diaspora partners, local groups may be better able to influence the agendas of policy makers by helping determine the substance and framing of the knowledge shared with policy makers abroad. Thanks to the mainstreaming of virtual meetings during the pandemic, joint meetings with policy makers, diaspora groups, and local organizations are increasingly common.

There are also organizations like TIMEP and the Arab Reform Initiative that, while headquartered in the diaspora, are increasingly hybrid organizations with staff and fellows located in the region and the diaspora. Such structures help break down geographic siloes, affording stable employment opportunities to local knowledge producers, but also more democratic and equitable partnerships between local and diaspora groups. This model may help replace the unequal funding model that a number of focus group participants raised concerns about, where some large international organizations function more as contractors than partners, controlling access to funds and the setting of priorities.

This new generation of diaspora-local cooperation and collaboration is still in a nascent phase and with the deepening of repression in much of the MENA region, will likely play a growing role in efforts to ensure knowledge production and dissemination is sustainable. Nonetheless diaspora groups cannot function as a replacement for the vital work done by local organizations, which is why investing in and supporting local organizations must remain a top priority.

Complementarity between political and social and economic rights

There is a widespread frustration that knowledge produced is falling on deaf ears among policy audiences and the general public. Even if audiences receive and review the information, it may fail to translate into policy or capture the attention of senior officials. Increasingly, creative framing is being instrumentalized as part of the effort to overcome this challenge. A growing number of CSOs and knowledge producers have worked to connect their work on political rights to work on social and economic rights. This comes with a number of potential advantages.

For one, the economy does not exist in a silo, and economic challenges are fundamentally political. Efforts to build or strengthen more inclusive economies require an inclusive analysis that integrates political, governance, and social variables along with economic ones, to understand the sources of challenges, as well as to develop realistic and impactful solutions.

Additionally, the public in many MENA countries are primarily focused on their economic challenges and regional leaders have often said that they have to address their respective weak economies before considering work on improving political rights. Officials of foreign governments often accept this argumentation at face value.

Showing that economic challenges are to a large extent rooted in political or governance challenges does two things. With respect to the general public, it shows that political rights are fundamental to addressing their economic concerns and cannot be separated or delayed, if they hope to see economic progress. Moreover, demonstrating that political rights violations and poor governance are central to a country's economic problems will often elevate political concerns as a priority for policy makers who are generally more concerned about economic instability than violations of political rights.

Showing how a lack of transparency, unaccountable governance, and a heavily repressed press all contribute to poor economic outcomes helps refocus the attention of policy makers on these issues and encourages integrating these variables in solutions they pursue.

Conclusion

Knowledge production in and on the MENA region has the potential to have significant impacts for the region - not only by informing the general public, but also by building up the capacity of CSOs and experts to re-imagine policy solutions, and informing policy interventions that meaningfully respond to challenges via their root causes.

By funding knowledge production in a manner that reflects the priorities of those on the ground and those who understand the region best, donors around the world have a unique opportunity to make a tangible impact. As authors of this paper, we hope this initiative advances that mission.

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4. Syrian Civil Society and Democratic Transformation Pathways: A Critical Assessment of Conflict and NGO-ization Legacies

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Introduction

The fall of Assad regime in December 2024 is a critical juncture in the history of Syria after decades of authoritarian regime including 14 years of suffer from protracted conflict that Destroyed the foundations of development distorted the public institutions fragmented the country and wasted the resources. This created an exceptional opportunity for civil society to genuinely contribute to the country's transformation from conflict to peace and justice, despite the enormous challenges that is associated with then transitional context such as the societal grievances and the conflict-centered institutions. Civil society, in broad definition included NGOs, unions, professional associations, grassroots and communities' initiatives Among others, has a crucial role and the transformation process on political societal economic and environmental aspects.

This paper assesses the key civic space and civil society institutions challenges and opportunities and the transitional process, through examining the political and legislative context, the societal relations and identity politics, the economic dynamics and available funds, the governance of civil society institutions, the engagement between these institutions and communities' donors and authorities, and the potential functions of civil society and the transformative strategies. The paper relied on extensive literature review, field work observations and interviews, stakeholder workshop, citizenship and social solidarity surveys that were conducted by SCPR 2022-2025. The aim is to provide a policy-relevant assessment of Syrian civil society's challenges during the conflict and to outline transformative strategies for its effective contribution to peace and democracy.

The Syrian Context

Syria's modern history has been characterized by authoritarian rule that severely constrained independent civil society. Since the Baath Party took power in 1963, genuine civic space was virtually closed, dissent was harshly repressed, and only regime-aligned mass organizations were permitted to operate at scale. Security services monitored or shut down nascent civil initiatives, and a brief "Damascus Spring" in 2000–2001 opened limited political space through intellectual forums and calls for reform, but it was quickly stifled by arrests and intimidation (SCPR, 2013). Thus, on the eve of the 2011 uprising, Syria's civil society largely comprised either informal, community-based networks (e.g. religious charities) or state-sponsored entities (e.g. the Baath Party's unions and youth organizations), with minimal autonomy.

The 2011 uprising and subsequent conflict profoundly shifted this landscape, as new grassroots civic structures emerged, such as local coordination committees, relief networks, independent media collectives, and human rights groups, to establish an activist role of civil society. Over time, however, the civil movement was overshadowed by militarization and fragmentation of the conflict, where many civil society activists were killed, detained, or driven into exile by the regime's crackdown and the rise of extremist armed groups.

By December 2024, the toll of conflict on Syrian society was catastrophic as millions of Syrians experienced killing, torture, disability, displacement, and widespread poverty (SCPR, 2024). The conflict's legacy has been devastating for the country's institutional structures, social relations, and even its economic, environmental and cultural resources (SCPR, 2024). Furthermore, the first period after the fall of the Assad regime (Dec 2024–Jun 2025) was associated with political instability continued territorial fragmentation, and limited transparency in transitional justice processes. Nevertheless, the transitional period remains a critical window for civil society to influence democratic and inclusive transformation toward justice and sustainable peace.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

There is a rich literature on the crucial role of civil society institutions in channeling people priorities and aspirations, bridging the relations between state and society, promoting accountability, and enabling pluralism within society (Habermas, 1989; Cohen and Arato, 1992; Diamond, 1994; and Putnam, 1993). Additionally, civil society participates in supporting vulnerable populations, facilitating dialogue, observing human rights and documenting violations, and delivering humanitarian assistance (SCPR, 2023; Lederach, 1997).

At the same time, contemporary debates increasingly challenge the so-called liberal and technical assumptions regarding the role and function of civil society that dominate mainstream discourse. In this regard, the critical conflict-transformation scholarship stresses the oversimplification of the

claim that often frame civil society as a neutral sphere between the state and citizens, as civil actors may mitigate violence, reproduce conflict dynamics, or contribute to transformation depending on how they are positioned within power relations, social relations, and political economy structures (Fischer, 2006; Marchetti and Tocci, 2009).

The conflict context is associated with factors that affect the civil society role such as, donor governance models that prioritize measurable outputs and risk management, or prioritizing humanitarian interventions compared to development ones. These technical conditionalities can constrain the capacity of civic actors to engage with core challenges such as enhancing political participation and justice (Dörner and List, 2012; Van Leeuwen and Verkoren, 2012; Edwards, 2010; Fowler, 2013). Moreover, the critiques in the literature grew, especially for the concentration on the reduced form of civil society as registered NGOs and funded projects which is often described as “NGOization” (Jad, 2003; Tabar, 2024). It refers to dominance of project-based organizations that focus on service delivery and short-term outputs affected by pursuing management professionalization. This management advantages of this approach negatively affected the voluntary work and the collective action, including grassroots struggles, unions, community initiatives, and broader forms of civic mobilization (Al Jayousi and Nishide, 2024; Banks et al., 2015; Da’na, 2015; Shivji, 2007; Alvarez, 1999).

This role of civil society is part of the neoliberal paradigm that usually reduces civil society’s capacity to influence public policy by favoring service delivery over community engagement and political participation (Van Leeuwen and Verkoren, 2012; Da’na, 2015). The NGOization transformed the role civil society in many cases from a political and social transformation to service-based projects that fill the gaps of state inefficiency or withdrawal (Banks et al., 2015). Accountability towards communities and affected populations declined in this approach and it was replaced by accountability to donors and international actors. (Banks et al., 2015; Da’na, 2015).

Markets and donors in the neoliberal paradigm restructure civil society governance by depending on outsourcing and humanitarian contracting in parallel with the shrinking in state role in social security (Ferguson, 1994; Harvey, 2005). Additionally, within this paradigm the civil society role becomes increasingly depoliticized, focused on needs, beneficiaries, and resilience, rather than rights, redistribution, and political participation. Depoliticization is particularly intense in conflict and post-conflict environments, where humanitarian priorities and security agendas overlap, and NGOs are frequently incentivized to adopt neutral or apolitical positions to maintain access, funding, and operational safety (Duffield, 2007; Howell and Lind, 2009).

However, such neutrality is itself political by focusing on service delivery and market-supporting activities, NGOs may inadvertently stabilize unequal power relations and contribute to the normalization of authoritarian or militarized governance (Pugh et al., 2004; Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Pearce, 2010). In conflict context, NGOs may become subordinated to dominant war actors

and involved in reproducing conflict economies and forms of social control (Pugh et al., 2004; SCPR, 2023; Marchetti and Tocci, 2009).

In contrast to the narrow NGO-centric model, many experiences from Latin America, Africa, and South Asia advances a broader and more political understanding of civil society, encompassing social movements, labor unions, cooperatives, feminist collectives, and community-based initiatives (Dagnino, 2007; Gaventa, 2006). These traditions emphasize civil society as a space of struggle, where collective action challenges both state domination and market exploitation. The transformative civil society emerges from rooted social practices that link participation, economic justice, and institutional reform (Coraggio, 2011). While in conflict context, solidarity, justice, and political agency shall be prioritized as foundations for peace and reconstruction (Pearce, 2010; Novelli et al., 2017).

These critiques are relevant in Syria, where civil society that has expanded substantially in different controlled areas inside and outside the country, to play essential role in supporting affected populations, however, the sector is fragmented structurally and politically, with NGOs increasingly dependent on donors and operating within highly constrained civic spaces (Khalaf, 2015; Pearlman, 2019). In many cases, NGOs became absorbed into service-oriented agendas at the expense of political participation and structural transformation (Khalaf, 2015; Datzberger and Nguyen, 2018).

Taken together, this study examines the structural challenges that face the Syrian civil society and possibilities of moving its role beyond service delivery toward alternative models grounded in solidarity, and political and social transformation.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative approach, drawing on insights from a participatory workshop convened by the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) in May 2025, in which 18 Syrian researchers and activists from across the country discussed political participation, citizenship, and the future role of civil society. The workshop transcript was coded and analyzed thematically. Additionally, the study is based on a desk review of literature and reports on the role of civil society in conflict and post-conflict contexts. It builds the analysis on data produced by SCPR in Citizenship research (2022) and Social Solidarity research (2023); both studies interviewed more than 400 key informants across Syria. Finally, the paper draws on the results of the Asfari Foundation workshop in Berlin (2023) on the evaluation of the role of civil society, and SCPR's (2019) analysis of conflict economies and civil society.

In addition to thematic analysis of workshop discussions and the desk review, the study employed participatory scenario building to structure uncertainty and generate policy-relevant options.

Building on the Shell Scenario Planning model (Wack, 1985; Wilkinson and Kupers, 2013), the research team used the May 2025 SCPR workshop to identify and prioritize key drivers shaping civil society's operating environment and map plausible trajectories for civic space and civil society roles over the subsequent two-year period (SCPR, 2025).

In addition to thematic analysis, which focused on the challenges, the study employed a scenario-building methodology based on Schell's scenario planning model (Wack, 1985; Wilkinson and Kupers, 2013). Within this framework, the research team developed during the workshop, a baseline scenario has been built based on an analysis of key actors, their potential strategies, and the factors influencing civic space over the following two years (SCPR, 2025). Finally, the study proposes strategies for overcoming the challenges faced during the conflict, drawing on political, social, and economic approaches.

It is important to note that this study has several limitations, including its reliance on qualitative inputs (workshop discussions, field observations, and interviews) and on field studies conducted in Syria. While these sources provide depth and are sensitive to the Syrian context, they may not fully capture the rapid changes occurring after December 2024, nor may they represent all regions with the same depth. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an in-depth and policy-relevant analysis, but not as a comprehensive or generalizable analysis applicable to all regions and communities in Syria. Furthermore, the study adhered to ethical research standards, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and do-nothing practices. Data was carefully handled to minimize risks, including restricting access to information related to a specific location or organizations.

Key Challenges of Civil Society During the Conflict

The civil society in Syria played an important role during the conflict, yet its role has been deeply ambivalent. This section outlines key challenges based on the study's sources, including context-related challenges (political oppression, geopolitical influence, conflict-economy dynamics, and the destruction of tangible and intangible resources) and internal challenges to civil society (governance, relations with communities, capacity, and resources).

Service Provision Roles

Civil society in Syria, despite noted expansion in its presence and impact over the past decade, has been marginalized by the dominance of militarization, human rights grave violations, political and social fragmentation, conflict economies, and external interventions. Many civil actors focus on humanitarian relief and service provision, on expense of development, governance and human

rights. Additionally, many of the activities of NGOs and initiatives has been reactive, addressing immediate needs or responding to opportunities presented by political actors or donors (Asfari, 2023; SCPR, 2025).

There is considerable debate among Syrian activists regarding civil society's role in shaping public policy, particularly in relation to achieving a political resolution to the conflict. Some argue that civil society should refrain from political involvement, which they view the purview of political parties, and instead focus on operating within a defined legal framework. Others maintain that civil society has a fundamental political role, albeit without seeking direct political power, by influencing public policies, establishing institutions that represent the priorities of Syrian society, and holding authorities accountable (Asfari, 2023). It is worth mentioning that this debate is not limited to the Syrian case, as it has already been discussed intensively in the Palestinian case (Jad, 2003) and the Lebanese case (Halawi and Salloukh, 2020).

According to participants in Asfari workshops 2023, civil society should work for the common good, fostering a genuine connection with the community, while remaining independent from societal or political pressures that perpetuate oppression or contradict human rights, justice, and sustainability. It is an integral part of society, engaging actively to transform the drivers of violence, discrimination, marginalization, and exploitation into foundations for political, social, cultural, and economic peace. This is particularly important given the transformation of state institutions into authoritarian entities hostile to society and the ascendance of economic forces that perpetuate conflict-driven economies (Asfari, 2023).

Poor Governance and Coordination

Many civil society institutions and initiatives suffer from weak governance, whether in participation, representation of community priorities, work ethics, effectiveness and efficiency, human-resource development, or financial sustainability. In some cases, organizations unintentionally create authoritarian structures shaped by surrounding circumstances. In this regard, strengthening inclusive governance and adopting human rights, participation, accountability, and transparency as a culture and practice, in design, implementation, and follow-up, is essential to align stated tasks with organizational behavior (SCPR, 2025; Asfari 2023). Civil society needs to critically assess the experience of governance in the last 14 years to extract lessons learned and establish sound governance for the post conflict era.

"The Syrian civil society suffers from weak institutional and human capacities, and a culture of competition rather than integration, which limits the effectiveness of networking between organizations" (SCPR, 2025).

Civil society also suffers from substantial loss of human capital for several reasons during the conflict, including killing, displacement, disability, or moving to another sector. Additionally, the

activists suffer from “psychological challenges and work burnout, which create a substantial drain in human capital” (SCPR, 2025).

Fragmentation and project-based funding also undermine coordination and integration. Therefore, it is crucial to build coordination around shared values and goals and to create links between actors inside and outside Syria, across different areas of control and the social, political, and cultural rifts created by years of conflict. Such interconnectedness strengthens civil society and improves its ability to build more equal relationships with internal and external parties—whether “allies” or “opponents” (Asfari, 2023).

“The civil sector suffers of dispersion, division, and weak coordination. The division within civil society takes on the form of implicit violence and a struggle for entitlement, visibility, and representation” (SCPR, 2025)

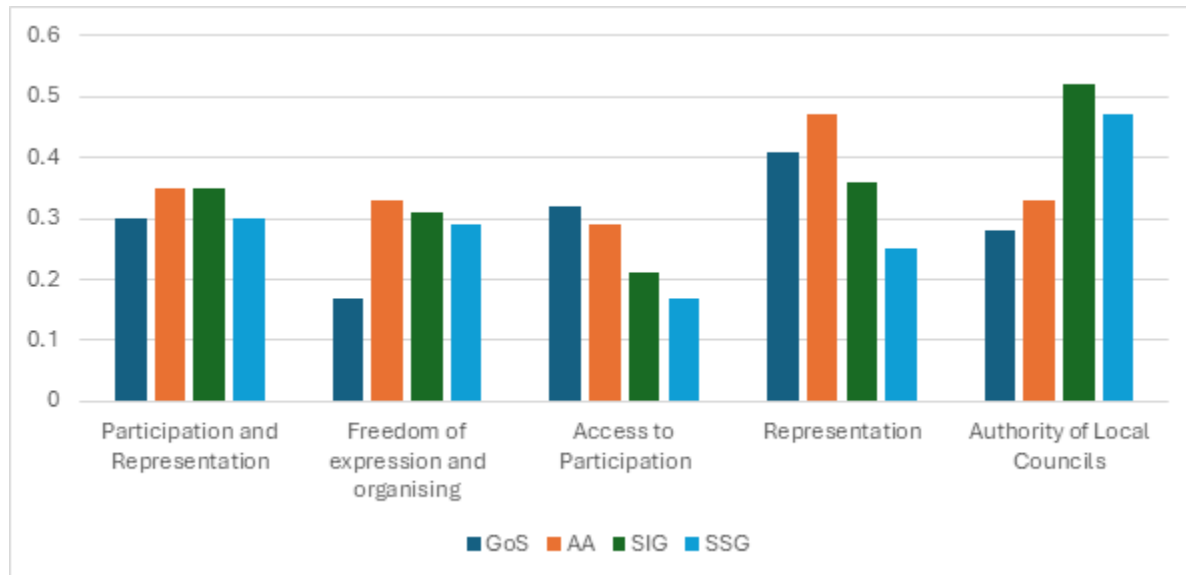
Joint work can expand influence at local, national, and international levels, and reduce the risks of division or captured by authoritarian powers. Integration also enables regionally differentiated strategies, e.g., dialogue where possible and advocacy where feasible maximizing the use of human resources and accumulated experiences across regions (Asfari, 2023; SCPR, 2025).

Civil Society and Politics

Civil society in Syria faces significant obstacles due to the country's fragmented and authoritarian political landscape. These challenges during the conflict depend on who controlled the area (Figure 1). In Regime-controlled areas, security forces restrict CSO activity mostly to socio-economic matters, and political repression severely restricted any meaningful public engagement. In Autonomous Administration (AA) areas, there is still centralized power as the PYD dominates. In this context, civil society worked in a restricted space, but it was not as limited as in the regime areas. In Syrian Interim Government (SIG) areas, Turkey heavily influences local governance, restricting CSO activities, and demands for broader participation were generally ignored. Finally, in Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) areas, control by HTS limits CSO activities, and access to decision-making depends on connections to HTS or financial influence. The country was under severely fragmented tyrannical authorities that prevented participation and accountability and used brutal violence to suppress civic activities (SCPR, 2023).

Figure 1: Participation and Representation Index and Sub-indicators in Syria 2023

(0 worst- 1 best)



SCPR 2023, Citizenship Research

Finally, the fall of the Assad regime created wider space for civil society to evolve in the public sphere. However, early signals of repression, including the persistence of fragmentation and weak rule of law, began to appear, reflecting governance practices of HTS observed previously in Idlib (SCPR, 2025).

“Political repression and the shrinking of civil space pose the greatest challenge to the current government, given its negative view of civil society. It treats it as a “need of necessity” rather than recognizing its fundamental role in development” (SCPR, 2025).

Political repression is associated with security barriers and ongoing conflict in several areas, hindering expansion of civic work. Furthermore, restrictive legal and bureaucratic frameworks, particularly the Associations Law, constitute significant obstacles. For example, licensing procedures can include a six-month “trial” period that enables direct government intervention.

Within this context, the question of whether civil society groups should engage in politics or remain neutral providers of aid became a defining tension. Some organizations openly aligned with political factions or revolutionary goals, for instance, NGOs associated with opposition structures or diaspora political networks, and those in AA areas operating within de facto authorities’ frameworks. These groups, often referred to as politicized actors, viewed themselves as resisting oppression or building a new political system. Their engagement sometimes increased influence over events (e.g., advocacy, agenda setting, governance preparation). However,

politicization also carried costs: perceived partisanship could damage impartiality, limit access across geographies, and make organizations targets. In addition, some armed groups formed affiliated organizations, blurring civilian and military boundaries and sometimes enabling diversion or misuse of aid.

The Syrian case illustrates that “political” versus “neutral” roles are not binary but exist on a continuum. A key lesson is the importance of civil society independence, both from partisan political interference and from undue donor influence. Achieving this requires formal guarantees of civic freedoms as well as cultural change that recognizes civil society as a legitimate critic and partner. During the conflict, such conditions were largely absent, both constraining civil society influence and explaining why neutrality was sometimes adopted as a survival strategy.

Humanitarian Aid Dependency and Relations with the Community

Over the last decade, Syrian civil society became heavily dependent on international humanitarian aid flows, amounting to billions of dollars channeled through UN agencies and NGOs to address Syria’s crises. While this aid was indispensable in averting abject poverty and disease, it fostered a dependency whereby many local civil initiatives could not function without foreign funding and were compelled to align with donor priorities and bureaucratic requirements.

“Over-reliance on external funding leads to a lack of strategic thinking and sustainability...” (SCPR, 2025)

Programs were often designed in line with global templates (like food security, psychosocial support programs), sometimes disconnected from local evolving needs on the ground. Aid distribution in Syria was frequently subject to political negotiation, the regime sought to control UN aid in its areas, while cross-border aid to opposition zones depended on Security Council mandates, donor politics, and non-state actors’ agendas. This created uneven coverage and inefficiencies, and the humanitarian sector’s dominance arguably crowded out indigenous coping strategies; some critics described Syrian civil society as being “NGO-ized” and overly projectized, losing flexibility to respond to context as communities themselves would prefer. The incentive system, represented by the wages of workers in the civil sector, shows that workers in its organizations receive, on average, higher wages than workers in the public and private sectors in various regions, as illustrated in Figure 2. Working in NGOs has become a rare opportunity to obtain a high income in light of the conflict, at the expense of community movements and initiatives based on volunteering.

“International interventions and conditions, as short-term funding (6 months to a year) weakens the impact; and reinforces negative images of organizations.” (SCPR, 2025)

Figure 2: Ratio of civil sector wages to public and private sector wages, by actors and areas under their control, during 2024 and 2025



SCPR 2025, CPI Syria's Survey

As Syria moves beyond Assad tyrannic regime , the challenge will be to shift from externally driven humanitarian relief to locally led recovery and development. Recent analyses emphasize that inclusive participation from below is crucial for an effective reconstruction – Syria's revival requires involving different sectors of society, especially the poorer and most vulnerable, not just economic and political elites (Daher, 2025). If the aid paradigm does not change, there is a risk that reconstruction will follow a top-down, donor-led model that could replicate dependency and deepen inequalities. Going forward, fostering local ownership of aid, through local NGO partnerships, community-driven projects, and decentralizing decision-making, could harness the intimate knowledge that Syrian communities have of their own needs.

It is also essential to repair relations between civil society and communities. Several factors widened this gap: capture by military and political interests, donor priorities overriding community needs, geographic selectivity, and programming conducted primarily outside Syria. A sense of elitism also emerged, alongside limited inclusion, community participation, and accountability in project design and implementation (Asfari, 2023). In this context, trust and community support are critical for organizational legitimacy and sustainability (Asfari, 2023).

Identity Politics

The Syrian conflict was fueled and influenced by identity politics based on religion, ethnicity, gender, and class. These identities have been securitized by warring actors on the local, regional, and global level as those actors adopted sectarian narratives, hate speech, and manipulated historical grievances, which created enormous polarization within Syrians and led to grave violations of human rights and brutal massacres (SCPR, 2022). Civil society played a complex and diverse role in politicizing and reducing the politicization of identity in Syria. While some civil institutions contributed to fueling and entrenching divisions, other forces resisted these divisions and tried to build social cohesion.

After the fall of the Assad regime, identity politics posed one of the gravest threats to Syria's unity. For example, in March 2025, violence broke out in the coastal region when remnants of the old regime launched attacks on general security, followed by sectarian killings of civilians by armed groups associated with new authorities. Multiple investigations document post-Assad sectarian violence and serious violations (Amnesty International, 2025a; OHCHR, 2025a; Reuters, 2025), creating contention inside civil society over accountability versus stabilization narratives. Civil society responses reflected deep fragmentation and the war's effects on civic culture, values, and institutions.

At the same time, Western and regional engagement with transitional authorities, including investment packages and sanctions shifts, increase incentives for NGOs to align messaging and operational choices with donor and diplomatic priorities. For instance, the EU's Brussels IX statement frames cooperation with the transitional government as part of enabling a "successful transition" (Council of the European Union, 2025).

Despite fragmentation, some initiatives attempted peacebuilding through local mediation, dialogue meetings, and campaigns against sectarian speech. These efforts were modest in scale, but they represent models to build upon.

Conflict Economies

Before the fall of the regime, Syria's economic situation was deteriorating and witnessed deep recession and high rates of unemployment and poverty. Additionally, the Syrian pound continued to depreciate and inflation surged, increasing organizational operating costs. This forced organizations to further reduce services at a time when citizens were increasingly dependent on them due to the erosion of state capacity and public services. Pressure on civil society to meet basic needs increased, but resources remained insufficient, widening the gap between societal expectations and what organizations could provide. Furthermore, international sanctions remained a major obstacle, slowing the delivery of support to those in need.

Syrian civil society organizations face a difficult balancing act, providing essential humanitarian aid while maintaining independence amid ongoing conflict dynamics. Navigating risks and opportunities places immense pressure on organizations (SCPR, 2019).

“Civic actors are suffering from severe financial weakness as a result of the country's general economic decline” (SCPR, 2025).

Despite efforts by civil society organizations to avoid reinforcing conflict dynamics, room for maneuvering across areas of control remains narrow and is shaped by conflict developments, local authorities, and stability conditions.

Limited independence and compulsion to adapt to dominance actors, through imposed legal/security frameworks and conflict-linked external funding, combined with civil society's location within political-military tensions, enabled penetration of civic space and redirection of activities toward conflict-serving outcomes. The absence of effective and independent local authorities, often replaced by security forces, political parties, armed groups, and de facto powers, undermined local governance and state institutions in favor of dominance actors and their networks (SCPR, 2019; 2025).

Finally, the emergence of war-beneficiary classes and their interest-based relationships with conflict actors, alongside pressure on CSOs to operate primarily as service providers rather than agents of participation and social change, contributed to a distorted relief-and-aid economic structure. In the absence of rule of law and effective accountability mechanisms, dominant actors exploited this structure to expand their economic resources. Many of the policies adopted by the transitional government indicate a preference for the service-oriented role of civil society, on the one hand, and an alliance with the new local and international economic elite that has begun to control reconstruction opportunities through untransparent means, while systematically diminishing the state's developmental role, on the other.

The challenges related to the roles of civil society, as outlined above, highlight the danger of continuing the normalization approach while remaining subordinated to political and security forces and economic elites, and of perpetuating a crisis management role or merely performing civil work. Below, we present the findings of a two-year continuity scenario based on a participatory workshop with experts and actors in Syrian civil society to project the expected state of the sector in 2027.

Baseline Scenario under current situation

This analysis is based on findings from the SCPR workshop held in 2025. It utilizes the Shell Scenario Planning model (Wack, 1985; Wilkinson and Kupers, 2013) to develop a robust and participatory baseline scenario. This approach builds upon a prior analysis of key factors and actors that significantly influence the role of civil society in the Syrian context.

The scenario logic also draws directly on the workshop's thematic coding of participants' interventions, which grouped constraints into external challenges (political repression/shrinking civic space, restrictive legal and bureaucratic frameworks, security fragmentation, economic crisis and sanctions-related banking "overcompliance," donor fatigue and conditionalities, and declining community trust) and internal challenges (institutional capacity gaps, weak internal governance and transparency, fragmentation and poor coordination, over-reliance on external funding, and activist burnout) (SCPR, 2025).

Given the current complexities of the situation, this scenario assumes no fundamental changes in Syria's political, economic, or security landscape over the next two years. Under this scenario, the status quo remains largely unchanged, no inclusive political settlement emerges, and no effective accountability architecture is established, despite the consolidation of the transitional government. The period is assumed to be characterized by continued security-driven governance, unresolved conflict in some areas, deep livelihood stress, and civil society operating within constrained and uneven civic space across multiple authorities (SCPR, 2025).

Under this baseline, the constraints outlined above are likely to persist, and may worsen, with several implications for the role and future of Syrian civil society.

Continued political and security control

Workshop participants emphasized that consolidation under the transitional governance is likely to reproduce an authoritarian operating environment for independent civic action if legal protections, accountability mechanisms, and plural political participation remain absent (SCPR, 2025). Under this trajectory, restrictions may deepen as authorities gain confidence through territorial consolidation and normalization of relations with some Arab and Western countries. Independent civil society activity may be suppressed through arrest, intimidation, or administrative restriction, forcing organizations to choose between two constrained pathways, alignment with state directives under quasi-governmental unions and associations (thereby compromising independence), or operating informally to avoid security crackdowns. Both pathways severely limit civil society effectiveness.

Recent mass violence and allegations of extrajudicial executions—documented in the coastal areas (March 2025) and in Suwayda (July 2025), intensify fear, polarization, and the costs of collective mobilization, further incentivizing apolitical civic work (service delivery and aid) over rights-based advocacy (Amnesty International, 2025a, 2025b).

Furthermore, advocacy and human rights efforts that emerged during the war years (such as documenting violations and defending detainees) are likely to face greater obstacles inside Syria. Without sustained international media coverage, perpetrators may face fewer reputational costs, potentially weakening local accountability claims. In general, civic space is likely to remain closed or semi-closed in government-controlled areas. It may remain partially open in some pockets of

the north outside Damascus's control, but these areas also face de facto authorities that may not tolerate criticism or initiatives outside their control over time.

Under this baseline, the transitional government extends administrative and security presence into north-east Syria through negotiated integration arrangements with SDF authorities. Recent deployments and integration steps indicate a trajectory of consolidation that may narrow civic space and reconfigure local governance. If rights guarantees and inclusive local participation remain weak, the process may increase risks of reprisals, mistrust, and renewed instability (Reuters, 2026; AP, 2026).

The Worsening Economic Crisis

In the absence of any inclusive political solutions, the economic situation in Syria is likely to remain deteriorating or stagnant at very low levels. The Syrian pound will continue to depreciate, and inflation will rise, increasing the operating costs of organizations (from staff wages to purchasing supplies and operational expenses). At the same time, large-scale Gulf-backed investment enabled by sanctions relief may accelerate market opening without minimum governance guarantees, increasing inequality and deepening pressures on civil society to compensate for weak public institutions (Reuters, 2026; AP, 2026). This may force organizations to further reduce services at a time when citizens are increasingly dependent on them due to the erosion of state institutional capacity and public services. As a result, pressure on civil society to meet basic needs will increase while resources remain insufficient, widening the gap between societal expectations and what organizations can deliver.

Moreover, even where sanctions are lifted or eased, civil society may continue to face severe banking and transfer constraints driven by compliance regimes and institutional risk aversion "overcompliance", alongside rising operating costs and donor fatigue—dynamics repeatedly emphasized in workshop discussions (SCPR, 2025).

Syrian activists have warned that the absence of rapid and effective support mechanisms threatens the survival of an open civic space, especially given the severity of the economic crisis. Consequently, the number of organizations operating on the ground may decline through closures or temporary freezes of activities, resulting in a diminished civil society presence in the public sphere. Moreover, brain drain is likely to continue if livelihood and professional security remain scarce; qualified civil society cadres may leave the country, weaken organizational capacity and increasing reliance on less experienced staff.

Continuation of Current Patterns of International Support

If the international and regional context regarding Syria remains unchanged, the paradox of severe humanitarian need alongside a tepid international response is likely to persist. Donor funding may remain concentrated on emergency relief (food, health, shelter) without a meaningful

shift toward development, institution-building, and peacebuilding. If some states normalize relations with governing authorities, some funding may flow through governmental or quasi-governmental channels, further marginalizing independent organizations.

Donors that continue supporting civil society may remain cautious and channel resources primarily through UN agencies or intermediary international organizations. As a result, Syrian organizations may receive a limited share of funding under onerous compliance conditions that require significant administrative capacity.

Failure to reform international support modalities—as numerous studies have urged— may keep Syrian organizations locked into short-term projects and prevent transition to recovery and community reconstruction. Furthermore, the protracted nature of the crisis may lead donor countries to shift priorities toward other global crises, intensifying donor fatigue. This creates a double challenge: growing needs and declining funding. This equation risks increased suffering among vulnerable groups who rely on civil society services in the absence of effective public provision.

Persistent Internal Challenges

If internal shortcomings persist over the next two to three years, civil society's capacity to adapt will weaken. For example, continued lack of coordination is likely to drive further duplication of effort and fragmentation of civil society's voices. Even when organizations attempt advocacy or propose initiatives, they may fail to generate collective momentum due to weak cooperation channels.

Persistent institutional weaknesses also reduce readiness to seize emerging opportunities (e.g., a new funding window or a political opening), given limited administrative flexibility and the absence of prepared action plans. Likewise, inadequate psychological support for activists may exacerbate burnout, reducing retention among experienced civic actors. The gap between internal and external spheres of influence may remain unbridged, weakening linkages with the Syrian diaspora, which holds resources and expertise that could support internal efforts. While cooperation between inside and outside actors has emerged at certain junctures, fragile trust has often prevented continuity. Under the baseline conditions, reconciliation within civil society is unlikely without deliberate efforts to rebuild trust and coordinate. However, such efforts may remain difficult if actors remain preoccupied with survival concerns and short-term funding.

Limited Role in Peacebuilding and Change:

Overall, continuation of the status quo suggests a civil society largely relegated to relief and charity roles, with limited ability to lead social change or contribute effectively to political processes. When external and internal challenges remain unaddressed, they can produce a

condition of civic paralysis: organizations provide humanitarian assistance but fail to consolidate as a societal pressure group or a sustained force for policy proposals and oversight.

In such a scenario, civil society voices may remain muted on national issues such as transitional justice, community reconciliation, and refugee return due to fear of repression, lack of resources, and fragmented strategic visions. Contributions may remain limited to local efforts (e.g., mediation of a community dispute, a small educational initiative, or health awareness activities). These efforts are important but insufficient to shift national trajectories.

At the same time, the presence of “directed” organizations linked to governing authorities may expand as a formal substitute for genuine civil society, particularly if authorities seek to improve international legitimacy through civic façades. These organizations may receive facilitation and resources unavailable to independent groups, producing a distorted civil society landscape in which activism exists institutionally but lacks critical and transformative capacity. Syrians abroad and international platforms may continue attempting to amplify independent civil society voices and demand protection. However, without changes in domestic political conditions and internal civil society cohesion, downstream effects on daily life may remain limited.

Across these conditions, civil society may be reshaped through an illusion of openness: formal space may expand for dialogue and service delivery, while rights-based mobilization, accountability work, and independent organizing remain securitized or socially risky. Workshop participants emphasized that shrinking civic space, donor conditionalities, reputational attacks (e.g., “foreign agenda” framing), and declining community trust together push organizations toward depoliticized programming and short-term outputs (SCPR, 2025). This aligns with NGOization critiques in the literature, where civil society becomes legible through projects and compliance while broader civic forms—unions, grassroots initiatives, and social movements—are displaced or fragmented.

As a result, this baseline scenario presents a non-promising outlook for Syrian civil society if external constraints and internal weaknesses remain unchanged. The challenges outlined above will likely prevent civil society from shifting from a “survival” position to one of sustained effectiveness and influence. Without real and durable support, civil society efforts remain vulnerable to failure. Likewise, failure to address internal divisions may constrain civil society’s ability to reimagine its role and move from restrictive conditions toward transformative engagement.

This scenario presents a warning signal of continuing with the same pattern. At the same time, a plausible pathway toward a more positive trajectory exists if stakeholders seriously address current constraints: improving the legal environment, ensuring more stable resources, strengthening civil society governance and capacity, and enhancing coordination and unity of purpose. However, this requires political will and solidarity among local and international actors

across civil and official spheres. In the following section, the study discusses key transformative strategies that mobilize forces supporting democratic transition on the one hand and provide objective conditions for peace and justice on the other.

Transformative Strategies for an Inclusive Democratic Transition

Syrian civil society will need to adapt substantially if it is to avoid the baseline trajectory and respond to the demands of transition after the fall of the Assad regime. The baseline scenario identified a cluster of mutually reinforcing constraints, political repression and shrinking civic space, restrictive legal and bureaucratic frameworks, security fragmentation, economic crisis and sanctions-related banking “overcompliance,” donor fatigue and conditionalities, and declining community trust, together with internal weaknesses such as fragmented coordination, weak governance and transparency, over-reliance on external funding, capacity gaps, and activist burnout. Under these conditions, civil society risks being pushed toward depoliticized, short-term service delivery “low-politics” while rights-based mobilization, accountability work, and independent organizing remain securitized or socially risky. In this context, civil society’s strategic role is not to substitute for public institutions but to widen participation, shape accountable institutions, rebuild social cohesion, and promote recovery pathways anchored in justice and solidarity, while directly addressing the baseline drivers that otherwise reproduce civic paralysis.

According to the actors mapping, the key factor that affects potentially hindering the suggested transformative strategies is the coalition between most influential actors including the transitional government, security and military power and factions, the new economic elite, and external backers. This group of actors are the most influential in reshaping the public institutions and producing formal stability with a managed civic space (institutionalized limited participation, controlled funding, and service channels). The indicators from 2025 suggest the viability of this path. However, the power of a comprehensive democratic transformation requires a countercoalition that includes a broad civil society, SMEs, local/union societal actors, and victims/human rights activists, with international support to the inclusive development and democratic transformation. The most serious threat to the five transformation strategies is the slide into apolitical service-based role of civil society funded by donors and operating under security/administrative constraints, with continued fragmentation, weak coordination and governance, and a trust deficit.

Revitalizing civic engagement focused on public policy and building institutional alliances

The first strategy is to re-politicize civic agency through institution-building coalitions that reposition civil society as a legitimate actor in public deliberation and governance formation, rather than primarily in the service delivery sector. This strategy directly responds to political repression and shrinking civic space by building collective capacity and protection through networks that reduce the vulnerability of isolated organizations to intimidation, licensing pressure, or reputational attacks. It also addresses security fragmentation by creating cross-area linkages that preserve national-level civic agendas even when territorial authority is divided and uneven. The core mechanism is coalition-building across regions and sectors, NGOs, unions, professional associations, grassroots initiatives, and community leaders, around minimum shared principles such as rights, inclusion, accountability, and non-violence, while developing practical coordination systems that reduce duplication and competition generated by project-based funding. Because donor conditionalities and compliance regimes often reward “legible” outputs over civic organizing, this strategy requires shifting collective action away from fragmented projects and toward shared platforms for agenda-setting that translate community priorities into civic demands (citizenship, public services, justice, local governance). To mitigate internal baseline constraints—weak governance and transparency, capacity gaps, activist burnout—coalitions must be grounded in improved institutional practices: participatory decision-making, ethical standards, conflict-of-interest safeguards, shared learning, and psychosocial support mechanisms. Coalition credibility also depends on restoring community trust by strengthening downward accountability and ensuring that civil society priorities are anchored in lived needs rather than donor templates.

Political civil society and civic–state engagement

The second strategy focuses on political civil society and structured civic–state engagement that institutionalizes participation and oversight within emerging governance arrangements while preserving independence. This strategy is designed to counter baseline risks arising from restrictive legal frameworks and bureaucratic control, including licensing systems and administrative “trial periods” that enable government intervention. It also addresses the consolidation dynamic under security-driven governance by proposing concrete, procedural routes for public participation that are harder to dismiss as purely oppositional or destabilising, while maintaining a clear boundary against co-optation. Practical mechanisms include consultative bodies, public hearings, participatory local planning, and public reporting requirements where conditions allow; these help reduce the “illusion of openness” described in the baseline scenario by moving from informal space to rule-based participation and oversight. Civil society can influence policy directly through participation in decision processes and indirectly through knowledge production, advocacy, and public dialogue—approaches that are particularly

important where repression limits formal engagement or where security fragmentation produces uneven civic space across authorities. Because donor conditionalities can push organizations toward short-term deliverables and risk management, civil society engagement strategies must include advocacy for donor modalities that protect civic freedoms, fund core institutional capacities (not only projects), and reward public accountability and community responsiveness. This pillar also confronts declining community trust by institutionalizing downward accountability, regular community feedback loops, grievance mechanisms, and participatory monitoring, so that civic–state engagement does not appear as elite bargaining detached from communities.

Social cohesion and citizenship

The third strategy centers on social cohesion and citizenship as peacebuilding infrastructure that counters identity-based securitization, one of the most destabilizing pathways in the baseline scenario, particularly under conditions of violence, repression, and contested authority. Security fragmentation and unresolved conflicts can intensify communal fear and polarization, raising the social costs of collective mobilization and encouraging civil society to retreat into “safe” service provision. In response, civil society can strengthen locally credible reconciliation and dialogue processes, expand mediation capacity, and create safe forums for community problem-solving that reduce the risk of violence escalation and rebuild practical trust. Because restrictive civic space and reputational attacks (“foreign agenda” framing) can delegitimize cohesion work, these initiatives should be rooted in community leadership and culturally resonant practices, rather than externally branded programming that triggers suspicion. Civil society can also counter hate speech and exclusionary narratives—often amplified in fragmented security environments—through cultural associations, religious and civic leaders, media engagement, and education programming that promotes pluralism and shared belonging. Crucially, this pillar responds to the baseline driver of declining community trust by re-embedding civil society in local priorities and by demonstrating impartial responsiveness across groups and geographies, reducing perceptions of geographic selectivity and donor-driven agenda setting.

Centrality of justice and equity

The fourth strategy places justice and equity at the center of the transition, treating them as foundations of a new social contract rather than as postponed outcomes. This pillar speaks directly to baseline risks of weak accountability architectures, securitized governance, and political consolidation without legal protections or plural participation. In such contexts, repression and fear can mute civic voices on transitional justice, disappearances, and institutional reform; therefore, civil society’s role includes sustaining documentation and monitoring of violations, supporting victims’ associations and legal aid initiatives, and advocating for credible accountability pathways that constrain coercive governance. Because international attention and donor priorities may shift due to donor fatigue or geopolitical trade-offs, civil society strategies

for justice must include building durable domestic constituencies for accountability and institutional reform, not only external advocacy. Equity is equally central in the political economy of transition: the baseline scenario anticipates economic crisis, inflation, and market opening enabled by sanctions shifts without governance guarantees, which can increase inequality and deepen public grievances. Civil society can therefore connect justice claims to distributive fairness by advocating transparent resource allocation, inclusive participation in reconstruction planning, and safeguards against capture by elites and war profiteers. This also addresses community trust: when communities see reconstruction governance as opaque or captured, trust erodes and civic space becomes more conflict prone.

Solidarity-based economic development and dismantling conflict-economy incentives

The fifth strategy addresses the political economy of transition by shifting civil society from emergency-dominated programming toward solidarity-based recovery that reduces conflict-economy incentives and expands inclusive livelihoods. This pillar responds directly to baseline economic drivers: deteriorating livelihoods, inflationary pressures, shrinking resources, donor fatigue, and sanctions-related banking “overcompliance” that constrains transfers even when formal restrictions ease. Under these conditions, over-reliance on external funding can lock organizations into short-term projects, fuel competition, and reinforce fragmentation; it can also widen the gap between civil society and communities when aid becomes the primary organizational logic. A solidarity-based recovery strategy seeks to reduce these vulnerabilities by developing locally rooted economic initiatives, cooperatives, community funds, local production networks, inclusive service models, that rebuild livelihoods while increasing local ownership and reducing dependency. In parallel, civil society can strengthen downward accountability by deepening community participation in planning and oversight of assistance and recovery programs, which also helps mitigate reputational attacks and rebuild trust. To counter conflict-economy dynamics, civil society can prioritize transparency and anti-corruption monitoring and advocate policies that reduce capture of aid and reconstruction flows, limit conflict financing, and improve oversight of procurement and investment sequencing. Given banking and compliance constraints, this pillar should include practical approaches for diversified resource mobilization and risk-aware financial channels, while also advocating internationally against excessive overcompliance that blocks legitimate civic operations.

Across these strategies, cross-cutting enablers determine feasibility and directly address baseline internal constraints. Improved governance and transparency within civil society institutions reduces the risk of reproducing authoritarian organizational cultures and increases legitimacy in the context of public distrust. Stronger coordination and coalition capacity counter duplication, competition, and fragmentation that are amplified by projectized funding and security fragmentation. Sustained community trust is essential for organizational durability and for

resisting reputational attacks that frame civil society as externally driven. Finally, safeguards against coercive interference, donor capture, and politicization are necessary to prevent the strategic agenda from collapsing back into low-risk service delivery shaped primarily by compliance requirements and security imperatives. Without these enabling conditions, civil society is likely to remain concentrated in-service provision with limited influence over institutional reform, justice, or economic structures, replicating the baseline pattern. With them, civil society can widen civic space, embed participation and oversight in governance, reduce polarization through locally grounded cohesion work, and support recovery pathways that are more inclusive, accountable, and socially sustainable.

Conclusion

Syrian civil society has carried an enormous burden during years of conflict, repression, and fragmentation. This paper has shown that, despite severe constraints, civil society has remained a consequential actor in sustaining communities through service provision, documenting violations, and maintaining elements of pluralism and social solidarity. At the same time, the last fourteen years have exposed structural vulnerabilities that limited civil society's transformative capacity, including NGOization, politicization under fragmented authorities, aid dependency, governance weaknesses, and identity-based polarization. The post-December 2024 transition opens a window for civil society to contribute more directly to democratic transformation, yet the baseline scenario indicates that the operating environment remains shaped by political repression and shrinking civic space, restrictive legal and bureaucratic frameworks, security fragmentation, economic crisis and sanctions-related banking overcompliance, donor fatigue and conditionalities, and declining community trust. Together, these conditions incentivize depoliticized, short-term programming and constrain rights-based mobilization, accountability work, and independent organizing.

The analysis suggests that civil society's contribution to a democratic transition depends less on organizational proliferation and more on the quality of civic space, institutional safeguards, and civic legitimacy under security-driven governance. In a context where repression, administrative restriction, and reputational attacks can rapidly erode civic space, civil society must strengthen internal governance and transparency, develop safeguards against capture, and rebuild trust through downward accountability and sustain responsiveness to community priorities. Because security fragmentation produces uneven civic space across territories, civil society strategies also require cross-area coordination and coalition-building that can maintain national-level agendas even when local operating conditions differ. Under conditions of donor fatigue and compliance-heavy modalities, civil society also needs to shift from fragmented project competition toward shared platforms for agenda-setting and oversight, while advocating for support modalities that

finance core capacities, protect civic freedoms, and reward inclusion and public accountability rather than narrowly measurable outputs.

The paper also argues that institutionalizing participation and oversight is central to avoiding an “illusion of openness” in which service delivery expands while rights-based mobilization remains securitized. Civil society’s relationship with public institutions should therefore be reconceived as structured engagement, consultative mechanisms, participatory planning, public reporting, and evidence-based policy influence, combined with continued independence and watchdog roles. Socially, rebuilding cohesion requires challenging identity-based securitization and investing in locally credible reconciliation, dialogue, and anti-hate initiatives that reduce polarization and restore practical trust. Economically, civil society must respond to livelihood stress, inflationary pressures, and banking constraints by supporting locally rooted recovery and social and solidarity economy initiatives, strengthening community co-production and oversight, and monitoring reconstruction governance to reduce corruption and conflict-economy incentives. In this framework, justice and equity are not secondary goals but foundational conditions: without credible accountability pathways, truth recovery, institutional reform, and fair distribution of resources and political power, the transition risks reproducing structural drivers of conflict and delegitimizing emerging governance arrangements.

Finally, the feasibility of these roles depends on choices by transitional authorities and international actors. Legal protections for civic freedoms, credible accountability architectures, and inclusive participation are not merely normative aspirations; they determine whether civil society can operate beyond a survival-oriented posture. Likewise, donor conditionalities and financial compliance regimes can either enable locally legitimate institution-building and recovery or deepen NGOization, fragmentation, and dependency. Without reforms to these enabling conditions, civil society is likely to remain locked into low-risk service provision with limited influence over governance, justice, and economic transformation. Under such conditions, an emerging political order may reproduce past patterns of exclusion and coercion even if institutional forms change. Conversely, if civic space is protected and support modalities prioritize inclusion, accountability, and local ownership, Syrian civil society is positioned to function as a central actor in building a more democratic, equitable, and sustainable post-conflict order.

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5. Challenges of Knowledge Production in Diaspora: A Syrian Case Study

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Executive Summary

This paper contributes to scholarship on the role diasporas can play in benefiting both homeland and diasporic societies. It investigates the challenges of knowledge production among displaced Syrian scholars, activists, and civil society actors living in diaspora since the outbreak of the 2011 Syrian uprising and ensuing conflict. Amid widespread displacement and repression, the context of exile has forced many Syrian intellectuals and practitioners to reconfigure their roles, networks, and institutional affiliations, leading to new dilemmas in representation, authorship, funding, and political legitimacy. The paper argues that despite increased visibility and opportunities for diasporic Syrians to contribute to global conversations about Syria, substantial obstacles persist in producing credible, independent, and ethically grounded knowledge.

The rationale behind this study is to critically reflect on the socio-political and structural challenges that shape the knowledge production of Syrians in diaspora, especially under donor-driven agendas and unequal institutional partnerships. This is increasingly urgent given the international emphasis on “inclusion” and “localization,” which can sometimes reproduce tokenism or co-opt Syrian voices rather than empower them. By centering the lived experiences of Syrian actors across academic, media, and civil society sectors, the paper aims to document not only the barriers they face but also the creative and strategic ways they resist marginalization and navigate restrictive structures.

Methodologically, the paper is principally grounded in in-depth expert interviews with Syrian academics, practitioners, policymakers, and activists who are known for their expertise on Syrian knowledge production in diaspora.

The key findings outline the multifaceted challenges facing Syrian scholars and civil society actors engaged in knowledge production in the diaspora. International funders often impose priorities misaligned with local needs, while racism and cultural marginalization reduce Syrian scholars and civil society actors to mere data collectors. Mobility restrictions—both globally and within Syria—hinder access to conferences, fieldwork, and collaboration. Intersectional factors such as gender, class, and sect further shape exclusion. Sanctions disrupt cross-border collaboration and limit funding flows. Unstable financial support undermines the sustainability of initiatives, and widespread misinformation challenges research credibility. Lastly, the absence of trauma-informed approaches risks ethical harm to participants and researchers alike, especially given the widespread experiences of displacement, violence, and marginalization.

Key recommendations include fostering inclusive knowledge networks that connect diaspora scholars with peers inside Syria and supporting locally driven research priorities. The paper also advocates for embracing “constructive marginality” as a framework, recognizing the unique positionality of displaced scholars as an asset. The authors stress the need to address discrimination in host countries, promote mobility through easier visa policies, and invest in capacity building programs that encourage intersectional approaches. Further, the paper highlights the importance of diaspora involvement in policymaking, developing ethical collaboration guidelines, and providing trauma-informed training and mental health support for researchers and participants. It also recommends expanding fact-checking programs, supporting research on disinformation, and investing in oral history preservation such as intergenerational storytelling and digital archiving initiatives.

Introduction

Scholars tend to be divided around the role of the diaspora in shaping politics and its impact on the home community. Some argue that diaspora members play a negative role in sustaining violence in the home context and asserting alternative loyalties and forms of groupness, such as ethnic or sectarian-based alliances and networks (Chalk 2008; Collier & Hoeffler 2004; Demmers 2001; Hear & Cohen 2017; Zeno 2022). Others, however, maintain that these members play a more productive role as a bridge between the displaced and those inside, using their privilege and understanding of domestic politics to inform policies that otherwise would not be accessible (Bob 2005; Carpenter 2010; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Moss 2022).

Until December 8, 2024, Syria’s knowledge production operated under tight control, serving primarily to uphold the rules of President Hafez al-Assad (1970-2000) and then his son, the country’s ousted dictator Bashar al-Assad (Wedeen 1999; Wedeen 2019). It thus lacked genuine contributions to public discourse. However, the 2011 Syrian uprising-turned-war changed the

information environment of Syria and opened space for new knowledge production initiatives (Badran 2021). Between 2011 and 2024, more than half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million experienced displacement, with an estimated 7.2 million internally displaced people and more than 6.6 million forcibly displaced abroad (UNHCR 2024). These numbers make the Syrian refugee crisis the largest refugee and displacement crisis in the world (UNHCR 2024).

In this period, many scholars, political activists, and a diverse range of civil society actors experienced displacement and joined the Syrian diaspora around the world. Since 2011 many of these actors have fled to Syria's neighboring countries, Europe, and North America, where they have been attempting to create and strengthen hubs for knowledge production to inform policy, such as the [Syrian Center for Policy Research](#) (SCPR) (Lebanon, Austria), the [Centre for Syrian Studies](#) at the University of St. Andrews (Scotland), the [Syrian Studies Association](#) (SSA) (United States), "[Verify-Sy](#)," the first Syrian fact-checking platform (Turkey, Norway), [Syriana](#) (United States), and [Start Point](#) (Turkey, Canada)¹.

While some of these institutes provide spaces for local research and community, they are isolated from one another and, crucially, from scholars and the broader population who have remained in Syria, in large part due to the accumulated impacts of authoritarian policies, war, and sanctions like the Caesar Act on Syria, which keeps the diaspora unable to connect and collaborate with those inside the country in a horizontal way².

Since the collapse of al-Assad's authoritarian regime after the military attack led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), there have been calls for sanctions on Syria to be lifted. To support the Syrian transition, the EU suspended a number of restrictive measures to support Syria's economic recovery (Council of the EU 2025). However, the major imposer of sanctions on Syria is the United States. Before the end of Biden's term, his administration issued a new general license allowing the current Syrian government to engage in limited energy sales and transactions for only six months, giving the Trump administration the power to renew it or not (Simon 2025). Initially the Trump administration's position seemed to support continuing sanctions on Syria, including "zombie sanctions leveled on Asad and other sanctions associated with HTS's pre-existing designation as a foreign terrorist organization" (Lynch 2025, para. 5). However, after Trump met with Syria's interim president al-Sharaa in Riyadh on May 14, 2025, in late June he ordered the lifting of US sanctions on 518 Syrian individuals and entities and revoked the "terrorist" designation for al-Sharaa's former group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). While the lifting of these sanctions is a welcome step toward rebuilding after devastating conflict and economic collapse, the accumulated impacts of sanctions will likely take years, if not decades, to recover.

In this context, displaced scholars and researchers from countries such as Syria have been obstructed from producing informed, reflexive, and impactful research and policy about their home contexts because the targeted community is severed from the research process. Such fragmentation and sequestration hinder the necessary conditions for impactful knowledge and its potential positive influence on policies that would benefit both the diasporic and home populations, including in-depth, critical, and on-the-ground research about Syria³.

This study is a first step toward examining the means to produce impactful policy that promotes solidarity and is inclusive to those in the diaspora while being informed by evidence produced locally. It will, therefore, serve as a stepping stone to expand and create a network among the newly founded academic and policy centers in MENA, North America, and Europe that should be incorporated into processes of lobbying and policymaking that impact people inside and outside the country.

The study investigates the state of knowledge production among displaced Syrian scholars and researchers in the MENA region, North America, and Europe. It aims to analyze the challenges of knowledge production by Syrian civil society actors and scholars in the diaspora. To do so, it explores what has become of scholars and researchers from countries affected by the “Arab Spring” like Syria, who were forced to flee to neighboring countries and the Global North, and what can be done to facilitate these scholars’ collaboration and knowledge production so that they can influence policy that benefits the diaspora as well as those inside their countries of origin. It also focuses on investigating how impactful policies can be developed using locally produced evidence that reflects the interests and well-being of community members.

Methodology and Methods

The project relies on three methods, each of which draws on an interpretive methodology (Schaffer 2016; Wedeen 2009) and intersectional analysis (Alhayek 2016; Alhayek & Zeno 2023; Crenshaw 1989; Lutz, Herrera Vivar & Supik 2016). The positionality of two of the Principal Investigators is deeply informed by their own intersectional identity as displaced Syrian scholars who have conducted various research with Syrian civil society and the research community (Pachirat 2017; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013; Shehata 2006). The main method used is semi-structured expert interviews with Syrian researchers and leaders of selected members of civil society organizations. Data based on interviews are supported by participant observation (PO) of online and offline meetings concerning knowledge production and the (dis)connection between exiled and diasporic communities and Syrians who remain inside Syria. The third method is critical discourse analysis (CDA) of policy reports and research published by Syrian scholars inside their country and abroad. We employed two sampling techniques, purposeful sampling and network

sampling, to recruit Syrian scholars and researchers. We conducted the interviews in colloquial Syrian Arabic and in English based on interviewees' preferences. We transcribed the interviews and translated significant portions of those in Arabic into English. To analyze the interviews and other data, we used thematic analysis by going through the interviews and developing as many categories as possible. Following that, we made comparisons and connected those categories with the challenges of Syrian knowledge production in the diaspora.

Literature Review

The impact of the diaspora on the home country is complex and multifaceted. Scholars such as Baser and Öztürk (2019), Kaya and Keyder (2020), Kim (2021), and Shain (2018) highlight the troubling role diasporas can play in homeland politics, revealing that their influence may extend beyond positive support to include surveillance, polarization, and authoritarian manipulation. Kaya and Keyder (2020) and Baser & Öztürk (2019) focus on the case study of Turkey under Erdoğan to show how authoritarian regimes exploit diaspora communities to reinforce control in their homelands by reproducing homeland power dynamics abroad. Through coordinated voting campaigns, propaganda, and surveillance, these transnational strategies can undermine democratic institutions, polarize communities, and repress dissent. In doing so, diasporas are co-opted as instruments of illiberal politics rather than independent voices. Similarly, Kim (2021) warns that diaspora engagement can embolden homeland conflicts through “political wedge narratives” that reduce critical engagement. By amplifying partisan or nationalist rhetoric from abroad, diaspora groups may strengthen the political power of certain factions, increase domestic mistrust, and further destabilize efforts toward reconciliation. Additionally, Shain (2018) highlights how diaspora advocacy can create dilemmas of dual loyalty. Diasporas are often held accountable for their homeland's policies by host governments. These pressures may push them toward supporting nationalist or hardline stances to preserve community interests or diplomatic standing—sometimes at the expense of broader democratic or human rights principles.

Other scholars illustrate that when diasporas are meaningfully engaged, they offer powerful resources for home-country transformation—economically, politically, and socially (Brinkerhoff, 2011; Levitt, Lacroix, & Vari-Lavoisier, 2016; and Wahba, 2014). Diasporas can provide proactive contributions through knowledge transfer, entrepreneurship, and institutional support (Brinkerhoff, 2011). By mobilizing financial resources, expertise, and political advocacy, diasporan groups become active partners in development and reform. Another major role in homeland development and governance is remittances—financial and cultural—from diaspora members (Levitt, Lacroix, & Vari-Lavoisier, 2016). They not only send money (economic remittances) but also transfer values, norms, skills, and democratic ideals—known as “social remittances”—which foster civic engagement and reform efforts in their countries of origin.

Rather than simply experiencing a “brain drain,” research such as that of Wahba (2014) shows that many skilled migrants return or collaborate from abroad—bringing back expertise, investment, and new norms that foster innovation, human capital development, and democratic systems in their homelands.

In sum, the role of diasporas in knowledge production—both in the homeland and abroad—is multidimensional and nuanced. On the one hand, diasporas can play a negative role by amplifying divisions through partisan narratives transmitted across borders; supporting authoritarian regimes that erode democratic discourse and civic autonomy; and enabling transnational repression that silences diaspora voices critical of home regimes, thereby limiting dissent and freedom of expression abroad. On the other hand, diasporas can play a positive role by providing economic support through remittances and bonds, fostering social empowerment through advocacy and cultural exchange, and contributing to “brain circulation.” Through diaspora-led institutional engagement, they can help build sustainable development and strengthen civic capacity.

In this paper, we contribute to these scholarly conversations by focusing on the pivotal transitional period in Syria. While highlighting the challenges of knowledge production by Syrian civil society actors and scholars in the diaspora, we aim to develop recommendations that support the positive role the Syrian diaspora can play in benefiting both homeland and diasporic societies.

Analysis and Key Findings

In this section, we present our key findings by outlining the main challenges facing Syrian knowledge production in the diaspora.

1. Different priorities

Our interviewees identified what they maintained to be important contradictions between their own agenda and research priorities as local organizations on the one hand and international organizations’ funding agenda and research priorities on the other hand. For example, some European-based international organizations were interested in the mid-2010s in funding research projects about Syrian refugees and ways to keep them in Syria’s neighboring countries and limit their forced migration to Germany and other European countries. Conversely, local organizations such as the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)⁴ prioritized research on the internally displaced population because they believed this segment of Syrian society to be more vulnerable and at risk. Similarly, interviewees from the organization Syriana⁵ expressed frustration with international funding organizations, which dismissed their local priorities and grounded experience and pressured them instead to conduct research on Syrian doctors and health workers

inside the country and devise policy-oriented recommendations regarding how to keep them from fleeing to European Union countries.

These different priorities made collaboration futile and doomed to fail. One of our interviewees explained this point further: “We are not against the West and learning exchange; rather, what we oppose is when funding agencies cancel our priorities as local organizations” (personal communication, October 28, 2024). For example, a Syrian organization was approached by an international organization that wanted to commission the Syrian organization to research increasing fertility rates in the context of the Syrian war because the organization had conducted previous research in certain war-riven countries in Africa and claimed such correlation exists and must be addressed and controlled. The Syrian organization was not able to commit to the research partnership because their local research in the context of the Syrian war showed a different outcome, that is, decreasing fertility rates. Instead of the imposition of a research agenda by external agencies and using funds as leverage to shape the priorities of local organizations, interviewees expressed the hope of finding support for their research projects, such as exploring social relations among Syrians and the dynamics that factors such as sect or class play in trust and dialogue.

2. Intercultural communication and cultural marginality

Our interviewees acknowledge their positionality and membership in the Syrian community as key elements that give them legitimacy and knowledge of the “significant regional, generational, and intra-cultural differences that distinguish one community from another” (Zentella 1998, p. 7). Interviewees who were themselves displaced by the Syrian conflict and continued their work in knowledge production in the diaspora post-2011 suffered from feelings of cultural marginality in which a person exists at the margins of multiple cultural identities and groups (Alhayek and Oseen 2024; Suen and Suen 2019). Such researchers who fled to Syria’s neighboring countries and then to Europe or North America expressed facing racism and marginalization and cited these issues as the main obstacle limiting their roles as researchers and their efforts to produce meaningful knowledge on Syria.

For example, Rabie Nasser, the co-founder of the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), explained the difficulties that face researchers who are refugees themselves: “It’s difficult to conduct evidence-based research aiming for the public good when there is a racist discourse against you as a refugee. Unfortunately, your research outcomes can be politicized and used against the refugee community” (personal communication, October 28, 2024). Other interviewees shared similar observations and experiences of political and cultural marginality. Ola Rifai, Deputy Director for Outreach at the Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS)⁶, related the challenge of politicizing research produced by Syrian scholars in the diaspora. She comments, “I want to be seen as a

scholar, to look at the big picture and make policy recommendations” (personal communication, November 14, 2024). However, Rifai explains that post-2011 Syrian scholars in the diaspora are perceived as activists and that their research is not taken seriously as scholars. Several interviewees underscored this point that international organizations and universities treat Syrian scholars in the diaspora as sources of data to be collected or as facilitators at best but rarely engaged with as authority figures when it comes to knowledge production. Omar Dahi, founding director of Security in Context⁷, observed that since 2011, Syrian scholars in the diaspora have “become demoralized because they [are] not taken seriously and alienated” (personal communication, November 6, 2024).

3. Freedom of mobility and access

Knowledge production by Syrian scholars and organizations in the diaspora is shaped by what is described as the “coloniality of knowledge” (Alhayek & Zeno 2023; Pallister-Wilkin 2022; Smith 2005). Restrictions on the mobility of scholars from the Global South and freedom of mobility for scholars from the Global North have been called a contemporary form of “racial segregation” at the international level (Pallister-Wilkin 2022). When Syrian scholars and researchers left Syria and became involved in knowledge production projects in the diaspora, their intellectual contributions were affected by the devaluation of Syrian passports and associated restricted mobility. For example, Ola Rifai, Deputy Director for Outreach at the Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS), shares how her Syrian nationality affected her travels and participation in international conferences. She comments, “I was invited to the University of Rabat in Morocco a few years ago when I was living in the UK doing my graduate studies. I was the only Arab woman participant; however, my visa was rejected, and a British male colleague went instead” (personal communication, November 14, 2024).

Political systems affect Syrian scholars’ and researchers’ freedom of mobility and access to fieldwork not only outside Syria but inside the country as well. Within Syria they are affected by mistrust, fear, and exclusion based on their opinions and social identities such as gender, sect, class, and sexual orientation. Before the collapse of Assad’s regime, diasporic Syrian scholars and researchers who were perceived as opposing or criticizing the regime faced severe safety challenges and a lack of ability to travel to Syria to conduct fieldwork on contemporary social issues. Reem Bailony, President of the Syrian Studies Association (SSA)⁸, explains this point by asserting that the only type of knowledge tolerated by the Syrian regime was historical research and archival work. She comments that “historians can easily travel to Syria” as long as their research does not relate in any way to the contemporary political situation (personal communication, November 15, 2024).

Since the establishment of the Syrian transitional government in December 2024, access to Syria by diasporic Syrian scholars and researchers has not changed dramatically. It continues to reflect unequal mobility and access to the country. Noura Aljizawi, co-founder and chairwoman of Start Point⁹ and Senior Researcher at the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, explains the continued hierarchy of mobility: "Most of our organization team were forcibly displaced post-2011 and live currently in countries like Turkey, Sweden, and Canada. Until today, none of us have been able to go back to Syria" (personal communication, February 28, 2025). Aljizawi elaborates that many displaced Syrian researchers and civil society actors still lack proper residency and travel documents that would allow them to travel into Syria. This community also lacks sufficient financial resources as many researchers and civil society actors work on a voluntary basis or for low pay.

4. Intersectionality

Intersectionality provides a theoretical tool to understand the complexity of knowledge production in the diaspora by Syrian scholars and researchers. It helps to understand how social identities (such as class, gender, and sect) and systems of discrimination (such as authoritarianism, classism, and racism) work simultaneously to shape the challenges of knowledge production (Crenshaw 1990; Collins and Bilge 2016).

Interviewees referred to how their knowledge production is affected by the intersection of exclusionary systems and social identities. For example, post-2011 Syrian scholars and researchers who moved to the United Kingdom are more diverse in terms of social identities than those who moved to the United States. In the United States, political tensions, classism, and sectarianism affect the dynamics and collaboration between the old diaspora who migrated before 2011 and the new diaspora who migrated or sought asylum in the United States after the Arab Spring uprisings.

Reem Bailony, President of the Syrian Studies Association, underscores the historical context that shaped Syrian knowledge production in the US by referring to how political and sectarian identities as well as class background shaped the diaspora of the 1970s and 1980s (main opponents of Assad's regime who left Syria after the 1982 Massacre of Hama) and fueled tensions between them and the diaspora of post 2011 (personal communication, November 15, 2024). Similarly, Ola Rifai, Deputy Director for Outreach at the Centre for Syrian Studies (CSS), left Damascus after 2011 and lived in both the US and the UK. She observed that the post-2011 Syrian diaspora in the US is dominated by middle- to upper-class knowledge producers in comparison with the UK, where knowledge producers with more diverse economic backgrounds were able to migrate and integrate (personal communication, November 14, 2024).

These statements confirm extant research that underscores how Syrians' class origins have impacted their trajectories and the challenges and opportunities they have faced in countries of settlement. The poorest and wealthiest diaspora stayed in bordering countries like Turkey, while the middle-class diaspora moved to European countries like Germany for educational and professional purposes (Pearlman 2020). Out of the groups that remain in Syria's bordering countries, the most marginalized group is women, who lack privileges based on the intersection of their class, age, education, family status, and place of origin (Alhayek 2015).

Within Syria, the UN humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) recently announced that since December 2024 over 825,000 people who were internally displaced have returned to their areas of origin. However, after the start of the November 2024 opposition offensive that overthrew the Assad regime, more than 615,000 became newly displaced across the country (UN News 2025). In Syria's neighboring countries – including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt – where more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees currently live, a recent UNHCR survey of Syrian refugees show that "around three-quarters...currently have no plans to go home in the next year and are waiting to see how the situation evolves" (UNHCR 2025, para. 9). Since December 2024, more than 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned, but barriers to return for the majority of refugees in neighboring countries include economic turmoil and the country's humanitarian crisis, which hinder basic services, and this is combined with a lack of housing and jobs (UNHCR, 2025). European countries have announced a pause in asylum applications for Syrians and have called for refugees to return home (Shankar 2024). However, refugees in countries such as Germany fill gaps in the labor market by holding jobs in key industries such as health care, hospitality, and construction (Martin 2024). Additionally, "a recent IAB-led survey found that more than 90% of Syrian-born refugees who entered Germany between 2013 and 2019 stated that they wanted to stay permanently" (Martin 2024, para. 15).

Seven months after the fall of Assad, major security challenges also continue to impact peace in Syria as violence is erupting, especially in areas heavily populated by ethnic and religious minorities in the south, northeast, and coastal areas (Bachega and Lapham 2025; Gol 2025; Zeno and Alhayek, 2025). For example, sectarian violence intensified in March 2025 on the coast's predominantly Alawite areas, where members of the Alawite community were targeted based on their religious identity and accusations that all the community, including civilians, are remnants of the former regime, as the Assad are Alawite (Gritten and Sinjab 2025).

Intersectional analysis demonstrates the diversity of Syrian refugees' experiences in the diaspora as it provides a tool to understand how factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and sect influence decisions of whether to return and what these decisions mean for the future of the country and the diaspora's impact on it. For example, Noura Aljizawi, co-founder and chairwoman of Start Point, explains the benefits of being in exile for her organization's work: "Since some of

us were forcibly displaced, life in exile gave us a space of safety, freedom, and the ability to learn and network with other organizations.” She adds that “such opportunities would not have been available to us if everyone stayed inside Syria experiencing the same security challenges” (personal communication, February 28, 2025). At the same time, Aljizawi highlights challenges for Start Point members in the diaspora: “Experiencing displacement and moving to a new country while staying committed to your activism in the home country is not easy. Each member of our organization has their unique learning, surviving, and integration experiences in the diasporic country” (personal communication, February 28, 2025). Experiences such as Aljizawi’s show intersectional opportunities and challenges for integration in exile and impact on the homeland.

5. Sanctions

The United States uses sanctions as a tool in its foreign policy to instigate regime change or policy compliance. However, evidence from countries like Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and South Sudan shows sanctions frequently produce collateral damage—hurting civilian welfare, undermining regional stability, and driving targeted states toward resistant economic systems and new alliances (Bajoghli, Nasr, Salehi-Isfahani, & Vaez, 2024). Even when sanctions are lifted, their long-term impact on civilians is severe and deeply harmful, often outlasting the sanctions themselves (Garfield, 1999). In this section, we illustrate—using the case of Syria—how U.S. sanctions have had deeply negative, long-term impacts on civilian populations and knowledge production processes, with consequences that are likely to persist for years even after the sanctions are lifted.

On December 20, 2019, President Trump signed into law the [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#), which imposed draconian primary and secondary sanctions against Syria. Though the US State Department and Syrian-American lobby groups [proclaimed](#) that the act is “not intended to harm the Syrian people, but rather to promote accountability for the Assad regime,” many scholars and policy analysts have noted that sanctions, in fact, significantly harm civilian populations while failing to truly hold regimes accountable or force them to change their behavior (Aita 2020; Dahi 2019; Douhan 2023; Hinnebusch 2023; Mehchy and Turkmani 2021; Neuenkirch & Neumeier 2016; Shaar & Dimashqi 2023; Weisbrot & Sachs 2019). Moreover, it is not only the “inside” populations that are negatively affected; those in the diaspora, especially individuals who do not have protected status, are also penalized.

On May 14, 2025, Trump met with Syria’s interim president, al-Sharaa, in Riyadh. Following that meeting—and due to mobilization efforts primarily by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—Trump ordered the lifting of U.S. sanctions on Syria in late June 2025 (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). While this move is a welcome step toward rebuilding after years of devastating conflict and economic collapse, the accumulated impacts of sanctions will likely take years, if not decades, to overcome. For example, Syrian scholars and

researchers have been obstructed from producing informed, reflexive, and impactful research and policy about their home contexts because the targeted community is severed from the research process due to unilateral draconian sanctions imposed by the United States. A collaborative project between Security in Context and the Syrian Center for Policy Research titled “The Participatory Security Initiative” illustrates this challenge. The idea of this initiative was to create a bottom-up security index instead of the dominant top-down approach to understanding security issues in the Arabic-speaking region. The research team developed a research design based on statistical analysis as well as focus groups, surveys, and interviews with communities impacted by security issues in Syria. The initiative was intended to be “a knowledge production project in Syria about Syria” (Omar Dahi, founding director of Security in Context, personal communication, November 6, 2024). It was meant to be a pilot program that explores how community members experience security issues such as the economy and the environment. The initiative received a grant that was supposed to be accessed through a partnership with one of the universities in the United States. The university required the research team to get approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The process of obtaining the IRB approval was complicated and daunting and took over a year to complete due to a lack of understanding of the local context in Syria. Nevertheless, after an extended back and forth the diasporic research team was finally able to get approval. However, the research team was soon surprised that the legal compliance office at the hosting university in the United States vetoed the research project and halted its execution. This not only effectively ended the project but also wasted over a year of the team's time that could have been used to seek alternatives.

Other Syrian diasporic organizations such as Start Point illustrate the profound impact of sanctions on small-scale organizations. Start Point started as a grassroots organization inside Syria, but when several members of the organization were displaced, they then formalized its work in the diaspora. They registered the organization in Sweden and had a licence number and official bank account. Yet due to sanctions their bank account and thus their ability to receive funds was jeopardized. Most funders, for example, require an official bank account for donations and will not send funds to personal bank accounts. Lacking an official bank account also affects an organization's ability to produce and submit audit reports. Start Point's members found a solution by registering the organization in Turkey, but several obstacles impede their civil society work, such as a requirement to rent an independent office and have a certain number of permanent employees. Turkey also requires organizations who receive funds in foreign currencies to convert them immediately to the local currency, which leads to financial losses and a shortage in their budget due to the fluctuations in value of Turkey's currency. This situation led Start Point to move their work again to a new country; they have recently registered and become certified in Canada.

6. Funding and continuity

Knowledge production by Syrian scholars and organizations has been greatly affected by a lack of sustainable funding in recent years. Some projects, such as The Day After, lacked long-term funding and influence because they were perceived by some of our interviewees as exclusive and limited to Syrian opposition members. Other projects were based on a funding model tied to individuals. In some cases, such individuals were controversial and problematic figures, which affected the public perception and legitimacy of the knowledge production projects.

Additionally, some of these individuals who are in leadership positions controlled funding and had exclusionary policies in terms of which voices they include in their knowledge production projects. An example of a significant knowledge production project that aimed to be inclusive of a variety of Syrian voices is [The National Agenda for the Future of Syria Programme](#) managed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in collaboration with various Syrian partners. This project aimed to bring together specialists from different political persuasions to map the country's cultural, economic, and political dimensions and plan for the challenges facing the post-conflict transition. However, the contributions of this important project were obscured by several limitations that led to an eventual cut in funding and halting of the project. These included: 1) attacks by various political sides instead of engaging in dialogue and seizing on the platform in a productive way. For example, some opposition groups who worked to overthrow the regime saw the project as pro-regime because it included some knowledge producers who sympathize with the Syrian government in addition to those who sympathize with the Syrian opposition; 2) lack of contributions to public discourse. Due to political sensitivities and the influence of governments, many aspects of useful knowledge production on Syria were censored; 3) feelings of frustration and demoralization among the knowledge producers involved in the project due to political pressures.

7. Spread of misinformation and disinformation

One of the major challenges for knowledge production in the diaspora is the spread of misinformation and disinformation, especially in a conflict polarized context like Syria. While misinformation refers to misleading information without malicious intent, disinformation refers to incorrect information that entities and actors spread intentionally for purposes like profit; to create harm; or to advance their political or ideological goals (Freelon & Wells 2020). The "weaponization" of information to affect public perception and behavior, particularly for political gains, is not new and has been described using terms such as propaganda, conspiracy theories, and false and misleading narratives (Posetti & Matthews 2018). A significant example of disinformation in war contexts is the second Gulf War when the US Bush administration used the

false claim that Saddam Hussein's regime had weapons of mass destruction to mobilize public opinion and invade Iraq.

Since the beginning of the 2011 Syrian revolution, Assad's regime used disinformation attacks by framing protestors as extremist and connected to foreign conspiracies, and harassed human rights defenders, journalists, humanitarians, and victims of war crimes (The Syria Campaign 2022; Zeno 2022). Since the fall of the regime, misleading, disinformation claims about atrocities and war crimes is undermining truth and reconciliation efforts as well as victims of war crimes' stories. For example, manipulated and out of context videos related to Saydnaya Prison pose a significant credibility challenge that risks discrediting genuine survivors' accounts (Ghaedi and Klug 2024). While social media is the primary vehicle for disinformation, international media also plays a role in fabricating events and spreading misleading information.

For instance, a CNN report featuring Clarissa Ward presented inauthentic stories from Assad's prisons, such as claiming to free a political detainee who was in fact a former intelligence officer implicated in extortion, theft, and coercion (Al-Hamwi 2024)¹⁰.

Noura Aljizawi, co-founder and chairwoman of Start Point, notes a significant increase in the flow of misinformation and disinformation since Bashar al-Assad fled Syria. In particular, Aljizawi refers to the spread of sectarian-based disinformation: "While the discourse focused on sectarianism and hatred is not new, it has taken on wider dimensions and new tactics" (personal communication, March 10, 2025). In this regard, Aljizawi observed deliberate online campaigns by state and state-related actors, including Iran and its affiliates, especially in Iraq, as well as Israel. Such actors aim to disrupt Syria's transition process and undermine stability and civil peace.

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, regular broadcasts and programming on Syrian state television ceased, with the exception of some images displaying the texts of the new Syrian government's decisions. This disruption continued until the Syrian News Channel, also known as Alikhbaria, launched its trial broadcast on May 5, 2025. This increased the proliferation of disinformation, inaccurate or decontextualized information, fake news, and hate speech, as well as dubious representations of sectarian-coded violence (Zeno & Alhayek, 2025).

Given the widespread displacement of Syrians around the world, the Syrian diaspora depends on social media to connect with displaced family and friends. Disinformation on Syrian social media and a lack of official communication from the new government leaves the community grappling with uncertainty and vulnerability. Aljizawi comments on the effects of sectarian-based disinformation on the diaspora: "The escalation of hate speech, fueled by misinformation, further deteriorates social cohesion and well-being. Given these conditions, the Syrian community's distress is entirely understandable, necessitating a comprehensive approach to mitigate

misinformation and support diaspora communities effectively" (personal communication, March 10, 2025).

Syrian diasporic organizations such as Verify Syria (Verify-Sy) work to counteract disinformation and support Syria's peace and transition.¹¹ Ahmad Primo, Verify-Sy Founder and Executive Director, shared that he founded the organization in 2016 in Turkey after he managed to escape from an ISIS prison in Syria where he was detained because of accusations such as being a secular journalist. Verify-Sy was then registered in Norway after his asylum application was accepted there. Ahmad was trained in fact checking and co-authored the 2022 book, *Verify... Your Guide to Verification and Counter-Disinformation Methods in Conflict Zones*¹². The key to the success of Verify-Sy has been maintaining its independence and impartiality. For instance, the organization refuses politicized funding such as from the Qatari or Saudi governments. After the fall of the Assad regime, Verify-Sy's work has increased significantly although their funding sources decreased due to the effects of the Trump administration's USAID cuts (Ahmad Primo, personal communication, March 2, 2025). Still, it launched a volunteer program called Guardians of Truth that trains Syrian journalists and media activists with consideration of gender diversity and place of residence. When the organization announced the program's launch, it received 2,000 requests from interested applicants, reflecting the large interest in fact-checking training (Ahmad Primo, personal communication, March 2, 2025). However, as a diasporic organization with limited resources Verify-Sy was only able to train 50 applicants inside Syria who became part of its reporters' network.

8. Lack of a trauma-informed approach

Knowledge production by Syrian scholars and civil society actors in the diaspora largely lacks understanding and incorporation of a trauma-informed approach. In recent years reports have shown how years of accumulating tragedy have left over 75% of Syrian refugees with serious mental health symptoms including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ahmed 2021). This affects the Syrian diaspora's interest in returning home, as many Syrian refugees (with reference to such factors as gender, age, and socioeconomic status) consider Syria a place of traumatic experiences that they refuse to go back to regardless of the political ruler (Martin 2024). Scholars have been calling for trauma-informed and culturally sensitive knowledge production practices, including replacing the term "traumatic event" with "negative life event"¹³. Such practices aim to be more inclusive of cultural factors that influence how "negative life events" are remembered and reported by people from diverse cultural backgrounds and to reduce misinterpretations and miscommunications due to cultural differences in communication styles and emotional expressions.

Some diasporic Syrian organizations such as Start Point that have multiple members with direct experience of political imprisonment, torture, and forced displacement use an applied trauma-informed approach in their knowledge production projects. Noura Aljizawi, co-founder and chairwoman of Start Point, explains: “Several members of our team and I personally are survivors from Assad’s prisons. After our release, we were subjected to social ostracism and inappropriate treatment by organizations, which increased our sensibility toward other survivors’ experiences” (personal communication, February 28, 2025). Now after the fall of the regime, diasporic Syrian researchers and scholars require trauma-informed training as they begin to engage with people inside the country and understand new internal and external dynamics and needs. For example, Start Point is developing a research project that addresses the lack of intergenerational communication between Syrian diasporic children and their grandparents inside the country to preserve oral histories, particularly grandmothers’ oral stories and songs.

Key Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper contributes to scholarship on knowledge production in diaspora by focusing on the case of Syrian scholars and civil society actors. In the context of the Syrian war and displacement, we derive the following recommendations from our interviews and observation of the main knowledge production initiatives in the Syrian diaspora.

9. ***Inclusive Knowledge Networks:*** Collaborative platforms are needed to bring together displaced Syrian scholars with their peers inside Syria to help bridge the gap created by sanctions and other political restrictions. Initiatives such as virtual academic networks could help bridge this gap while navigating around sanctions compliance.
10. ***Support Locally Driven Research Priorities:*** Funders and international organizations should invest in and respect the agendas of local Syrian research institutions, rather than imposing external priorities. This includes supporting studies on issues such as social relations and local dynamics rather than externally driven topics.
11. ***Promote Cultural Legitimacy and Marginality as an Asset:*** Developing the theory of “constructive marginality” in the Syrian context is needed, through which the unique insights of displaced scholars and researchers facilitate the documentation of issues particular to their community, such as narratives that otherwise might never be recorded.
12. ***Address Discrimination in the Diaspora:*** Funders can take corrective actions that deal with racism and marginalization in countries offering Syrians residency so that their research contributions are considered based on intellectual merit rather than political views.
13. ***Enhance the Mobility of Syrian Scholars:*** Funders and international organizations can support policies that will further facilitate the mobility of Syrian scholars and researchers,

including streamlined visa processes for academic purposes and waivers for scholars from sanctioned countries.

14. **Mitigate negative, long-term impacts of Sanctions:** Countries like Canada can support Syrian scholars and organizations in a way that minimizes the negative, long-term consequences of sanctions policies. This support can include allowing mechanisms for cross-border academic collaboration and funding of research projects through humanitarian exemptions.
15. **Invest in Capacity Building:** Support for projects such as the New University in Exile Consortium and MESA's Global Academy provides opportunities to enhance the research skills of displaced scholars and better incorporate them into global academic life.
16. **Foster Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches:** Encourage Syrian scholarship that relies on intersectional analysis to understand how factors of class, gender, and sectarian identity overlap with one another to shape challenges and opportunities for Syrian knowledge production in the diaspora.
17. **Engage the Diaspora in Policymaking:** Ensure that displaced scholars are involved in discussions and decisions regarding policies affecting both the diaspora and Syrian communities in the homeland. This might include advisory positions within international agencies.
18. **Develop Ethical Guidelines for Collaboration:** Establish clear ethical frameworks to guide partnerships between Syrian and international research organizations, ensuring equitable collaboration that respects local knowledge and priorities.
19. **Organize Trauma-Informed Training:** Funders and international organizations can invest in such training to ensure that research is accurate and respectful of the research participants who have experienced "negative life events." Such training should focus on cultural awareness and sensitivity in a multicultural context like Syria with diverse social identities.
20. **Provide Mental Health Services:** Develop sensitive approaches regarding the consent, privacy, and emotional well-being of research participants who have experienced "negative life events" and provide researchers and participants with adequate mental health services and related support resources.
21. **Support and Expand Fact-Checking Training Programs:** Funders and international organizations can support and expand training programs like the "Guardians of Truth" by Verify-Sy that focus on fact-checking, digital safety, and media literacy.
22. **Support Research on the Danger of Misinformation and Disinformation:** Shore up work on trends in social media and how they impact Syrian civil peace and the dynamics between the Syrian diaspora and those inside the country.
23. **Invest in Media Literacy Campaigns and Educational Initiatives:** Promote critical consumption of information and provide audiences with tools to identify credible sources.

24. **Encourage Research on Preserving and Documenting Syrian Oral Histories:** Support initiatives such as Start Point's work aimed at preserving and documenting Syrian oral histories and integrational communication between the Syrian diaspora and those inside the country. Such work may include intergenerational workshops and events to document grandparents' forms of oral tradition like stories and songs. It also can include training programs for undertaking oral history, making documentary films, and conducting digital storytelling and community-based archiving.

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6. Revisiting the Concept of Self-determination in the Palestinian Context: The Role of Civil Society

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Executive Summary

This paper reconsiders the concept of self-determination in the Palestinian context by critically examining the role of civil society as a transformative actor in a colonial political reality. The urgency of humanitarian responses in Palestine often overshadows deeper political and emancipatory goals. Yet, the stagnation of political leadership and the erosion of civic initiative demand a renewed understanding of civil society's responsibilities. The paper argues that self-determination must be revisited and redefined not merely as a national project but rather within a trilateral framework which encompasses individual, communal, and national levels.

The research is guided by the need to move beyond reductionist frameworks that equate self-determination with statehood, which risks sidelining personal and social freedoms. It sets out to investigate how Palestinian civil society conceptualizes self-determination and whether it possesses the strategic and intellectual capacity to enable a progressive emancipatory project. Using a literature review and in-depth interviews with diverse civil society actors, this research explores how knowledge, politics, and praxis intersect in Palestinian civil society.

The findings highlight that while civil society actors generally welcome the broadening of self-determination, most lack a comprehensive understanding of its individual and communal dimensions. The dominance of the national narrative, international law frameworks, and donor priorities has contributed to a depoliticization and fragmentation of civic discourse. Many civil society organisations (CSOs), especially NGOs, have shifted from mass-based, politicised entities to project-driven, bureaucratised structures. This has resulted in a loss of autonomy, a decline in intellectual engagement, and weakened transformative capacity.

Despite these challenges, this research identifies a clear recognition among actors of the need for renewal. There is growing demand for civil society to reassert its moral and political role in designing post-colonial futures. Knowledge production emerges as a key tool for this transformation, but it must be organic, participatory, and strategic.

Key Recommendations

1. Reframe self-determination as a holistic, emancipatory process across individual, communal, and national spheres.
2. Revive civil society's political and ethical role through support for autonomous knowledge production, strategic theorisation, and critical public debate.
3. Depoliticization must be reversed by re-establishing CSOs' independence from donor and governmental tutelage.
4. Encourage donors to align their funding with the broader goals of self-determination and emancipation, rather than narrow, issue-specific agendas.
5. Build civil trust by fostering participatory and community-driven agendas.
6. Support civil society not just with humanitarian aid, but with tools for reconstruction, knowledge production, and autonomy.

Introduction

The urgent and the important do not coincide. We tend to put aside tasks and plans that are important for us because something urgent occurred. However, we must consider if this very urgency is a result of acts that aim to hinder our (important) plans. Almost everything in Palestine is a catch 22 situation - a norm imposed by the colonial condition. Freedom requires resisting the colonial power, but resistance requires priorities and limitations that defy freedom. This anomaly led to a deformation of the usual state-civil society nexus, which in turn, deformed civil society. It acts like a civil society, but thinks like a (nascent) state!

In the Arab region, the anomaly is exacerbated due to coloniality's presence and legacy. Arab peoples are trumped by wars, internal conflict, crippled, torn apart, and failed governments. Colonial powers, Israel in particular, practice destruction on an ongoing basis, including the destruction of civil and civic structures, institutions, and resources. Hence civil society's main task is survival. The latter has three levels: the immediate, comprising humanitarian assistance; the short-term involving political survival (that has been coined by Palestinians as *sumoud*) – a basic ingredient of future existence; and the long term, where the quality and sustainability of existence require self-determination.

The only opportunity that destruction provides, is the theoretical possibility to design the future in the process of reconstruction, albeit for that possibility to be realised it is inevitable to have the knowledge necessary to design the attributes of livelihood, not only the political (national), but also the social (communal), and the individual (human) levels.

This paper is structured as follows: first, an outline of the context and the research questions in the section on the problem statement; then an outline of the used methodology; third, a review

of the literature on self-determination and civil society engaging with some of the key relevant literature to develop the trilateral conceptualization of self-determination. Next is a presentation of the results of the field interviews with the key Palestinian civil society dialogue participants; and finally, a conclusive section with policy recommendations for civil society actors and the donor community.

Problem Statement

This paper investigates the Palestinian civil society's transformative capacity concerning one of the pillars of its own *raison d'être* – the realisation of self-determination, in particular those aspects of self-determination that serve beyond immediate individual survival, and beyond the emergence and maintenance of a state. The aim of this exercise is to identify directions of developing civil society's "organic" (home grown and locally embedded) transformative strategies that support the realisation of the emancipatory aspirations of the Palestinian society. There is a need to vitalise the Palestinian civil society's role in facilitating the enactment of the will of Palestinians, end the colonial condition, and create a balanced representation of plural Palestinian aspirations by countering hegemony over the fate of the Palestinians. It should encounter domination, whether it originates from the occupation, or from local authoritarian powers. Civil society is also expected to develop the tools, and make ready the ingredients of emancipation. These include providing platforms for societal debate, and organisational structures, like professional associations, and social institutions. In particular, it is expected to produce knowledge that supports, outlines, and defines its multifaceted role, and create convictions in the necessity and importance of civic participation. Civil society is there to lead an "organic" transformative endeavour of relevance to its society.

The aspired transformation is multifaceted, and its priorities vary for different actors and societal segments. However, autonomy is by and large the common denominator that legitimises the variety of aspirations, whether they stem from individual or collective choices, and whether they mirror the interests of a particular group or the nation as a whole. To aspire is to will, and autonomy is a prerequisite for will. The choice of the matter of this enquiry - the conceptualisation of self-determination – is based on the assumption that self-determination is the epitomiser of the will to transform. In particular, what this paper examines is the degree to which self-determination is understood in a complex manner that involves individual, collective, and national autonomy.

An obvious obstacle to such a complex and nuanced conceptualisation is the prevailing understanding that limits self-determination to its national manifestation. But the state, which embodies national autonomy, as a political form of collective organisation, does not guarantee the realisation of individual, and communal endeavours for self-determination. The reality is that

while the state should be tasked with the facilitation of self-determination by its citizens, and ensuring the necessary means of its realisation, it seldom engages in practicing the opposite, and in other cases fails in playing its intended role. On the other hand, a main function of civil society is to prevent the state from defying its said purpose.

Investigating the Palestinian civil actors' conceptualization of self-determination, and their perception about their role in achieving it is key to developing strategies for fostering civil society's role in addressing the emancipatory needs of Palestinians proactively, in a manner that instils hope in the "day after", and provides direction. Discussing the future is much needed because the well-known Palestinian common ground of dismantling and overcoming the colonial condition does not speak much to how Palestinians will live and organise within a sovereign entity. Delving into the "day after" requires examining the dynamics of self-determination beyond independence and state formation. Such an extrapolation is necessary in order to reassure a human-centred understanding, and the consequences of such an understanding for political participation, and knowledge production.

Over the past century, the prevailing understanding and definition of self-determination was centred around the nation-state. However, in addition to national self-determination, there are two other aspects: individual self-determination, and communal self-determination. Without reinstalling these two aspects (forming a trilateral concept), self-determination cannot deliver what it is intended to attain. The polity should facilitate the realisation of individual and communal aspirations, and not suppress or frame them. Modern history demonstrates that suppression and framing are not the exception. In other words, achieving national self-determination does not guarantee personal emancipation and the realisation of communal aspirations that are necessary conditions for a human-centred world. The lately growing populist, oligarchical, and proto-fascist trends in politics point to the urgency of de-monopolising the concept of self-determination through the reemployment of its largely dismissed connotations – individual and communal self-determination.

No contemporary society is immune against right-wing extremism, which conflates against the backdrop of the prevalence of populist politics. Dealing with these phenomena as the problem of "others" only exacerbates the populist and eventually the fascist threats. Additionally, the core democratic component of free will is threatened due to the change in the nature of the nation state in the neoliberal era of globalisation. The growing demand and adherence to non-voluntary, frequently kinship-based identities (tribal, ethnic, confessional, etc.) in the formation of communities, and even state structures, threatens the disintegration of democracy as a political system. It defies the principle of echoing the will of the people.

Organising around combating these threats requires a strong conviction in substantial (not only formal) democracy, the cornerstone of which is a collective free will that forms a polity, and not formed by it. Only a triangulated, as stipulated above, understanding of self-determination, along

with and conviction in its centrality, can constitute the canvas for democratic value system that goes beyond the form and the procedure and can result in a human-oriented political system.

A related concern is the deterioration of the place and role of civil society actors over the past period, which was exposed by their weak responsiveness to the Arab dignity revolts of 2010-2011, where they could not play a decisive role in shaping the revolts' outcomes. This deterioration is particularly evident in Palestine (in both the West Bank and Gaza), where the status of civil society, and popular expectations from it contracted. Hence, there is reason to revisit the role of civil society, and the requirements for ensuring its transformative capacity.

In the current turbulence of the (changing) world order, the existence and actions of transformative actors is crucial, especially in a period of democratic erosion, when fierce populist anti-democratic actors are gaining more ground. This situation requires readiness to engage in politics at levels that are not limited to the form of the polity. It rather demands the politicisation of civil society's perspectives and strategies, and the abandonment of the de-political stances that characterised, to a significant extent, the positions of civil society in the past three decades.

While the question of self-determination obviously cannot grasp all issues of relevance to the above-described conditions, it can, if posed as a question about an "emancipatory self-determination" (in the above-mentioned triangular manner), serve the revisiting of civil society's conceptualisation of governance, freedom, welfare, wellbeing, health, education, dignity, and much more. The application of such a conceptualisation to the Palestinian dilemma is self-evident and has "double" (national and social) significance.

Civil society organisations witnessed visible transformations that coincided with the emergence of the new world order, which reflected the triumph of neoliberal politics including the fall of the socialist block, and the resulting unipolar order. The transformations involved a boom in the emergence and growth of non-governmental organizations, and a shrinking of union work, a decline in the role of political parties (in spite of the growth of their number in numerous countries), amongst other trends. While there is no substantial evidence connecting the transformations in civil society and political parties to the neoliberal triumph, it is self-evident that these transformations and their upshots belong to the era, in which they developed. However, this era is the very same era whose terrifying crisis we are witnessing today. Civil society organisations not only were occasioned by their neoliberal context, but also contributed to its formation and development. As such, the impact of the crisis of the neoliberal order on them is inevitable.

The crisis situation dictates revisiting the requirements for civil society institutions to execute their transformative capacity, and discuss its direction and scope – there is need to outline what is to be expected from civil society organisations concerning their role in changing this world, and contributing to the transition to the next era.

There are two aspects to the work of civil society institutions. These institutions constitute a mediator, or a barrier, between power and its subject, and their further and most important role lies in maintaining the balance and stability of power (or, in Gramsci's expression, maintaining hegemony). There are two ways to stabilize hegemony in the presence of two or more powers: either contributing to the subjugation of the subordinate party to that, which possesses the means of repression; or working to raise the status of the interests of the party that does not possess the means of repression and compelling the owner of the means of repression to adopt the interests of the subordinate to a degree that guarantees the relative satisfaction of the subordinates. These two ways of working of civil society institutions are contradictory, but they coexist. Reality accommodates both paths, and civil society institutions constitute a mixture and a conflict between them.

Research Questions

This paper hopes to answer the following questions:

1. How does Palestinian civil society understand and conceptualise self-determination, and how does the absence of a political perspective affect this understanding in the short and medium terms?
2. How does the diversity of Palestinian civil society perceptions and perspectives affect the possibility of making an emancipatory concept of self-determination the centre of the Palestinian question? To what extent can such a comprehension serve as a strategic component of policy-making processes while still under occupation?
3. How to strengthen the capacity of Palestinian civil society in knowledge production processes and identify long-term strategies to promote its resilience with an eye on self-determination? And how can the understanding of self-determination be intersectional to respond to the diversity within the Palestinian society, i.e. inclusively respond to diverse aspirations coming from women and girls, youth, poor, refugees, urban rural, etc?

Methodology

In order to examine how self-determination is envisioned, defined, and assessed by the Palestinian civil society the research process departed from a literature review towards in-depth dialogues with civil society actors. First a mapping of literature on civil society in Palestine, the Arab world, and global literature was carried out, as was a literature review on the schools of self-determination. The literature review process then fed the development of the conceptual framework which was used for the field work. A sample of Palestinian civil society representatives was selected, and field work was initiated by conducting interviews from the selected sample.

From there data was analysed using qualitative analysis and a comparative matrix. Finally, the data was distilled to produce policy recommendations.

In regard to the sample, it represented the variety of civil society actors. The group of interviewed persons included a variety of actors, such as university professors, civil society workers, public figures, activists, etc. The selection criteria involved the sector of activity (health, agriculture, water, gender, education, marginalized groups/refugees/Bedouin, etc.), geography (Area C, Urban areas, North/Central/South WB), demographic diversity (gender, age, socio-economic conditions). The sample was approached, and presented with a concept note that stipulates the central idea behind this research and its goals. Research ethics consideration, and a consent request.

The political situation, as always is the case in the colonial condition, had its toll on the research process, which took place during an exacerbated Israeli aggression on the Palestinians. In addition to the depressive effect of the genocide which continues to unfold on a large scale in Gaza, direct Israeli army, and army supported settler attacks in the West Bank forced the research team to carry out several interviews via digital platforms. Interviews with colleagues in the Gaza Strip was simply impossible!

Despite these serious obstacles, over 15 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from civil society during the research period. Dialogue with interviewees was used to distil how Palestinian civil society actors define and assess the concept of self-determination in the absence of a political process in short and medium terms, and considerations concerning the need to strengthen the capacity of Palestinian civil society in knowledge production processes. The data from the interviews was then transcribed, classified into a data matrix with the main themes of the dialogues serving as headings (most of them predetermined, but some emerged from the dialogues and were not initially intended). The data was analysed in light of the conceptual framework adopted by the research team and enriched by the literature review, which aimed at reviewing relevant literature on civil society, and on self-determination.

Conceptual Background

Self-determination

The prevalence of the “national” in the understanding of self-determination, dating to the beginning of the twentieth century, shadowed the “original” (personal) significance of self-determination that held a central position within the liberal doctrine, and the less developed concept of collective (communal) self-determination that underpinned the notion of social democracy.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides two definitions for self-determination:

- 1: *free choice of one's own acts or states without external compulsion;*
- 2: *determination by the people of a territorial unit of their own future political status.*^[2]

The second definition arose first in the middle of the nineteenth century,^[3] with the first use occurring in 1911,^[4] while the first definition goes back to circa 1680.^[5] In all cases "self-determination, in essence, refers to acting based on one's own mind or free will, without external compulsion."^[6]

Towards the end of the 19th century, the focus in discussions about self-determination shifted towards the question of collective self-determination (mainly national self-determination) due to political-historical reasons related one way or another to the nation (and the) state.

The post WWI reality dictated a need to provide new and better arguments that legitimate coloniality, and invent new techniques for its maintenance. Significant restructuring of the world order took place in the post-war period to fulfil several functions: (a) establishing means and techniques to control the territories of the defeated empires, (b) answer the challenge posed by the Bolshevik victory in Russia, and its expansion into the Soviet Union soon after, and (c) settling geopolitical accounts between the colonial victors. In these conditions, self-determination acquired its national connotation, boosted by several factors amongst which was the "confluence of socialist and liberal ideas of self-determination,"^[7] that made self-determination "a doctrine that applied first and foremost to nations, and only subsequently to individuals."^[8]

The picture significantly changed after WWII. It was not only a socialist - capitalist "complot", but also a colonial - anti-colonial concourse. The subsequence of individual self-determination became globally dominant along with the normalisation of nationalism and the nation-state. In (and for) this contest, liberalism overcomes its libertarian assumption concerning the centrality of the individual for the sake of its commodified form and its essential function of competition in the market.

Self-determination is not a state of being (a status), but an act of becoming (a process) – an execution of a will. The maintenance of its achievements or realisation within an entity of a singular (including individual) magnitude requires external recognition by the surrounding entities. Such recognition necessitates a certain legitimation of the acts that the process of self-determination needs. However, legitimation requires a collective. This is one rationale for the idea of collective self-determination: "individual and collective self-determination are inextricably bound together."^[9]

The emergence of the nation-state, amongst other factors belonging to the same epoch, instituted change, which made a "world order" possible towards the end of the fifteenth century.^[10] Within this historical framework collective self-determination acquired two different, albeit interconnected, and in apart overlapping forms: liberal and socialist, or nationalist and

internationalist. The differences between the opposing perspectives concern various aspects, including the functions of self-determination that range between coloniality and emancipation, the criteria of the collective formation ranging between class and blood, and the geography accordingly. However, all the differences found their reflection in the magnitude of the perceived self-determination and in the social/individual pre-eminence in the formation of the collective self-determining entity. The liberal perception gave pre-eminence to the individual – the citizen to be, while the socialist perception gave ascendancy to the society, both at the level of ideology. In practice, both gave priority to the state.

The notion of collective consciousness is crucial for understanding collective self-determination and the processes of its realisation. Various forms of political organisation provide a solution to the problem of discordancy between the abstract notion of “public will” and the concrete nature of its realisation through collective self-determination. What spawns discordancy is the absence of a concrete carrier of collective consciousness that embodies the collective will, and the lack of an “organic” quality of the bearer of this will. The existence of a concrete carrier is a necessary condition for objectifying the will through its formation, stipulation, and negotiation with other collective wills for the formation of the “public will”.

The nature of the carrier, which is necessary for will representation, depends on the magnitude (quantity and substance) of the collective. While state institutions might be the appropriate carrier for the expression of the “national will”, unions are likely to be better for the expression of various professional strata, parties for the expression of class type interests, and committees or municipalities for expressing communal wills. The common denominator of the various forms of political organisation is their ability to substitute (or expand) the harmonising capacity of the organic body (the holder of the free will of the individual member of the self-determining collective).

However, the representation of the free will cannot be reduced to the coercive legal form that the state adopts. Hence, there is a necessity to maintain a voluntary, non-coercive representation of the free will, whether it is an individual will, or a collective one that forms the collective consciousness. This function is taken up by the civil society (discussed in more detail below).

The idea of collective self-determination is, inter alia, a natural response to colonial collective repression, especially because class and national emancipation are intertwined. “Self-determination is then an historical instance of counter-power, which endangers the imperial self and endows the non-self with the attributes of a resistant and militant self. Self-determination becomes opposed to ‘alien’ determination of the self.”^[11] De-colonial self-determination is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for emancipation, because eliminating foreign hegemony does not guarantee the absence of local hegemony.

Historically, the political concept of self-determination rested with the liberal tradition while maintaining its anticolonial stance. The dominance of the liberal tradition's fervour for self-determination amongst anti-colonial movements resulted in two major drawbacks: losing the emancipatory momentum and leading to statism (and nationalism); and suppressing individual and communal self-determination.

The nation, which is the subject of national self-determination is a "collectivised group" – "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."^[12] This imagined construct is a result of abstraction, which amalgamates several elements, and presents them as possessing common features such as language, history, territory, culture, ethnic similarity, and even an "average personality".^[13]

Contrasting natural collectives, such as society, the nation requires mediating elements for its bonding into an entity. One central mediating element is law, which facilitates the bonding of the nation (within the state) as well as the relations between states (international law). Law itself requires a master (the sovereign), and needs external legitimation, which international law and institutions, amongst other elements, serves. International law understanding of self-determination contradicts, in essence, the notion of self-determination as a process of realising the free will of nations, because it "is the legal form of the struggle of the capitalist states among themselves for domination over the rest of the world".^[14] Moreover, international law deals in effect with the states as perceived polities and not with nations constituted of people(s). The cases of Palestine (especially today), Kurdistan, the Tamil, the Quebecois, the Western Sahara, inter alia, serve as evidence of the incapacity of international law, and its instruments, to grant or even facilitate the practice of self-determination. National self-determination in international law is contingent on such contested and frequently negotiated concepts as ethnicity, territory, sovereignty, hegemony/consent, and statehood. Land and blood are the kernel of this conceptual web, albeit frequently secularised.

We can functionally define national self-determination as the process of ensuring the means to realise the will of the self-determined entity in conditions of sovereignty, which functions in the environment of governmentality that is conducive for the negation of self-determination's autonomy. Other attributes of national self-determination, such as territory and the people (comprising the nation), and the need for security, coercion, etc... are necessary for the existence of the state, but are not actually attributes of sovereignty (although they are attributes of the sovereign), nor constitute a logical condition for self-determination.

The invention of the nation in the individualist scheme of capitalist modernity happened apparently at the cost of the community. Capitalist modernity, comprising industrialisation and the colonial ambition, involved the suppression of the communal social unit. Modern structures of domination required the atomised supply of wage labour and the totalised nation of the centralised state. Under colonial practices, singularisation and individualisation were "efficient"

techniques. The dismissal of the communal magnitude was necessary not only for colonial settlement, but also for the imperialist redistribution of territory.

The construction of any entity entails a degree of mediation and objectification – techniques that can transform individual wills into a collective one, which does not spring unaided. This is especially true for the emergence of a national will. On the other hand, the emergence of a communal collective will, while requiring the same techniques, needs a much humbler magnitude of them compared to what constructing national will requires. The community's everyday is its politics, and its everyday free activity is a practice of self-determination – this means that socialisation alone can be sufficient to fulfil the mediation and objectification of a community. For this very reason of “simplicity” and minimal mediated relations, the community should serve as the unit of analysis of collective self-determination. The coercive bundling of the community into a nation (of a state), which modernity imposed, forced collective self-determination to lose its natural demeanour, and made it dependent on the sovereign. However, coercive membership of a nation cannot replace the organic relations that constitute a society.

We can conclude that there is a need to identify a social collective of a magnitude other than the national – an entity that is not contingent on what makes it derivative in relation to the state, perceived in a light that does not conform with the modernity doctrine. Such a collective must possess the features that permit it to be a self-determining entity. These features include self-sufficiency (capability of social reproduction), the possession of a free collective (united) will, and self-formation. The latter, being an autonomous act of association, requires the collective to form (without necessarily existing beforehand) a “true” (not only imagined) community.

The term communal implies that “the right to self-determination should not be confined to achieving political independence and separate statehood.”^[15] Collective self-determination has an essential social nature, which is primary in comparison to the form of political organisation – i.e. political organisation requires the existence of a society, and cannot exist without it, while the opposite is not true. The nation-state, where the town becomes the “city”, and the burgess becomes the “citizen”, is one such form. There are at least three reasons for contemplating a polity other than the nation (as the form of political organisation). The first reason is the need for a collective self-determining entity, which is not singularised or totalised, and which does not suppress and objectify individual self-determination. The second is the need to identify a true (not imaginary) community. The third reason is the existence of evidence of crises, and the looming demise of the nation state as the realm of self-determination. Witness of this is the growing motivation for indigenous rights, and the resurfacing of the idea of peoplehood, with the frequently implicit assumption that the “people” form a community other than the nation. The re-emergence of various kinship roles, especially in war-torn societies is further witness to the insufficiency of the nation state for realising satisfactory self-determination, albeit replacing the nation with archaic and outdated communal forms does not solve the problem. The above-

mentioned phenomena testify to the crisis, but do not constitute a roadmap to its resolution. Such resolution should be taken up by the civil society.

When examining concrete self-determination questions (like the Palestinian question), a common observation is that considerations of external determination, which provide the form of self-determination (the state), override the internal substance of self-determination understood as the realisation of public will. Different subjects, i.e. potentially conflicting wills, define the form and a substance (content) of self-determination, and thus, generate the self-contradictory nature of national self-determination. This contradiction poses a significant limitation on the possibility of achieving freedom, as a voluntary act of self-determination. "There is but one law which by its [the general will's] nature requires unanimous consent, that is, the social compact; for civil association is the most voluntary act in the world."^[16]

Civil Society

Civil society is an abstract and quite fluid concept that has multiple denotations, and overwent significant re-conceptualisations over time. What interests us in this paper stems from ideas and conceptualisations that emerged over the past three and half centuries.^[17] They all relate to the question of the relationship between the state and the society. Their variations have different standpoints and focuses, but they do share the notion of the autonomy of the society along with its various elements (individual, family, associations, religious institutions, economy, etc.), protecting it from state tutelage. They also share a view on requirements of such autonomy, like freedom, the existence of rational-critical debate, social cohesion, democracy, and collective identities.

Civil society represents something that is distinct from the state, but relative to it. It is what embeds the "pre- or non-political identity"^[18] of the nation – an embodiment that contains a tension between two directions: "one moves towards the norm of self-determination; the other towards the goal of marginalizing the political."^[19] In this sense understanding civil society can be realized through understanding the nation-state as a dialectic binary of the nation and the state. To use Gramscian terms, if the state represents legality, civil society represents reality.^[20] It represents "the ethical content of the state,"^[21] but in "concrete historical life, political society and civil society are a single entity."^[22] Being the realm of the real and the ethical ingredient of hegemony (the nexus of the political and the civil society), civil society is a generator of change, and a guardian of rights, or as Tylor puts it, of "equilibrium and change."^[23] Civil society "secures the bonding of the organic intellectuals of a social group with traditional intellectuals, a function ... to lift the 'economic' members of a social group to the level of 'political intellectuals,' that is, organizers of all the functions intrinsic to the organic development of an integral civil and political society."^[24]

It is this epitome of civil society, that makes the obvious candidate to realise and engage in developing and grounding the above-proposed triangulated concept of self-determination. While

the distinction and delineation of civil society from the state is conceptually necessary, its (relative) autonomy is not guaranteed at all. Maintaining the “pre-political” capacity of the society is a necessary feature of the state if the latter is to serve the nation, rather than making an instrument in the service of the sovereign out of it – a typical characteristic of oligarchy. In order for civil society to perform in this capacity, it ought to ensure its differentiation from the state, and maintain its civil nature. Civil society refers to civil (not militant or coercive) societal structures. It, thus, excludes all branches of the state and any apparatus that belongs to it, and any militia-like or mafia-like structure. The concrete incarnate of civil society’s role of the “ethical content of the state”, and “autonomy protector” are civil actors who initiate, organise, and practice counterbalancing the drive to absolutize the political.

Belonging to one or another formation of civil society is voluntary, and self-initiated. As such, civil society members can be individuals and groups, whether they constitute legal persons or potential legal persons (citizens, and registered organisations) or not (persons without citizenship, and unregistered groups – whether legal or not, including groups that organise across more than one jurisdiction). Intrinsically, membership of civil society cannot be based on kinship (family, tribal, ethnic, etc.) criteria.

The conceptualisation of civil society assumes the existence of “non-civil” structures (such as the state), from which the former is demarcated, to which it is counterposed, and which it aspires to (re)form, shape, and hold accountable. However, because the state tends to subsume civil society, and sometimes succeeds in containing it, the latter is transformed in a way that routs it away from its nature. Examples of this are, inter alia, corporatisation, juridification^[25], and reduction. The latter is a living example nowadays when civil society is reduced to non-governmental organisations that are registered, constitute a legal person, and bureaucratised. But our understanding of civil society is broader.

In this text, the term “non-governmental organizations” (NGOs) refers to non-profit organizations that see themselves as professional organizations, rely on funding for their work, and carry out their activities through “projects.” These organizations are a type of “civil organizations” (COs), which include, in addition to NGOs as defined above, organizations that rely on voluntary and charitable work, such as unions and clubs. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) include, in addition to COs, organizations such as universities, cultural centres, museums, and the like, as long as they are non-governmental and non-profit. All these organisations exclude political organizations such as parties, factions, and party coalitions, and any group that seeks political power, or is likely to hold it, and they also exclude any organizations whose membership conditions include non-voluntary criteria, or those that have hierarchical structures (including religious organizations that fall under this criteria).

The subject of this paper is not these institutions in general, but rather their transformative role in facilitating the development and fostering of autonomous free will(s), which eventually institute

the carcass on which political sovereignty is erected. This is the very carcass of legitimacy, which encompasses legality and morality. It is this two-fold nature what makes modern citizenship possible.^[26] For the reason that the nature of legality is coercive, the free will, which the political power is supposed to represent, hinges on the protection of the autonomy of its constituents, whether they are private or public. This protection is the moral duty of civil society, particularly in the state where "laws of freedom obligated men to undertake themselves."^[27] The development of law in the framework of the modern state "did not consist in an ever growing quantity of morality but exclusively in an increase of the products of legality."^[28]

The two-prong legitimacy requires a certain degree of autonomy of its components, and harmony between them. However, such autonomy and harmony cannot be achieved under the colonial condition. This is the main reason why the Palestinian civil society cannot serve the above-mentioned harmony, and the same remains true after the emergence of the Palestinian Authority (PA), which did not put an end to the colonial condition. "The 1994 establishment of the ... PA in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ... created a huge shift in terms of setting the structural conditions for civil society."^[29] Since the emergence of the PA on the background of the Oslo Accords, the tense relation between the two foundations of legitimacy became complex due to the jurisdictional duality, and the subordination of the Palestinian jurisdiction to Israeli power.

Prior to the emergence of the PA, Palestinian civil society served its moral duty of dissociating from the legal postulates and structures of the occupier's law. After the emergence of the PA, a fused situation arose, where the PA became a holder of jurisdiction on one hand, and a subordinate body to colonial dominance on the other. This led to a schism in the Palestinian civil society's moral obligation: harmony and dissociation with the existing political structures at the same time, resulting in an undeclared (although well recognised) crisis and deterioration of the Palestinian civil society. Not only did the externally conditioned birth of the PA pose the dilemma resulting from the co-existence of two different powers that pose opposite duties on civil society, but the PA acted actively on ensuring that "civil society is institutionalized as a sphere of legally domesticated, incessant competition between strategically acting private persons, the organs of state, organized by means of public law, constitute the level on which consensus can be restored in cases of stubborn conflict."^[30]

There are other factors that exacerbated the crisis of civil society. While these factors have a range of different upbringings, they are all connected to a global context, in which "the state-civil society dualism more or less disappeared from the mainstream of political discourse."^[31] One of the features of this global context, especially, its neoliberal version, is that considerations of regulation override those of rationalism. On the backdrop of this context, CSOs were factually reduced to NGOs, which were singled out as the "eligible" counterpart for political structures in the political-moral formula. In this process CSOs, but especially NGOs, adopted the "rule of law" framework, accepted rigid legal frameworks in their endeavour to gain legality (rather than suffice with

legitimacy), adopted “corporate” techniques required for the “partnership” with political structures (like the government), and became de-politicised instead of fulfilling their original role of depoliticising the political system, or “marginalizing the political.”^[32] The dependence of NGOs, and some other CSOs on donors, who share the drive to regulation, fosters the impression that civil society consists of NGOs.

The picture, which unfolded in the aftermath of the emergence of the PA reminds of Gramsci’s description of the conditions of the Italian civil society in the period preceding WWI:

... this same civil society was something shapeless and chaotic and remained so for many decades; it was therefore possible for the state to dominate it, overcoming each time the contradictions that presented themselves in a sporadic, localized form, without any national nexus. Not even clericalism itself, then, was the expression of this civil society, because it was not able to organize it nationally, however much it might have been a strong and (formally) compact national organization. In the meantime, this organization was not politically homogeneous and was fearful of the same masses which, in a certain sense, it dominated.^[33]

In such a context one cannot expect civil society actors to be able to fulfil a role and duty that are contingent on non-existing grounds: sovereignty, and the unity of the political framework. Without these grounds, civil society does not possess the ability to constitute the second element (with the political society) of hegemony, and it is impossible for it to play the “harmonising” role, and seek to bring about “equilibrium.”

The two non-political^[34] components of self-determination, the individual and the communal are the very object of civil society’s moral obligation. One can envisage the nature of the two-fold nation-state consisting of the coercive power (the state) and the moral power (the nation). The latter is what self-determination expresses, as Taylor put it:

Between 1776 and now, the notion of a people’s pre-political identity has taken a new and much more powerful form, that of the nation. We now speak of this right to make and unmake structures as the right of self-determination.^[35]

While the state is responsible for the political, the maintenance of the “pre-political” is the responsibility of civil society, and this pre-political civil society is made up of autonomous individuals and the collectives they belong to – communities. Both of them are prerequisites of the state, which with the legitimacy that civil society provides constitutes a nation state, which in turn makes civil society vital. This is why the Palestinian civil society cannot escape the battle for the state as a matter of existential necessity, no matter how this task seems counterintuitive. However, adopting this battle comes with a price.

Discussion of Field Findings

In this part of the paper, we will delve into the discussion about how civil society actors perceive this complex picture of their role, and their nexus with the political. Beforehand, it is important to note that the nation, which figures in the above discussion is a several century old construct that belongs to modernity. Its role was played by other structures before modernity and can very well be played by different structures after modernity. But in all cases, as long as there is a polity, the nexus of law and ethics, or of coercive and moral powers, etc. is inevitable, and hence the inevitability of civil society or its equivalent.

In dialogues with civil society actors, the general reception of the idea of a three-prong concept of self-determination was positive and welcoming. One counterpart even said that it comes belated, because there was need for paying attention to the individual and communal aspects of self-determination a while ago. This could have prevented the deterioration of personal and collective freedom, which face growing restrictions.^[36] Similar logic was behind calls to expand the discussion on the triangular understanding of self-determination.^[37]

There is clarity that political independence does not guarantee self-determination, and that the latter is coupled with a comprehensive understanding of (indivisible) rights. The realisation of self-determination requires, for example, the implementation of the right to return,^[38] not to mention civil and political freedoms, and socio-economic rights.

Lack of comprehensive understanding of self-determination

Nonetheless, a common takeaway from all encounters with civil society actors is that they (and others) did not reflect, in depth, on the understanding of self-determination. While they understand that national self-determination does not suffice for the establishment of freedoms,^[39] and that freedom is the core issue,^[40] there is general agreement that under occupation, there is prevalence for the task of national liberation, which is discursively and conceptually connected to national self-determination.

Having said this, the monopoly of the national in the understanding of self-determination is not absolute. The dialogues registered various notes concerning the intersection between individual rights (such as gender rights) and the notion of individual self-determination.^[41] There were reminders that collective rights include individual rights.^[42] However, the conclusion that there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding of individual and collective self-determination is unavoidable. It is, probably, the almost exclusive focus, in civil society's work, on separate rights issues, such as, inter alia, gender, or the disabled, that facilitated or deepened the disconnection of understanding that these rights, in their wholeness, form the right to self-determination, and fostered an abridged understanding of the latter as a particular national right, "not even in the proper meaning of national".^[43]

The prevailing discourse in Palestine gives more weight to the "Palestinian identity" than it gives to self-determination and its other essentials. One participant said that "for me, the collective right to self-determination is elevated to the sacred, because I need to preserve my identity."^[44] This identity is evidently "national", and hence the prioritisation of national self-determination. According to Dana, "civil society actors centered the production of knowledge on an indigenous field that entailed emphasis on the originality of the local culture and values as a cornerstone for the affirmation of national identity."^[45] But the affirmation of the identity is not value free. It rather possesses a "social aspect, which reflects the nature of the society."^[46]

In the Palestinian context, it comes to no surprise that the concept of self-determination is associated with international law. However, the meaning and implications of self-determination in international law are not clear given the nexus of the nation (the people) and the state.^[47] Some participants even expressed their fear that framing the Palestinian question as one of self-determination diverts attention from the main cause - freedom.^[48] Another reason for scepticism in the utility of the concept is the conviction that no real and full self-determination for the Palestinians can be realised in the current status of power relations.^[49]

One can add "extra-cognitive" reasons for the fragmented or reduced understanding of self-determination. For example, the impact of donor agendas, many of which disconnect rights from self-determination.^[50] This disconnection seems to be expressed in the web of donor-recipient interactions, and ends up institutionalised in some NGOs.

However, it is clear that civil society actors in general realise the limitations of national self-determination, by expressing a notion of incapability of overcoming it. The need to be "practical", and attend to urgent vital questions, pushes civic actors away from contemplating the very concepts and principles that guide their practice. One participant explained that "we work with persons who suffer direct violations, and it is not easy or simple to keep in mind that these persons are part of the collective struggle for self-determination."^[51] This notion of "our hands do not get to the matter" resonated in different forms: "all we can do is to try to minimise harm, and not even prevent it. ... Especially for those who use legal tools, ... the utmost that we can achieve is the implementation of the law, but if the law is unfair and unjust, then you are inflicting harm."^[52]

Deep intellectual discussions do not seem to be popular in CSOs. There is a noticeable nostalgia for times when intellectual debates were standard practice amongst civil society actors. One participant said:

There is no room for such discussions today. Even if it takes place, it cannot lead to anything. Civil society became domesticated. Not politically domesticated. People still think, and no agenda was imposed, but our thinking changed. This is the most dangerous. We succumbed to this change willingly.^[53]

Another participant noted that domestication can be observed in the terminology that we use and the policies that we adopt, without questioning whether they fulfil their purpose.^[54]

There are also convictions that the framing of the Palestinian question using self-determination is wrong. The rooted nexus of the nation and the state renders the idea of self-determination altogether problematic for some Palestinians. They see self-determination as part of a “package” that is imported, and relates to the modern state, and includes, inter alia, “civil society” and “self-determination”.^[55] Calling for self-determination can be perceived a possible drawback from the goal of liberation.^[56]

For others, the fear is that the realisation of self-determination in the context of a perceived two-state solution will divide the Palestinian nation [consisting of Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel and the diaspora],^[57] especially that national self-determination is viewed through a legal lens, particularly that of international law.^[58]

In addition, there is a perceived connection between self-determination as something enshrined in international law, that also serves as the framework for the two-state formula of solving the Palestinian question. In addition, there is the widely believed claim that the Oslo process happened under the patronage of international law.^[59] The combination of these considerations/perceptions leads to a sceptical relation to self-determination.

To conclude, the lack of comprehensiveness in understanding self-determination is not solely a question of knowledge, but rather, partially, is a result of seeking a comfort zone, alignment with the mainstream or avoiding challenging it, and playing to the ears of the public and the donors and the political structures. Overcoming the reductionism requires a stronger commitment by civil society to their emancipatory role understood in universalizable terms, i.e. going beyond the pressing issues of here and now (Palestine in the colonial condition) towards the future of here and there (they day after seen in a global context).

Transformations of civil society organisations

The above-mentioned crisis of the Palestinian civil society, which is linked to multiple reasons and circumstances, manifests itself, amongst other things, in the agendas and priorities of civic actors. The question of self-determination is not central on their agenda, although it does serve as a guiding principle for some.^[60] “Civil society moved away from the major national questions and issues.”^[61] Anything that requires a collective will or vision is dropped from the agenda:

There is no complementarity in the programmes of CSOs, and there is no umbrella for the coordination of different types of work in various sectors (women rights, children rights, water, etc.) so that there can be a unified national vision and direction. On the contrary, there is competition (not the healthy type).^[62]

A similar idea was voiced by another participant:

As if the civil sector was privatised. I, as a woman, work separately from labourers, students, etc. We do not have the capacity to attract the new

generation, because we transformed from 'idea holders' [and ideal holders], to institutions.^[63]

There is a strong conviction that civil society underwent significant changes after the emergence of the PA. The symptoms of this change include the shift of CSOs from politicised mass organisations engaged in popular resistance to depoliticised professional organisations,^[64] a shift in the focus from the total collective right to selective and individual rights,^[65] and a shift towards reform questions, that do not require a public constituency.^[66] The shift towards reform is connected to an affable relation with the executive, which situates the civil society in the service of subjugation.^[67] The symptoms also include the emergent control by the PA,^[68] that "created an iron wall between political and social work."^[69]

The situation got worse with the radicalisation of internal divisions, the absence of a national agenda, the degradation of global interest in the Palestinian question (until late 2023), and the corresponding partial withdrawal of donors, and most importantly, the gloomy political perspectives had their toll on the Palestinian civil society.

However, is important to note here that there is no consensus on the absence of political perspectives. Some see resistance as the perspective,^[70] or consider that missing a compass and a plan of action, does not amount to lacking perspective.

Others emphasised that perspectives can be created. One participant described the situation as intractable, and needs thinking outside the box.^[71] Another noted:

... the problem is that we see only two options for a perspective: that of the PA, and that of the opposition. We see no perspective if these two options are obstructed, and become frustrated. However, civil society should create a new way out of the deadlock. Most probably this way should avoid succumbing to the colonial condition, and avoid attempting to face a mighty state physically, but rather concentrate on rights.^[72]

The political deadlock obfuscates the conceptualisation of self-determination, and renders it unworkable for some. This problem is voiced in multiple nuanced forms that are related to the lack of clarity concerning the political resolution of the Palestinian question. The most intuitive reasoning is that the Palestinian civil society is struggling to end the occupation, and possesses an elaborate mechanism for promoting this struggle, but it does "not discuss in any depth the question about what we want after the occupation ends."^[73]

Since a vast majority of civic actors, especially those who belong to CSOs, and in particular those who belong to NGOs, are activists, they tend to be pragmatic and plan in accordance with the real politique, which is miserable. From such a perspective there is not much to build hope on. The way out requires more imagination, or as several participants noted, "it needs thinking outside the box":

Israel has created a reality of control and domination that is very hard to dismantle. The two-state solution is not a realistic option, neither is the single bi-national state. Theoretically, there are alternatives to national self-determination, like the ethnic-based cultural self-determination, but we need to delve into theorizing these questions. This will be challenging but worth the effort.^[74]

While the absence of political perspective (and a national plan of action) will discourage the majority, it will prompt others for becoming more active.^[75] The crisis, or the peak of the deadlock, especially on the backdrop of massacres in Gaza, pushed many civil society actors to more radical discussions. Some of them see the presented triangulated concept of self-determination as a good starting point in a process of revisiting the Palestinian political agenda. "It is an opportunity to think exactly about these issues. Where are we heading? What are we doing? What is our destiny? What is our future?"^[76]

Another factor that led to transformations of the civil society, is the funding. According to some participants, funding led COs to break into two categories, not only based on their dependency on funding, but there are organisations that appeared to receive funding. One category includes COs that are not NGOs, but rather constituency-based organisations, and those NGOs "that emerged as mass movements, and are still true to their mission".^[77] They tend to be selective in their choice of donors, and negotiate funding terms to fit their agenda and align with certain principles (including political stances).

The second category does not possess any agenda other than a donor-driven one. These are the organisations that serve as one of the reasons for the popular disappointment with CSOs and distrust in them. They also seem to play a role in the deterioration of the intellectual rigor of civil society, its depoliticization, detachment from core questions, and the fragmentation of issues that implies the disconnection of individual rights and self-determination, and a reduced understanding of the latter.^[78]

Donor-led agendas are categorised as de-politicised, thus there was a depoliticising impact by the donors on NGOs, but this was not the sole factor leading to depoliticization.^[79] Another important mentioned factor was the PA policies.

There is also a partial belief that donor funding, that supported NGOs, but not all types of CSOs, especially not COs, played a central role in the reduction of the understanding CSOs to NGOs, which many participants criticised. There is an assumption that the lack of trust in civil society is a result of this reduction.^[80] This logic is fortified by the impression that NGOs became "slaves of funding,"^[81] and became depoliticised while attempting to market themselves to donors.^[82]

However, not only funding created deformations in the civil society, but its absence is expected as well to create more problems! There is a perception that external funding was linked to the

two-state solution, which is a diminishing option. Hence there is fear that funding might stop with the vanishing of its drive and the political deadlock.

This discussion shows that the Palestinian civil society has transformed over time to adapt to the changing circumstances. In this process, it lost some of the features that are required for the fulfilment of its role of “change and equilibrium”. Namely, it sidelined the significant non-political component of serving its ethical duty based in the totality of human considerations, and avoid the reduction of the civil life-world to the political realm. This reduction serves as a comfort zone in the conditions of the crisis resulting from the colonial condition, and the nature of political powers in Palestine. Leaving the comfort zone requires a self-rejuvenation of civil society is needed, but it ought to be reminded of it, because making a leap outside the comfort zone is not an intuitive decision.

Tools for overcoming the challenges: knowledge production?

Civil society is evidently not playing its role and fulfilling its moral duty to facilitate individual and collective participation in shaping the future, i.e. in self-determination. While this situation has multiple causes and arose in a complex set of circumstances, it is not a fate, but overcoming it requires the combination of collective work with conviction under a leadership that has a vision.^[83]

Overcoming the deadlock in civil stagnation and in politics requires a lucid view, one that is grounded in reality, but looking beyond the status quo of things and doctrines. This is not necessarily to suggest a paradigm shift, but rather to at least contemplate the operational paradigm.

Civil society is, theoretically, a source of legitimacy for the state for as long as it represents the “real” and the “moral”, and serves “change and equilibrium”. However, if it does not fulfil these functions, it stops being legitimate itself, and if it relies instead on its legality, it will render itself secondary and subordinate to the political power, which in Palestine is not even the “least of all evils”, but rather worse.

This is why it is inevitable for the Palestinian civil society to think, and reflect not only on how bad things stand, but on the perspective of a better life. This is its duty, which requires producing “organic” home grown knowledge, not only disseminating it, or collecting and sorting information about the current impasse. In other words, civil society needs to strategize, and in knowledge production this means to theorise, albeit this task seems farfetched in the current state of the art.

There is no serious comprehensive knowledge production. There exists sporadic knowledge production, and attempts for production about right, self-determination, and the future. Knowledge production is not accumulative, like the NGO projects and funding: spread out and not productive. The main reason for this is the absence of a political unifying and guiding leadership.^[84]

The existing knowledge production in CSOs is not significant. "They ask questions, but do not produce programmes, or strategies."^[85] The absence of significant knowledge production "results from the depoliticization of knowledge, starting with the lack of a political societal discussion."^[86] In addition the lack of political leadership, and a political incubator, prevents a critical intellectual societal discussion.^[87] Such a discussion should analyse and unravel the civil society and pose the hard questions,^[88] and produce critical knowledge.^[89] There is a need for a vibrant civil society, political leadership,^[90] and national research centres (not donor funded ones).^[91]

The above stipulated diagnosis (by civic actors) is sufficient to conclude what is needed: a comprehensive, serious, based on public debate, politicised, organised, autonomous, and free process of knowledge production. However, it is not clear where the ingredients and requirements (capacity) for such a process will come from, and how they should be utilised. Some answers are clear: "education", "critical emancipatory education", "local knowledge and expertise", and the list goes on to show that the ingredients exist, and need not be imported. What seems to be missing is the conviction in the necessity of such a process, and maybe the habit to engage, and even immerse in knowledge production, in imagination, and in intellectual exercise.

Upon inquiring from dialogue participants about what does it take to adopt a broader understanding of self-determination, they iterated the need to find and comprehend a way to demystify the concept, and connect it to daily reality, to daily tasks and issues,^[92] to develop an understanding that is connected to an emancipatory view, cantered around self-determination,^[93] to instrumentalise the concept in the framework of localising civil society's strategies and workplans, develop them by ourselves, "and not by 'consultants'", so that we can work on what we need to work on.^[94]

In the end analysis, the autonomy of civil society dictates that it develops its own tools to bring itself up to the fulfilment of its functions. The tutelage of political powers, and the drive towards "best practices", especially supported by donors, and the need to negotiate civil agendas with global political agendas, rendered knowledge production secondary within the Palestinian civil society. This has taken enough toll, that many civic actors (representatives of the civil society) do not even realise their own "unfreedom" that results from sufficing with choosing between the existing knowledge supply, or even resorting to the existing applications, rather than developing their own tools via praxis, which combines knowledge production and organic belonging to the constituency. Nonetheless, there is enough recognition of the problem to initiate a process, or rather a tradition, of producing knowledge and exchanging it instead of adopting externally produced knowledge.

Conclusion

There is agreement that reducing the understanding of self-determination to its national (statist) component contradicts the mission and the *raison d'être* of civil society, and cannot encompass the elements of the declared agendas of CSOs, including the set of freedoms and rights, and the active civic participation in shaping the destiny of the nation. However, civic actors did not express readiness to adopt the broadened concept in their activism, but on multiple occasions, they were sincere about their eagerness for further discussions and debates, and about their conviction that such debates are necessary on a broad scale.

The outcome of this round of dialogues is not surprising. Civic actors are bounded by public sentiment, mainstream discourse, the political crises, and the accompanying civic stagnation. Their agenda has many subtitles, but only one heading: ending the occupation, and negotiating the conditions of daily life meanwhile. This is a manifestation of the colonisation of mind – a typical syndrome in the colonial condition.

The resulting narrowed strategies are not challenged due to the absence of relevant actors, such as political parties that have agendas beyond the colonised reality (an absence that is shared amongst the civil and the political components of the Palestinian nation). There is no alternative leadership so to speak, hence everyone stays in a comfort zone, where there is no room for radical challenges.

However, unrealised, or ignored challenges still challenge. Civil society needs to embrace its broader emancipatory duty that looks at the future. For this, it needs to overcome certain mishaps that occurred through its byzantine history, rejuvenate itself, and make a leap towards fulfilling the role of the designer of social life rather than an executer of a perceived design. In this context it should maintain its organic nature by producing all that is needed to reproduce itself maintaining its *raison d'être*. This requires, foremost, the production of relevant knowledge in relevant formats.

The prevalence of questions of life and death, along with the ubiquity of a de-secularised outlook in the everyday, and absence of political perspectives led to stagnation of civic initiative, and deterioration in the leadership quality of civic actors – the ability to listen and lead, rather than listen to follow (the popular drive, or the political mainstream).

However, in spite of this stiffness, there are indicators on a will to move towards change, albite a receiving audience is needed. The main felt obstacle to engage in changing the prevailing mantra is the dictate of the reality of here and now, and the feeling of powerlessness in what concerns the future, because it seems unattainable. It is quite telling that civil society in Palestine is not questioning the fact of being the fulfiller of the role of its counterparts – the political power. This deformation amounts to the inability, when the day after comes, of civil society to act on its duties,

and fulfil its moral obligations (as we witnessed during the emergence of the PA, and during and after the Arab Dignity Revolutions).

Exiting this situation is not simple, but achievable. Civic actors do feel accountable, and they are ready to act, but need a conducive environment for this action, the cornerstone of which is recognition. The proposal is ambitious, and targets the value system of the Palestinian society at large, with civil society being the main change actor in this endeavour. The proposed change is geared towards reintroducing the ethical component of social organisation. This ethical component shall replace conformity, and has to be rationalised, comprehended, and internalised, rather than adopted. It cannot be limited in one issue or manifestation, but rather has to be comprehensive, touching on human life and not this or that aspect of it.

For this to happen, praxis rather than practice, and critical education are needed. An education embedded in praxis will aim to replace training, propose rationality in place of “coolness”, conviction in place of belief, work instead of the job, and self-satisfaction instead of evaluation.

Policy Implications

In terms of policy concerning research and knowledge production, there is need to foster the civic transformative function, and reinstitute the ethical duties of civil society – to act on the emancipation of Palestinians from all kinds of dominance, including tutelage. In Kantian terms the proposed duty is “enlightenment, that is, the human being’s emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity.”^[95] However, to support people in their emancipation endeavour, civil society needs itself to be seeking emancipation.

Such a task requires a high degree of autonomy for researchers to choose their topics and research agendas as long as they fit in the general and broad range of civic led transformation. This will allow some to make the leap and emerge from under the weightiness of the status quo.

There is a general trend in the academia to publish in a certain type of journals that pushes researchers to work in issues that are either less relevant to the civic transformative function. The trend is mostly driven by considerations of competition. One partial solution to this problem, in academic institutions, is support for the fostering and creation of alternative competitive edges for them in areas that coincide with their civic duties. In other CSOs, the development of research capacity should be on top of the agenda, with attention to the quality of research, and ensuring that enough attention and effort are given to theorisation. In the first instance, collaborative work with academic institutions can be a practical track: for example, institute special scholarship funds to support civil society actors to take academic retreats (leading or not leading to a degree).

Relevant modes of grant accountability need to be developed. Something other than quantifiable outputs, and measurable outcomes, etc. One solution can be to move the accountability from the recipient individual to the recipient institution, and frame it in a reflexive format, rather than a

result-oriented one. If we are seeking the fostering of intellectual capacity (i.e. thinking), then attention should be made solely to the process and not the results, because fixing the results of thinking is stagnation by definition.

The above also means the need to open the formats of grant making. No policy orientation, or empirical evidence, or community based, etc. direction should be stipulated. Only such requirements as coherence, and adherence to emancipatory values can serve as criteria for selection and accountability. Thematic delineation should also be avoided.

Recommendations^[96]

1. Encourage debate about the nature of self-determination: This can take the form of sponsoring workshops and conferences to discuss the concept of self-determination; support development of curricula and public awareness campaigns that emphasize the interconnectedness of individual, communal, and national self-determination; support CSOs in integrating this broader understanding into their advocacy and programming.
2. Strengthen civil society's capacity to produce organic, home-grown knowledge through supporting research centres that focus on critical, emancipatory knowledge production.
3. Address the reluctance to produce knowledge by: (a) supporting and promoting programmes that integrate knowledge production in their structures; (b) supporting informed public debate on strategic issues rather than "hot topics"; and (c) consider supporting the initiation of specific programmes of critical theoretical nature that are attractive to civic actors.
4. Address the depoliticization of civil society by supporting initiatives that reconnect civil society with its emancipatory and transformative role. This includes encouraging CSOs to adopt politically informed strategies through maximizing on funding that ensures alignment of programmes with societal needs and priorities, and independence from donor agendas; and encourage adopting rights-based approaches that link individual and collective rights in the framework of self-determination.
5. Rebuild Trust in Civil Society: address the erosion of public trust in CSOs by supporting the prioritization of community-driven projects, and encouraging CSOs to engage with their constituencies through participatory decision-making processes.
6. Support theorisation on alternative political models by funding research and pilot projects that explore alternative political and economic models beyond the traditional nation-state framework; and supporting pilot projects that test innovative approaches to economic development, social organization, and political participation.
7. Prioritize initiatives and projects that address the root causes of the Palestinian struggle and build the capacity for the day after (not only in Gaza). Encourage donors to align their funding with the broader goals of self-determination and emancipation, rather than narrow, issue-specific agendas.

8. Minimise the impact of donor funding by adopting more flexible and less prescriptive funding models that allow CSOs to maintain their independence and align their work with the priorities of their constituents.
9. Foster international solidarity and advocacy by supporting networks that can advocate for Palestinian self-determination and support civil society's efforts to challenge the colonial condition. One example is supporting partner initiatives between Palestinian CSOs and international organizations working on human rights, anti-colonialism, and social justice.

Needless to say, special attention should be given to Gaza, which suffers dire humanitarian need that has to be prioritised. However, it is crucial that Gazans are not left with sole humanitarian support that can only guarantee bare life. It is inevitable to attend to the reformation and rejuvenation of CSOs in Gaza and support their capacity to play a central role. The war has prepared some grounds for rejuvenating the role of civil society, and this should be built on.

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^[11] I thank Omar Qassis, Ahmad Atallah, Hadil Ayoub, Rania Qadi, Yasmeen Jubeh, and Asil Husein for their contributions to the literature review, field work, transcription, data sorting, comments on drafts, suggestions for policy recommendations, and copy editing. Gratitude is also due to the civic actors who engaged in dialogues with the team that worked on this research. Insights from these dialogues are very much present in this article.

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7. A Framework for Donors to Support Knowledge Production and Civil Society Organizations in the MENA Region

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"The old is dying and the new cannot be born"

Introduction

We are living at a critical juncture, aptly described by political philosopher Nancy Fraser's book *The old is dying and the new cannot be born*. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's analysis, Fraser argues that we exist in an "interregnum"—a period where the old order is collapsing, but a new one has yet to emerge. Our moment is characterized by profound instability and a fierce contest over what comes next.

Globally, this "interregnum" is defined by democratic erosion, growing authoritarian and proto-fascist trends, and the consolidation of power in increasingly fewer hands. We witness this in the rise of far-right parties across Europe, increasing polarization, rising restrictions on civic space, and the stark double standards made evident after October 7th. These trends are compounded by worsening mental health crises (exacerbated by social media), economic precarity, and the mounting pressures of climate change, all of which point to the unsustainability of our current political and economic systems. As for the Arab world, it has been living in an "interregnum" for decades. The Arab uprisings came as an attempt to challenge existing systems, but they failed. Authoritarian regimes persist, a genocide in Gaza has been ongoing for 22 months now, and the struggle for dignity, justice and freedom remains ongoing. The region exists in a political vacuum and lacks a clear strategic vision for the future.

This critical moment is fundamentally shaped by power relations around knowledge production and the structures that govern how knowledge is created and disseminated. As Michel Foucault demonstrated, knowledge and power are intertwined—those who control knowledge production shape the possibilities for political and socio-economic transformation. In the MENA region, the knowledge ecosystem has been deeply restricted by authoritarian regimes, repression and surveillance of researchers, displacement of scholars because of wars, and donor-driven research

agendas that have marginalized local voices. This has created a fragmented landscape where critical scholarship struggles to find institutional support, where researchers lack access to essential datasets and resources or are unable to collaborate with local researchers (as in the case of displaced Syrian scholars because of the sanctions regime that was imposed on Syria), and where knowledge production can be sometimes disconnected from the priorities of local communities. The current state of the knowledge ecosystem thus reflects broader patterns of domination and exclusion that must be addressed if we are to envision and create meaningful alternatives.

Despite the sobering reality we live in, it is precisely in times of crisis that new political, economic, and social imaginaries can be constructed. The question of how we use knowledge for change becomes central to this transformative moment. Indeed, the current “interregnum” presents a unique opportunity: to envision what “the new” could look like and to strategize collectively to help bring it into being, by building alternative systems grounded in principles of social justice, freedom, inclusivity and democracy. This is also an opportune moment to identify and nurture the nascent initiatives that are emerging at the micro level to build those alternatives from below.

This moment also demands a fundamental rethinking of civil society and its role. As Gramsci reminds us, civil society is not a neutral arena—it is rather a contested space where power is negotiated, hegemony is produced, and control is maintained. Indeed, traditional NGOs can sometimes function to reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge them. Therefore, for donor engagement to be meaningful in supporting CSOs and positive change in the MENA, it must expand beyond conventional civil society actors/ NGOs to also include social movements, independent scholars and research centers, labor unions, cooperatives, and other forms of organized civic action that have transformative potential.²

For donors, this moment is also an opportunity to support the incubation of “the new”— but only if they fundamentally rethink how they engage with CSOs in the MENA region. A constructive role by donors requires breaking from traditional aid paradigms and committing to a reimagined funding model grounded in a clear ethical framework that puts local researchers and local CSOs at the center.

To catalyze meaningful change in this critical moment, this document proposes a strategic framework for donor engagement with CSOs in the MENA region, organized around three mutually reinforcing objectives:

1. **Support the envisioning of “the new”:** Build research capacity and foster research agendas that generate new imaginaries and alternatives to current paradigms. This involves decolonizing knowledge production and creating new conceptual tools and language necessary to understand and act within our current moment.

2. **Push for "the new" to be born:** Support the move from envisioning to implementation through strategic advocacy, coalition building, and communications. This involves working with a wide array of actors—from unions and independent media to grassroots movements—to help bring new visions to life.
3. **Identify and support nascent initiatives:** Discover and nurture initiatives and emerging forms of organization that embody aspects of "the new" or are actively working to build different systems at the local level. These "hidden spaces of resistance" (Georges Fahmi's paper) are essential sites of experimentation and transformation.

Before elaborating on these strategic objectives and their implementation, it is important to first outline a code of ethics that reenvision the traditional aid model and establishes new principles to guide donors' engagement with MENA civil society actors.

Code of ethics for donors: Reimagining the aid model

The papers that were commissioned for the purpose of this project highlighted several systemic issues within current funding approaches that limit the effectiveness and sustainability of civil society efforts in the MENA region. One of the key issues identified by the commissioned authors is that research agendas in the MENA region have largely been driven by donors and their political interests instead of being shaped by local researchers and serving local needs. This has led to a situation where organizations compete for funding by aligning with donor priorities, leading to oversaturation of certain topics while critical issues remain unaddressed. A persistent bias (by both donors and some people in the South) toward Western credentials and methodologies has also undermined local researchers and the insights they could bring to the research.

Another important issue highlighted by the authors relates to power dynamics and the distribution of resources, which reflects significant inequities in the current system. Larger international CSOs consistently receive disproportionate funding compared to smaller local organizations, which often access only a fraction of resources through subgrants with larger organizations although the latter add limited value to project implementation.

The predominance of project-based funding is another key problem that leads to sustainability challenges. Much of the current funding from donors primarily focuses on events and activities rather than core organizational costs and salaries. This has resulted in low compensation at local organizations, leading to staff burnout and talent drain to larger organizations. As researchers move away from local organizations, the development of indigenous knowledge ecosystems has

been undermined despite the fact that local organizations often provide greater opportunities for field-based research and contextual understanding.

The structural inflexibility of donors has also been identified as a factor that further hampers effectiveness. Limited adaptability to respond to rapidly changing dynamics in the region has meant that organizations cannot pivot when circumstances demand it. Moreover, excessive administrative requirements have created burdens that smaller organizations struggle to meet, diverting precious resources from their core mission. Funding cycles and reporting requirements also frequently fail to align with the realities of operating in complex political environments.

Political interference and censorship have also become increasingly problematic, especially after October 7, 2023, with growing restrictions on content that is critical of Israel. Foreign funding from states that are supportive of Israel has endangered CSO partners and harmed their domestic reputation. Meanwhile, the absence of protections against politically motivated funding cuts has left some organizations vulnerable to external pressure that compromises their independence.

Elements of a reimagined aid model

Against the above background, this document attempts to devise a code of ethics for donors, drawing on recommendations from the commissioned papers. A new approach to funding civil society and knowledge production in the MENA region requires fundamental shifts in how resources are allocated, relationships are structured, and the research agenda is set.

Core institutional support

The shift from project-based funding to core institutional support addresses the fundamental challenge of organizational instability that prevents strategic planning as well as the brain drain phenomenon. By providing sustainable core funding that covers operational costs, including competitive salaries, to local organizations, donors can enable organizations to transition from survival mode to strategic institutional development. This approach requires establishing multi-year funding agreements with predetermined review periods rather than demanding constant reapplication, allowing organizations to build their institutional capacity over time.

Localization of knowledge production

Research agendas have largely been donor-driven while local and displaced researchers are often treated as data sources rather than authority figures in knowledge production processes. A reimagined funding model should position local knowledge producers as leaders in setting the research agenda and driving the research process, recognizing their expertise and authority. This

requires moving away from narrow and prescriptive models and building more collaborative project and program design, where research agendas are developed by local organizations. Additionally, donors should invest in their own capacity to engage with CSOs in Arabic to reduce language barriers that privilege Western-trained researchers and limit access for knowledge producers who don't speak English.

Direct funding pathways

Resources are frequently diluted through multiple intermediaries before reaching local actors, reducing their impact and reinforcing power imbalances (especially between local organizations and international ones). Prioritizing funding streams that go directly to local CSOs working on the ground ensures more resources reach those closest to the communities being served. Implementing this approach requires streamlining application processes to make direct funding more accessible to smaller organizations and reducing complex eligibility requirements that favor established institutions with extensive administrative capacity.

Flexible and adaptive funding

The volatile contexts in which many MENA CSOs operate demand responsive funding mechanisms. Rigid funding structures prevent organizations from addressing emerging challenges effectively. Designing funding mechanisms that allow for pivoting and adaptation without burdensome approval processes enhances organizational responsiveness and effectiveness. This could involve including contingency funds within grants that organizations can flexibly reallocate in response to shifting circumstances, using streamlined and expedited approval processes.

Ethical guidelines for collaboration

Power imbalances between international and local partners undermine equitable collaboration and sustainable outcomes. To address this, it is crucial to establish clear ethical frameworks that define mutual responsibilities, prioritize local agendas, and ensure collaborative decision-making. Such frameworks might include principles for equitable authorship in joint research, fair compensation for local researchers, and inclusive agenda-setting processes. For example, a partnership agreement could stipulate that research questions must be co-designed with local organizations, that findings cannot be published without their consent, and that local researchers must be credited as co-authors or contributors in all research outputs.

It is also essential to establish clear Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) that define the terms of engagement between CSOs and governments to maintain independence and objectivity. These

agreements should explicitly protect CSO autonomy in research design, methodology selection, and findings dissemination, while ensuring that an engagement between a CSO and a government does not compromise the critical voice and analytical independence that make civil society organizations valuable partners in knowledge production.

Anti-reprisal protections

Organizations increasingly face funding cuts for political positions that diverge from the foreign policy of the donor government, particularly in the context of Israel's war on Gaza. The commissioned papers have thus emphasized the importance of establishing clear anti-reprisal policies that protect partners from politically driven funding decisions and preserves the independence and integrity of civil society. This requires creating institutional independence between donors and their government funders and developing emergency support mechanisms for organizations facing political pressure. As the election of far-right governments rises globally, normalizing such institutional independence becomes increasingly urgent.

Donor coordination and collaborative mechanisms

One critical gap in current funding approaches is the lack of effective donor coordination, particularly at the sectoral level. The absence of coordinated strategies has led to duplicated efforts and missed opportunities for comprehensive support to civil society actors. There is thus an urgent need for donors to establish new mechanisms for coordination to enable more strategic support for the knowledge ecosystem in the MENA region. Effective donor coordination should include: establishing sectoral working groups that bring together multiple donors around specific thematic areas; creating shared databases of funded projects and organizations to avoid overlap and identify gaps; developing joint funding mechanisms that allow donors to pool resources for larger, more sustained interventions; and implementing regular review processes that assess the collective impact of donor investments rather than individual donor performance alone.

A locally driven research agenda that reimagines political and economic futures

The MENA region stands at a critical historical juncture today. The current moment thus presents a unique opportunity to reimagine political and economic systems and think more proactively about the future. This is also an opportunity to reflect on the role played by civil society actors in the past three decades and decolonize knowledge production by promoting critical scholarship and the use of new language and conceptual tools that better reflect our reality. Below is a list of

research priorities that donors can support. The list is by no means exhaustive and a different exercise with CSOs would need to be conducted to identify more priority areas for research.

Research priority areas

Reimagining the role of civil society in times of crisis and transition

In times of deep crisis and transformation, it is essential to revisit the role that civil society organizations can play. This means not only examining the conditions that enable or constrain their action (as the commissioned papers have done to a certain extent) but also reflecting on the kind of change they should be pursuing, and how far-reaching that change should be (drawing on the paper of Mudar Kassis). For example, Mudar Kassis, one of the authors of the commissioned papers, argues that civil society's role should be reconceptualized through the lens of "emancipatory self-determination."³ In other words, self-determination—understood not just as national independence but also as a broader framework for social and political emancipation—should be a central guiding concept for how civil society engages with issues like governance, wellbeing, education, and dignity.

Research in this area would:

- Critically examine how we conceptualize CSOs (and whether we need to remap and reconceptualize what we mean by CSOs), the role they played in the past three decades, their organizational processes, and their limitations. It would also be important to examine power relations (between civil society and society; civil society and the state; and civil society and transnational organizations) and reflect on the structures of oppression at different levels that shape the role of CSOs.
- Develop a renewed understanding of civil society's role in shaping just and sustainable futures and explore how civil society can move beyond service delivery to become architects of systemic change (Kassis).
- Identify which civil society actors in MENA are genuinely creating counter-hegemonic spaces and new imaginaries and explore new forms of civic engagement that transcend traditional CSO structures and that could be more effective in affecting change. Comparative approaches with the work of CSOs in other contexts could be informative in this regard.
- Support collaborative mapping initiatives of civil society ecosystems at local levels to understand existing power dynamics, resource flows, and collaboration patterns.

Building a new political and economic imaginary

There is an urgent need to move beyond critique and develop concrete alternatives to failed political and economic systems in the region. Areas of research would include:

- Theorizing alternative political models beyond the traditional nation-state framework (Kassis).
- Developing new economic paradigms that prioritize collective wellbeing over extractive growth and imagining new forms of economic governance that address structural inequalities.
- Reflecting on innovative approaches to political participation and deliberation (Kassis)—including whether we should fundamentally rethink political participation itself. This involves examining whether meaningful change happens at the municipal level or by supporting candidates for office, or whether entirely new forms of civic engagement are needed that bypass traditional electoral processes.
- Exploring the question of renegotiating the social contract in the MENA region, with particular attention to how societies can manage diversity and vulnerability while promoting gender equality and feminist approaches. Research should address how social cohesion can be fostered in contexts of increasing polarization and examine governance mechanisms for managing diversity. Given the context of funding austerity, future research should also explore how CSOs can promote social cohesion in resource-constrained environments and develop new models of collective support that don't rely solely on external funding.

Post-conflict reconstruction

This research theme is very much related to the one above. As Mudar Kassis, one of the authors of the commissioned papers, argued: "The only opportunity that destruction provides, is the theoretical possibility to design the future in the process of reconstruction." Indeed, several MENA countries face reconstruction after conflict (Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, Libya, Yemen, Sudan), creating openings for fundamentally reimagined systems. Research could focus on:

- Developing critical approaches to reconstruction that view it as a multi-dimensional process for systemic change.
- Researching justice-oriented transition frameworks specific to each context. This includes research on institutional and legal reform, accountable governing systems, and inclusive economic reforms (TIMEP).⁴
- Identifying methodologies for ensuring reconstruction is locally led and serves populations rather than external investors.

- Designing participatory processes for communities to shape reconstruction priorities and be engaged with policymakers working on reconstruction.

Regional Power Dynamics and Geopolitical Reimagining

Since understanding and reimagining regional relationships is essential for new political possibilities, research could focus on:

- Mapping and analyzing how external powers shape political and economic possibilities across the region (TIMEP).
- Develop frameworks for more equitable regional relationships and cooperation.
- Research pathways toward regional economic integration that serves people rather than elites.

Programmatic entry points

The programmatic entry points suggested below are designed as integrated initiatives that would address the different strategic objectives simultaneously, but donors can also choose to support one objective only.

1. Fellowship programs

While donors often prioritize institutional support, there is a compelling need to also invest directly in individual researchers as part of a broader strategy to strengthen the knowledge ecosystem in the region. Indeed, the MENA region is home to a critical mass of emerging and mid-career researchers—many of whom are politically marginalized, displaced, or working outside traditional institutions—who can play transformative roles in shaping public discourse, informing civic action, and generating new critical frameworks. Strategic investment in researchers is essential to deploy their skills across institutions, including CSOs, universities, think tanks, media, and advocacy platforms. Fellowships can also help counter the brain drain phenomenon and diversify the voices that inform policy debates, especially by supporting community-based, feminist, and decolonial perspectives that are often excluded from formal policy and academic spaces. These fellowship programs are specifically designed to link fellows with local organizations, foster collaborative learning, and lead to a new generation of critical thinkers and knowledge producers.

Multi-year fellowships for independent and affiliated researchers

- Establish multi-year fellowships for independent or affiliated researchers, academics, or practitioners in the region and from diaspora communities, especially those excluded from mainstream academia or think tanks. Emphasis should be placed on supporting researchers with critical or decolonial perspectives who can generate new conceptual tools to understand the region (e.g., neo-colonialism, imperialism, ecological justice), thus contributing to the decolonization of knowledge production.
- Fellows may be based inside or outside the MENA region, but it would be preferable for fellows to have or build a link with a local CSO or grassroots initiative. This ensures that research remains locally grounded and contributes to local agendas. Eligibility criteria could also be expanded to include researchers affiliated with social movements, community collectives, cultural initiatives, worker cooperatives, and digital activism networks.
- Prioritize research proposals that look into the future and involve meaningful community engagement components and methodologies that involve communities in the research.
- Support knowledge production in Arabic and support translation of key outputs into multiple languages.
- Organize annual retreats or research workshops (in-person or virtual) to foster peer exchange, joint publications, and cross-national collaboration.
- Strengthen dissemination and policy influence by integrating fellows with media platforms, civil society coalitions, and reform-oriented policymakers—ensuring that research informs narratives, public debate, and policy action
- Create digital platforms to reconnect displaced scholars, particularly those affected by sanctions or conflict (e.g. Syrian academics), enabling virtual collaboration and preserving transnational research communities.

Fellowships for PhD students

- Offer one- to two-year fellowships for PhD candidates conducting research aligned with the thematic priorities of the program. Fellows would be formally affiliated with a local civil society organization or think tank. This affiliation would enable fellows to contribute to ongoing research agendas and outputs, while gaining access to local data, networks, and fieldwork opportunities.
- Support co-mentorship models, where fellows are guided by both academic advisors and CSO practitioners. The goal would be to help bridge theory and practice, enhance the policy relevance of academic work, and foster new pathways for knowledge exchange between academia and civil society.

- Where possible, provide organizational capacity grants to host institutions to enable them to effectively support fellows (e.g. hosting infrastructure, mentorship time, dissemination support).

Suggested funding modalities

- Organize an open call for fellowships on an annual basis. Local organizations and national universities can also be asked to nominate candidates from non-traditional backgrounds who might not know about the fellowship or apply through formal processes. Arabic-speaking candidates who produce knowledge in Arabic (not English) should also be allowed to apply. Include outreach to researchers from underrepresented geographies and social backgrounds (e.g. women, displaced scholars).
- Fellowship stipends (1-2 years) would be provided, with institutional affiliations. Institutional support grants to host organizations can also be provided.
- Travel grants can be provided to promote collaborative work across the region.
- Resources from multiple donors can be pooled to create a sustainable, long-term fellowship program that bridges the gap between local organizations and academia.

2. Research networks and summer school series

The establishment of inclusive research networks is essential as they would provide spaces for collective development of new imaginaries and cross-pollination of alternative visions; build coalitions of actors who can collaborate on advocacy and strategizing for implementation; and function as a discovery mechanism for identifying promising initiatives and connecting them to resources. To build effective networks that reflect the diverse contexts and priorities of the region, the following elements are essential:

- Build pluralistic and inclusive networks that bring together early-career scholars, PhD and MA candidates, independent researchers, and practitioners working on critical issues aligned with the program's themes. These networks should prioritize inclusion of underrepresented voices—including researchers from marginalized areas and conflict-affected geographies. One of the main goals of the network would be to facilitate the envisioning process (of "the new"); discuss and refine the research agenda; and provide a platform for inclusive dialogue on alternative futures.
- Structure networks around thematic areas (e.g. reconstruction, environmental justice, etc.) and geographical clusters to ensure they reflect the diverse needs and contexts across the region. Include researchers from different backgrounds—including political science, sociology, political economy, economics, anthropology, philosophy—to enable the cross-fertilization of ideas.

- Activate networks through regular programming, including peer-to-peer exchange and collaborative research projects, access to research resources and expert mentorship, and rotating leadership and advisory roles to prevent centralization and ensure diverse ownership.
- Leverage networks to promote knowledge-to-policy processes by holding cross-sectoral roundtables that convene researchers, policymakers, community representatives, and advocacy organizations, to engage with research findings and strategize for the future; and by creating knowledge dissemination platforms, such as blogs, research briefs, policy dialogues, and podcast series in Arabic and English, to broaden the reach of insights generated.
- Organize an annual summer school in partnership with a university in the MENA region or with strong regional ties. An open call for proposals can be launched to target promising researchers and civil society actors. A small cohort (around 10 people) would be selected to participate in an intensive week-long program that would be led by the network. The summer school's program would include: presentation of ongoing research; feedback sessions with senior scholars and practitioners; skills-based workshops; community-building and thematic deep dives.
- Support publication series - in Arabic and other relevant languages - based on research conducted as part of the network, prioritizing co-authorship, community-informed methodologies, and public accessibility.

Suggested funding modality

- Provide core support to the network: two or three regional organizations can be selected as the anchors of the network that would take the lead in convening people, commissioning the research, organizing the summer school, etc. These organizations would be provided with multi-year, flexible core funding.

3. Publication of the commissioned papers for this project

Given the limited availability of research examining civil society organizations in the MENA region, the papers that were commissioned for this project fill an important gap in the literature and provide a solid start. They can be edited and published as part of a book volume (open-access) on CSOs, in addition to other papers that would be commissioned on themes selected by CSOs under the rubric of "reimagining the role of civil society in times of crisis and transition."

Suggested funding modalities

- Organize an open call for proposals, to find writers for the other research papers. Organizations/ researchers can also be asked to examine specific topics under the theme of “reimagining civil society in times of crisis and transition.”
- Provide grants for the commissioned papers and funding for the editor of the book volume.
- Fund partnerships between researchers and media outlets to co-create content that reaches wider audiences.

4. Institutional research support

Providing institutional research support is important to create sustainable institutional capacity for research and provide platforms from which advocacy campaigns and strategic initiatives can be launched.

- Invest in research infrastructure, by supporting the development and maintenance of data repositories, archives, and research tools.
- Support institution-to-institution partnerships, including South-South and South-North collaborations, through exchange programs, joint research grants, and co-hosted events. Donors can also play an important role in fostering regional knowledge ecosystems through initiatives that link local research centers across the MENA region to share methodologies, policy insights, and thematic expertise and build collaborative networks. This could happen by supporting the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (ACSS), which is a network-based non-profit organization that seeks to enhance knowledge production in the MENA region.
- Support university-CSO linkages, by promoting formal partnerships between academic institutions and CSOs to co-produce knowledge, integrate practical perspectives into academic research, and amplify civic voices. Donors can also invest in shared research spaces, including physical and digital research hubs where CSOs and academics can co-design and implement projects, share data, and disseminate findings.
- In light of increasing repression and surveillance, fund comprehensive security protocols for local research institutions, including digital safety training, physical protection, and legal risk mitigation.
- Invest in strengthening the research-to-policy processes by helping CSOs in the following domains: generating policy-relevant research; building their skills for translating research into accessible policy recommendations and briefs; and developing long-term relationships with policymakers to embed civil society knowledge into decision-making

processes. This would also involve creating opportunities for researchers to engage directly with policymakers, supporting the scaling up of successful local initiatives to regional or national levels, and building advocacy strategies that leverage research findings to push for concrete policy changes.

- Establish platforms for CSOs to reflect collectively on future scenarios and strategic possibilities. Given the complexity of current challenges, organizations need dedicated time and space to think beyond immediate programmatic demands and engage in strategic reflection about long-term goals and how their research fits into larger patterns of change. These platforms should facilitate scenario planning as well as strategic visioning exercises.
- Tackle the political and structural barriers to data access in the MENA region by funding database access for researchers and institutions; supporting the creation of independent, regional, open-access data repositories that make essential datasets available to MENA researchers; investing in the local capacity for data collection, especially among civil society actors, to reduce reliance on state-controlled statistics; and encouraging transparency and data-sharing among multilateral organizations, like the World Bank, who often have access to valuable datasets that are not made publicly available.

Suggested funding modalities

- Offer seed funding for cohort-based collaborative research projects with a regional or transnational lens.
- To encourage organizations to collaborate on specific research themes about the region, joint proposals can be required from organizations (e.g. a local and a diaspora organization) and a collaborative research grant would be provided.
- Provide core, long-term funding to local research institutions focused on critical, emancipatory knowledge production.
- Provide capacity development grants for organizational strengthening, including infrastructure and technology improvement grants.

5. Capacity building for researchers in local CSOs

- Establish mentorship programs that connect emerging researchers with established scholars and practitioners. These networks can help build confidence, improve research quality, and provide career guidance to early-career researchers, especially those working in the region.

- Support for projects such as the New University in Exile Consortium and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA)'s Global Academy can help build the research skills of displaced scholars and allow them to integrate into global academic life.
- Support training in new tools such as Optical Character Recognition (OCR), AI for data processing, and other digital platforms that can streamline data collection and analysis, particularly for researchers in resource-constrained environments.
- Support culturally sensitive, trauma-informed research training, particularly for those working in conflict and post-conflict settings, to ensure ethical engagement with vulnerable communities and historically marginalized groups.
- Prioritize funding and mentorship for researchers from marginalized communities, including women, rural populations, and displaced scholars, to ensure inclusive knowledge production.
- Establish emergency grants or institutional support systems for researchers facing state repression, surveillance, or other risks due to their work.
- Support collaborative work with academic institutions and initiatives that fund civil society researchers to participate in academic retreats (regardless of whether they lead to formal degrees).

Suggested funding modalities

- Provide stipends for local researchers to cover research travel costs, writing retreats, and funding for conference participation.
- Create a donor consortium to co-fund long-term capacity-building platforms like regional mentorship networks or academic-CSO partnerships.
- Offer mentorship stipends to both mentors and mentees as part of an established mentorship program.
- Create a rapid-response funding mechanism for researchers at risk—this could include legal aid, temporary relocation support, or digital security upgrades.
- Offer small-scale seed grants to support pilot projects, training workshops, or digital tool acquisition (e.g. OCR, AI tools). These grants can be issued through a streamlined application process and targeted at underrepresented researchers or informal networks.
- Fund workshops, training programs, and the development of ethical guidelines for conducting research in conflict-affected and marginalized communities.

6. Coalition building, advocacy, and research-to-policy influence

The main goal here is to build a coalition of interests to create the collective power necessary to effectively advocate for the implementation of new approaches and reforms; and to connect nascent initiatives to broader movements, increasing their sustainability and impact. A critical dimension of this work involves enhancing the role of civil society as not only a force for advocacy, but also as a source of relevant, context-sensitive knowledge that can inform and shape policy agendas.

- Support the formation of coalitions that span countries in the MENA region and beyond. These coalitions should bring together diverse stakeholders—including researchers, grassroots organizers, unions, independent media, practitioners, and cultural workers—around shared political and social priorities (e.g. reconstruction, civic space, or transitional justice). This would strengthen legitimacy and foster solidarity-based models of organizing and resistance.
- Build strategic advocacy, communications, and policy engagement capacity: Provide targeted support (including training, mentorship, and digital tools) to enhance the ability of coalitions not only to conduct public campaigns and shape narratives, but also to navigate policy spaces, engage meaningfully with policymakers, and present evidence-backed proposals rooted in lived realities.
- Support the establishment of regional advocacy and knowledge platforms. These platforms can serve as convening spaces for strategic coordination across countries and sectors, and as vehicles for engaging international organizations (e.g., the World Bank, UN, or donor governments) on reform grounded in local priorities.
- Apply a “scaling up” approach to advocacy by identifying successful local or thematic initiatives and supporting their expansion across geographies or policy domains. This would involve strengthening horizontal linkages between local actors and regional/international networks and investing in mechanisms that allow knowledge and advocacy models to be adapted, replicated, and institutionalized.

Suggested funding modality

- Provide core and multi-year flexible grants to regional or cross-regional coalitions or networks to cover coordination, campaign planning, convenings, and collective action.

Annex: Recommendations provided by the five commissioned papers

The excerpts below are drawn directly from the commissioned papers and outline key recommendations intended to guide donor engagement.

“Controlling Knowledge: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Knowledge Ecosystem After the Arab Uprisings”. By: Sami Atallah and Sami Zoughaib (The Policy Initiative)

“A Way Forward for Effective Knowledge Production in the Arab Region: To build a more effective knowledge ecosystem in the Arab region, collaborative action among civil society organizations (CSOs), local institutions, and international stakeholders is essential. Addressing the constraints posed by formal state controls and informal regime practices requires strategic responses focused on localization of knowledge agendas, strengthening mediation capacities, ensuring sustainable funding, and reinforcing holistic security measures.

1. Localization of Knowledge Agendas CSOs and international stakeholders should prioritize research agendas that reflect local priorities and realities. This involves supporting participatory processes to define research questions and fostering community-driven initiatives. Building local analytical capacities through tailored training, mentorship, and culturally relevant methodologies ensures that research remains credible, impactful, and resilient to external pressures.
2. Strengthening Knowledge Mediation Given the constraints from state censorship and informal marginalization, enhancing knowledge dissemination and mediation is critical. CSOs should strengthen their capacities in strategic communication and advocacy to effectively convey complex research findings. Partnerships with independent media and proactive outreach strategies will amplify voices that are otherwise marginalized, ensuring that valuable insights reach policymakers and the broader public.
3. Sustainable Funding and Institutional Resilience Sustainable, long-term funding from diverse sources is crucial for CSOs to transition from survival mode to strategic institutional development. Predictable funding facilitates planning, talent retention, and organizational stability. CSOs are encouraged to form strategic coalitions and networks that enhance

collective resilience and increase their capacity to withstand external pressures from regimes.

4. Security and Protection In the context of ongoing surveillance, legal persecution, and informal intimidation, security must be a priority for CSOs and their supporters. Organizations should develop comprehensive security protocols, including digital safety and risk management training. Establishing rapid-response support networks, legal aid, and international solidarity channels will provide necessary protections to sustain independent knowledge production and advocacy efforts.

By implementing these strategies, CSOs and international partners can jointly cultivate a robust, autonomous, and impactful knowledge ecosystem, effectively countering existing challenges in the Arab region.”

“Challenges of Knowledge production in Diaspora: A Syrian Case Study”. By: Basileus Zeno (Trent University), Katty Alhayek (Toronto Metropolitan University), Mimi Kirk (MESA and Georgetown University)

“In the context of the Syrian war and displacement, we derive the following recommendations from our interviews and observation of the main knowledge production initiatives in the Syrian diaspora.

1. Inclusive Knowledge Networks: Collaborative platforms are needed to bring together displaced Syrian scholars with their peers inside Syria to help bridge the gap created by sanctions and other political restrictions. Initiatives such as virtual academic networks could help bridge this gap while navigating around sanctions compliance.
2. Support Locally Driven Research Priorities: Funders and international organizations should invest in and respect the agendas of local Syrian research institutions, rather than imposing external priorities. This includes supporting studies on issues such as social relations and local dynamics rather than externally driven topics.
3. Promote Cultural Legitimacy and Marginality as an Asset: Developing the theory of “constructive marginality” in the Syrian context is needed, through which the unique insights of displaced scholars and researchers facilitate the documentation of issues particular to their community, such as narratives that otherwise might never be recorded.
4. Address Discrimination in the Diaspora: Funders can take corrective actions that deal with racism and marginalization in countries offering Syrians residency so that their research contributions are considered based on intellectual merit rather than political views.

5. Enhance the Mobility of Syrian Scholars: Funders and international organizations can support policies that will further facilitate the mobility of Syrian scholars and researchers, including streamlined visa processes for academic purposes and waivers for scholars from sanctioned countries.
6. Redesign Sanctions Policy to Harm Knowledge Production Less: Countries like Canada can support Syrian scholars and organizations in a way that minimizes the negative consequences of US sanctions policies. This support can include allowing mechanisms for cross-border academic collaboration and funding of research projects through humanitarian exemptions.
7. Invest in Capacity Building: Support for projects such as the New University in Exile Consortium and MESA's Global Academy provides opportunities to enhance the research skills of displaced scholars and better incorporate them into global academic life.
8. Foster Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Approaches: Encourage Syrian scholarship that relies on intersectional analysis to understand how factors of class, gender, and sectarian identity overlap with one another to shape challenges and opportunities for Syrian knowledge production in the diaspora.
9. Engage the Diaspora in Policymaking: Ensure that displaced scholars are involved in discussions and decisions regarding policies affecting both the diaspora and Syrian communities in the homeland. This might include advisory positions within international agencies.
10. Develop Ethical Guidelines for Collaboration: Establish clear ethical frameworks to guide partnerships between Syrian and international research organizations, ensuring equitable collaboration that respects local knowledge and priorities.
11. Organize Trauma-Informed Training: Funders and international organizations can invest in such training to ensure that research is accurate and respectful of the research participants who have experienced "negative life events." Such training should focus on cultural awareness and sensitivity in a multicultural context like Syria with diverse social identities.
12. Provide Mental Health Services: Develop sensitive approaches regarding the consent, privacy, and emotional well-being of research participants who have experienced "negative life events" and provide researchers and participants with adequate mental health services and related support resources.
13. Support and Expand Fact-Checking Training Programs: Funders and international organizations can support and expand training programs like the "Guardians of Truth" by Verify-Sy that focus on fact-checking, digital safety, and media literacy.
14. Support Research on the Danger of Misinformation and Disinformation: Shore up work on trends in social media and how they impact Syrian civil peace and the dynamics between the Syrian diaspora and those inside the country.

15. Invest in Media Literacy Campaigns and Educational Initiatives: Promote critical consumption of information and provide audiences with tools to identify credible sources.
16. Encourage Research on Preserving and Documenting Syrian Oral Histories: Support initiatives such as Start Point's work aimed at preserving and documenting Syrian oral histories and integrational communication between the Syrian diaspora and those inside the country. Such work may include intergenerational workshops and events to document grandparents' forms of oral tradition like stories and songs. It also can include training programs for undertaking oral history, making documentary films, and conducting digital storytelling and community-based archiving."

"Revisiting The Concept of Self-Determination in the Palestinian Context: The Role of Civil Society". By: Mudar Kassis (Birzeit University)

"In terms of policy concerning research and knowledge production, there is need to foster the civic transformative function, and reinstitute the ethical duties of civil society – to act on the emancipation of Palestinians from all kinds of dominance, including tutelage. In Kantian terms the proposed duty is "enlightenment, that is, the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity."⁵ However, to support people in their emancipation endeavour, civil society needs itself to be seeking emancipation.

Such a task requires a high degree of autonomy for researchers to choose their topics and research agendas as long as they fit in the general and broad range of civic led transformation. This will allow some to make the leap and emerge from under the weightiness of the status quo.

There is a general trend in the academia to publish in a certain type of journals that pushes researchers to work in issues that are either less relevant to the civic transformative function. The trend is mostly driven by considerations of competition. One partial solution to this problem, in academic institutions, is support for the fostering and creation of alternative competitive edges for them in areas that coincide with their civic duties. In other CSOs, the development of research capacity should be on top of the agenda, with attention to the quality of research, and ensuring that enough attention and effort are given to theorisation. In the first instance, collaborative work with academic institutions can be a practical track: for example, institute special scholarship funds to support civil society actors to take academic retreats (leading or not leading to a degree).

Relevant modes of grant accountability need to be developed. Something other than quantifiable outputs, and measurable outcomes, etc. One solution can be to move the accountability from the recipient individual to the recipient institution, and frame it in a reflexive format, rather than a

result-oriented one. If we are seeking the fostering of intellectual capacity (i.e. thinking), then attention should be made solely to the process and not the results, because fixing the results of thinking is stagnation by definition.

The above also means the need to open the formats of grant making. No policy orientation, or empirical evidence, or community based, etc. direction should be stipulated. Only such requirements as coherence, and adherence to emancipatory values can serve as criteria for selection and accountability. Thematic delineation should also be avoided.

Recommendations

1. Encourage debate about the nature of self-determination: This can take the form of sponsoring workshops and conferences to discuss the concept of self-determination; support development of curricula and public awareness campaigns that emphasize the interconnectedness of individual, communal, and national self-determination; support CSOs in integrating this broader understanding into their advocacy and programming.
2. Strengthen civil society's capacity to produce organic, home-grown knowledge through supporting research centres that focus on critical, emancipatory knowledge production.
3. Address the reluctance to produce knowledge by: (a) supporting and promoting programmes that integrate knowledge production in their structures; (b) supporting informed public debate on strategic issues rather than "hot topics"; and (c) consider supporting the initiation of specific programmes of critical theoretical nature that are attractive to civic actors.
4. Address the depoliticization of civil society by supporting initiatives that reconnect civil society with its emancipatory and transformative role. This includes encouraging CSOs to adopt politically informed strategies through maximizing on funding that ensures alignment of programmes with societal needs and priorities, and independence from donor agendas; and encourage adopting rights-based approaches that link individual and collective rights in the framework of self-determination.
5. Rebuild Trust in Civil Society: address the erosion of public trust in CSOs by supporting the prioritization of community-driven projects and encouraging CSOs to engage with their constituencies through participatory decision-making processes.
6. Support theorisation on alternative political models by funding research and pilot projects that explore alternative political and economic models beyond the traditional nation-state framework; and supporting pilot projects that test innovative approaches to economic development, social organization, and political participation.
7. Prioritize initiatives and projects that address the root causes of the Palestinian struggle and build the capacity for the day after (not only in Gaza). Encourage donors to align their

funding with the broader goals of self-determination and emancipation, rather than narrow, issue-specific agendas.

8. Minimise the impact of donor funding by adopting more flexible and less prescriptive funding models that allow CSOs to maintain their independence and align their work with the priorities of their constituents.
9. Foster international solidarity and advocacy by supporting networks that can advocate for Palestinian self-determination and support civil society's efforts to challenge the colonial condition. One example is supporting partner initiatives between Palestinian CSOs and international organizations working on human rights, anti-colonialism, and social justice.

Needless to say, special attention should be given to Gaza, which suffers dire humanitarian need that has to be prioritised. However, it is crucial that Gazans are not left with sole humanitarian support that can only guarantee bare life. It is inevitable to attend to the reformation and rejuvenation of CSOs in Gaza and support their capacity to play a central role. The war has prepared some grounds for rejuvenating the role of civil society, and this should be built on."

"Understanding and Investing in the Knowledge Production and Dissemination Community of Practice in and for the MENA region". By: Timothy Kaldas, Nadine Kheshen, Mai El-Saidany (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy)

Recommendations for Donors on Knowledge Production and Dissemination

The challenges uncovered in this paper as well as the techniques developed and deployed by knowledge producers to overcome them helps us identify a number of recommendations for donors and fellow knowledge producers to strengthen knowledge production in the MENA region as well as to improve the dissemination of knowledge produced. In addition to the material discussed thus far in the paper, these recommendations are grounded in conversations with policy makers who engage civil society. These recommendations are also grounded in the authors' own experiences working to translate the knowledge being produced throughout and about the region into tangible policy advice and working to encourage policy makers to act on that advice, while integrating locally grounded analysis in their own assessments.

CSO-driven funding priorities

Many of the knowledge producers and CSOs we engaged in focus groups and interviews cited the challenge of being forced to fit their work into the funding priorities identified by donors. At times, these donors have little to no expertise in the region and area of work. As a result, some CSOs and knowledge producers feel the need to design projects and pursue work that they doubt the value of. They do so in order to be able to secure funding necessary to stay afloat and retain their staff. Further, when topics are trendy, there is a lot of duplication in knowledge production, while other important topics receive little to no attention. This is not a productive use of human and capital resources.

Donors should reduce their focus on trying to set the agenda for the region's knowledge producers and civil society and instead increase collaborative project and program design into their workflow. Ultimately, CSOs and knowledge producers are the experts in their respective areas of work and while donor feedback and collaboration should be a part of the process, donors should develop priorities for programs and projects in direct collaboration with their civil society partners and allow civil society to lead the way. In most cases, CSOs and knowledge producers will be better positioned to capture an array of valuable variables that should inform priorities. They are generally more aware of recent developments and changes on the ground that affect their contexts, as well as the priorities of stakeholders they are engaged with and engaging. They are best able to assess how changes impact risk, but also to create opportunities for impactful knowledge production.

To whatever extent possible, donors should invite their civil society partners to come to them with program and project ideas, rather than ask them to fill predetermined calls for funding. In order for this to be actionable, donors will need to adapt their funding models to allow for more collaborative project and program design and move away from prescriptive, narrow project models. To the credit of the donors funding this paper and the other papers that are being produced in this series, this project is a good step and opportunity for civil society to redefine how priorities are set. It is also an opportunity for donors to bring back these ideas and work with colleagues to integrate them into efforts to redesign donors' approach and relationship with partners.

Sustainable and adaptive funding

Financial precarity is a major challenge cited by the knowledge producers that we spoke with. Not only is this a challenge in terms of securing sufficient funding, but also in terms of the uncertainty of constantly needing to reapply for funding and identify projects that CSOs could fulfill so as to retain staff and keep the lights on, both figuratively and literally. Moreover, many donors are

reluctant to adequately fund salaries and overhead costs, particularly via project funding, despite the fact that for many CSOs, staff salaries are their biggest cost and most valuable asset. An emphasis on project-based funding can exacerbate this precarity as well. Further, focus group participants often noted that realities and needs can change quickly, and it is often difficult to secure approval for reappropriating funds from donors that have been strictly allocated to specific purposes, even when funding these activities may no longer make sense. This can result in a waste of funds, as well as missed opportunities.

Donors should continue to transition their emphasis in funding to core funding and reduce their focus on project-based funding. Secure and sustainable CSOs and knowledge producers are better able to plan long term and take advantage of opportunities that require long term commitments and investments. They are also better positioned to be agile and adaptive to our often fast-changing environments. For project-based funding, clear and efficient means for reprogramming funds should be in place to ensure adaptive funding that allows for partners to maximize impact as they navigate dynamic challenges in the dynamic and ever-changing MENA region.

Invest in people, tools, and technology

A number of focus group participants highlighted the limited resources for training and education for staff and a growing brain drain due to a combination of repression and inadequate resources. They also noted the lack of funding for tools and technology, such as optical character recognition (OCR) and other data gathering technology, in a region where many public records and documents are still in paper form. While donors alone cannot counter these challenges alone, they can work with partners to significantly improve opportunities for knowledge producers in the region, and support them in accessing the technology necessary for advancing their research.

Donors should work to increase resources devoted to long term training for knowledge producers. This can include support for scholarships, fellowships, and training programs. This creates opportunities for personal growth, and helps knowledge producers train new colleagues as others choose to or are forced to relocate abroad. Investments in educational and training opportunities, as well as access to the latest research tools and technologies, are essential for ensuring that knowledge production is sustainable and efficient.

Democratize access to funding

Many CSOs and knowledge producers that we spoke with discussed hurdles that smaller, local CSOs experience in accessing funding due to the burdensome and costly requirements for applying for and reporting on grants, as well as biases among donors who privilege larger

international CSOs and Western credentials. Oftentimes, CSOs and knowledge producers are forced to act as subcontractors and sub-grantees for larger CSOs who retain a large share or even the bulk of the funding, while making a minimal contribution beyond soliciting and managing the grant. Larger groups like these can also afford to invest in full-time staff who focus on securing and reporting on grants, while smaller CSOs with limited staff lack the capacity to have teams devoted to such tasks.

Donors should streamline funding applications and prioritize funding streams that go directly to CSOs working on the ground or those that are actively partnering with CSOs and knowledge producers on the ground. They should avoid an emphasis on funding streams to larger CSOs which act primarily as a contractor, rather than a genuine partner with local groups. Donors should also invest in donor capacity to engage with CSOs in Arabic to reduce language barriers that privilege Western language training and limit the access of knowledge producers who don't speak a Western language. This could help advance the recommendation articulated by those interviewed who wanted to see a decolonization of knowledge production in terms of the language knowledge is produced in, as well as how topics for knowledge production are selected.

Communication and dissemination cannot be an afterthought

When discussing the challenges in disseminating knowledge, CSOs and knowledge producers cited a variety of issues. Many CSOs work in environments with various levels of government censorship and restrictions. Additionally, there are often insufficient platforms available to publish and distribute CSO findings and publications. Donors often seek English language content, but the domestic audiences of most MENA knowledge producers are primarily Arabic speakers. Moreover, irrespective of language barriers, much of the content that certain CSOs and knowledge producers publish can be challenging for a lay audience to understand, as this content is often dense, academic, and technical. Some focus group participants highlighted that they encounter a lack of clarity in terms of target audiences and inadequate experience and capacity to adapt framing when target audiences are identified. CSOs face difficulty securing sufficient funding to produce more engaging content, which is often cost intensive.

Without effective and well-targeted dissemination, the knowledge produced will have limited impact, failing to benefit relevant stakeholders. Addressing this requires both a committed strategy and targeted investments. Donors should work with partners to strengthen their in-house communications capacity. Oftentimes, communications capacity is funded through a patchwork of portions of different grants. Projects rarely have the necessary funding directly going to communications, marketing, and dissemination, despite it being essential for impact. Donors should mainstream conversations about and support for communications. They should discuss in detail with partners how they plan to communicate, the audiences they seek to target, and what

resources they realistically need to operationalize their plans successfully. More funds should be made available not only to support in-house communications capacity, but also to contract the development of multimedia content that makes content more accessible and engaging for CSOs' and knowledge producers' respective target audiences. CSOs should be encouraged to consider whether having designers, animators, and other communications specialists as contractors or staff members make sense. Funds need to be available to support their ability to engage these specialists.

Focus group participants were consistent in their recommendation that more spaces for publishing and showcasing knowledge was needed. They identified insufficient spaces overall, but also noted that available spaces often fail to adequately engage target audiences, especially when the national public is the intended audience. Donors should continue to support independent media platforms and invest financial and in-kind, technical support to work with media outlets to become more mainstream and reach a wider general audience when aligned with their missions.

Aside from funding, donors can help by deepening their own capacity to help partners connect with mainstream outlets to place op-eds, be quoted in interviews, and otherwise disseminate knowledge through existing widely-read and viewed platforms. This will help bridge gaps between the findings and work of civil society and public discourse, strengthening the impact of knowledge producers and their work.

Finally, communications should not be siloed and limited to communications specialists. Donors should fund and make available training sessions and workshops to ensure that knowledge producers understand and integrate communications priorities into their work and planning. Staff-wide communications training sessions and workshops should include thinking about who their audience is, understanding their audience's priorities, and planning how to frame their content to connect with their audience and their respective priorities.

Deepen ethical guidelines

Knowledge producers in the MENA region struggle enough with censorship and restrictions imposed by their own governments; however, following October 7, 2023, in particular, there was a tightening by some donors, particularly those with governmental affiliations, on content that was critical of Israel. Moreover, foreign funding from states that have backed Israel as it conducts mass atrocities in Gaza and Lebanon can endanger CSO partners and harm their reputations domestically.

Donors should establish clear anti-reprisal policies that protect partners from politically-motivated actions that cut off funding for CSOs and knowledge producers due to disagreements on their governments' foreign policy views. They should, to what extent possible, establish independence

between themselves and governments that fund them, both to strengthen their ability to guarantee such anti-reprisal protections, as well as to reduce reputational risks for partners. Normalizing such institutional independence now is also important for slowing likely political interventions as the election of far-right governments is currently on the rise.

Collaborating with other donors to coordinate

Focus group participants and interviewees have received funding from a diversity of donors, but they have also experienced many of the same obstacles and challenges in their dealings with donors across the board.

As such, it is highly recommended that donors hold meetings and discussions amongst each other to share feedback, exchange lessons learned, coordinate on areas of mutual interest, divide and conquer on areas not already covered, and establish codes of conduct when appropriate.

Recommendations for Donors on Programmatic Priorities

In addition to the above recommendations for donors on best practices vis-a-vis funding knowledge production and dissemination across the MENA region, the authors of this paper would also like to highlight a few programmatic priorities on which there is insufficient knowledge production and that merit additional funding. These examples are, by no means, exhaustive; however, they are meant to offer some paradigmatic options for engagement in the current moment.

Political and economic reconstruction

Several countries in the region are emerging from economic or political crises and/or war. Lebanon and Syria, for example, have new governments and are embarking on sensitive political transitions, while working to rebuild after war and displacement; in Syria's case, this reconstruction is also taking place following the fall of a 54-year brutal regime. Gaza is navigating a tenuous ceasefire, while Palestinians will be faced with pressures to renegotiate governance structures and attempt to rebuild in the wake of Gaza and amid intensifying violence in the West Bank. Sudan, Yemen, and Libya are all in various stages of civil conflict and political turmoil that will require both political and economic reconstruction and recovery in due time.

The need for policy solutions grounded in sound research informed by the needs and aspirations of communities on the ground are vitally important as both national policy makers and their international partners work to navigate challenging transitions with the aim of durable stabilization that sets countries on the path to peaceful, inclusive futures. Research is needed to

inform what justice-oriented transitions and reconstruction processes look like for each of these contexts, to understand what the priorities of those most impacted look like, and to offer a way forward. This includes research on institutional and governance reform; legal institutions that can protect the rule of law; inclusive and accountable governing systems; and realistic, yet inclusive economic reforms that can stabilize the state's finances, while ensuring the inclusion and protection of vulnerable groups to foster environments conducive to durable transitions. Donors should look to support this work for ongoing transitions and in anticipation of future ones when the opportunity arises.

Incorporating Sudan into the MENA region

Though knowledge production and dissemination in and on the MENA region is under-funded across the board and there are many deserving country contexts in need of donor attention and support, one area that the authors of this paper find to be severely under-funded in MENA programming is that of Sudan.

More often than not, governments, CSOs, and multilateral organizations situate Sudan in Africa and exclude it from the MENA region. While Sudan is, of course, an African nation with strong links across the continent, it is also a MENA country and a member of the Arab League. It is also impossible to comprehensively understand Sudan's context and challenges without examining its links to the MENA region, which requires that MENA departments and CSOs be included in the analysis and discussion of Sudan.

Sudan - much like Lebanon and Iraq - underwent a popular uprising in 2019. And Sudan - much like countries across the MENA region today - is experiencing conflict that is exacerbated at the hands of regional powers from across the MENA region. Understanding Sudan is critical to understanding the modern MENA region and vice versa, and so, it is essential for donors to support knowledge production that delves deeper into Sudan as a part of the MENA region to enhance understanding of an oft-ignored context. Furthermore, it is essential for donors to support knowledge production that incorporates Sudan comparatively when identifying lessons learned and producing region-wide analysis on the greater MENA region.

Mapping external actors

Throughout the region, external powers are influencing in-country and across-region developments and can play existential roles in fueling conflicts, influencing the economy, and shaping political power. While the role of external actors is often considered on a case by case basis, one area that is ripe for greater knowledge production is understanding the motivations,

actions, and impact of external powers across the MENA region. This includes, but is not limited to Gulf countries and countries within the Global North.

Knowledge producers are increasingly finding it important to map and understand the practices of regional actors and begin to understand to what extent there exist broader strategies in their efforts to shape events and power dynamics throughout the region. Despite this, they often lack the resources and funding to track, study, and delve into a new country context. These external actors are key to resolving military conflicts, achieving political settlements, and securing inclusive and durable economic reforms.

It is important for donors to support cross-cutting multidisciplinary analysis in this vein, to facilitate knowledge exchange on this issue among different stakeholders, and to support knowledge producers as they expand their capacities in this area. Doing so will help inform concrete and actionable policy recommendations that may prove essential for unlocking solutions to many of the region's most durable challenges.

Investing in policy advocacy experience

There often exists a disconnect between the rich body of knowledge produced in and about the MENA region and the policies pursued in and towards the region. Many knowledge producers produce knowledge in formats that don't easily reach or resonate with policy makers, while their work is highly relevant to policy making and could strengthen policy in a number of ways. Donors should consider working with groups that have developed policy advocacy experience to assist in filling this broader gap in the knowledge production space.

Programming can include developing materials on how to frame and structure policy relevant-knowledge to increase its resonance with policy makers; how to develop actionable policy recommendations that allow for operationalizing the findings of knowledge producers; how to identify and engage with relevant policy makers to convincingly communicate analysis and recommendations that can be integrated into policy decisions; and how to develop and sustain advocacy campaigns. In addition, training sessions on advocacy can be funded to increase the in-house advocacy capacity of CSOs and expand the pool of organizations with the capacity to translate their knowledge production into policy. Investing in training a new generation of advocates through policy-oriented fellowship opportunities offers a sustainable model for growing the community of knowledge producers capable of reaching and influencing policy makers to ensure that the needs and aspirations of the region are centered in policy discussions about the region. Finally, donors should support partnerships between organizations with robust advocacy experience and knowledge producers. Activities in need of support include

consultations, the hosting of delegations, and the organization of virtual and in-person policy briefings through their networks.”

“Civil society trajectories after 2011: How has the Arab Spring impacted civil society dynamics in the MENA region”;
By: Georges Fahmi (Arab Forum for Alternatives- Lebanon)

1. “Support project ideas to counter this wave of post Arab Spring populism.

Findings

Interviews with civil society activists in the MENA region show that this post Arab Spring phase has seen a large wave of populism that aims at “diabolizing” civil society actors, as “agents of the west” that seeks to “divide our societies”. Civil society groups have been trying to resist this wave of populism by seeking innovative ways to reach their societies, as well as offering support for vulnerable communities within this populist environment as is the case with migrant communities and reaching different religious and ethnic communities to build trust among them.

Recommendation

Donor institutions should give priority at this moment to project ideas that could resist this wave of populism, such as:

- Initiatives of dialogue and cooperation among civil society groups belonging to different religious and ethnic groups, particularly in deeply divided societies as is the case in Lebanon and Iraq.
- Initiatives of support to migrant communities, including de-constructing the populist narrative against them.
- Initiatives offering alternative media platforms for civil society groups to express their ideas and counter populist narratives.
- Initiatives focusing on factchecking to deconstruct populist misinformation in the media.
- Initiatives focusing on researching how civil society resisted populism in other cases (Latin America for example)

2. Create dialogue platforms for members of the Arab Spring generation to share their experiences.

Findings

Research findings show that the Arab Spring has seen the emergence of a new generation of civil society activists. Even if the Arab Spring has been defeated, this generation hasn't been defeated yet. They are exploring different ways of dealing with political setbacks, and their challenges. Members of this generation have gone into different paths after the failure of the Arab Spring: cultural, charity, in addition to those who remained committed to their work on political and socio-economic rights.

Recommendation

Donors shouldn't look at civil society in the MENA region with a strict organizational lens but should also find innovative ways of bringing members of this Arab Spring generation together, even if they are engaged in different sectors within civil society. This is of course a shared responsibility with these young people themselves to also suggest and design projects that could bring those engaged in charity, development, environmental and art initiatives together. One example of such projects could be creating dialogue platforms where these civil society voices could meet and share their different responses to the failure of the Arab Spring, and their experiences in surviving it.

3. Strengthening the legitimacy of civil society organizations

Findings

Research findings show that the issue of legitimacy is a major challenge for civil society groups in the region during this post Arab Spring phase. Political regimes in the region often tries to discredit the work of civil society as being funded by "the West" to implement a "hidden agenda". Such a narrative has impacted parts of Arab societies that are looking suspiciously to civil society organizations and their activities. This crisis of legitimacy has been aggravated with the Israeli war on Gaza, and the western support to Israel after 7 October 2023. As expressed several times during our interviews, it became more difficult for civil society groups to convince local communities that western countries that support the Genocide in Gaza, are interested in their wellbeing.

Recommendation

Donor institutions need to keep this issue of legitimacy in mind when cooperating with civil society organizations and initiatives in the MENA region. They should take measures to strengthen the legitimacy of civil society groups with whom they are cooperating. These measures could include:

- Donors' attitudes towards the Palestinian cause is one major issue that could strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of civil society organizations within whom they are working. It's important for donors to show publicly that they support the same universal values for the Palestinians, as they do with everyone else in the MENA region, and elsewhere.
- Donors should not punish civil society organizations for showing their support to the Palestinian cause.
- Instead of following a model where a western donor support a civil society organization in the MENA region, donors should invest in supporting cooperation among civil society groups in the Global South (Africa, MENA, Latin America). This approach will allow these civil society groups to learn from each other's experiences, while at the same time, it will strengthen the legitimacy of these groups within their local communities.

4. Distinguish between NGOs working with the state, and those working for the state.

Findings

Research findings show that cooperating with state institutions is often a survival strategy adopted by NGOs working in offering services to local communities (welfare activities/ cultural and artistic associations). These organizations need to make certain concessions to keep their activities running. However, this strategy adopted by some civil society groups shouldn't be mistaken with organizations created by political regimes to maintain a foot within civil society. In all cases studied, political regimes create their own civil society groups, and in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, influential political parties have also their own civil society groups.

Recommendation

Donors need to distinguish between NGOs cooperating with state institutions to keep their activities running, those NGOs created by political regimes when deciding on their funding.

5. Invest in supporting cultural initiatives.

Findings

Research findings point out to an increase in cultural initiatives in this post Arab Spring phase in the region. The restoration of authoritarianism in many of the Arab Spring countries has pushed activists to look for “safer” forms of activism. These cultural initiatives seek to change their societies, but through safe activities to avoid clashing with political authorities. While these initiatives might seem apolitical at first, they offer a platform for this Arab Spring community to meet and have an influence within their local communities.

Recommendation

Donors should invest in supporting these cultural initiatives that are working towards changing their societies through culture and art. They can do so by funding regional projects that bring these different initiatives together to share their experiences and their lessons learned. These projects could also go beyond the MENA region to include initiatives from the Global South. As mentioned earlier in the paper, one theatre initiative in Morocco was inspired by the Brazilian Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed.

6. Invest in programs that bring together humanitarian assistance with political and civil awareness

Findings

Research findings show that civil society groups working on political and civil rights suffered in moments when donors shifts their priorities to focus on humanitarian assistance, and not on protecting political and civil rights. In a different part of the research, civil society groups highlighted the need to take local societies priorities in basic services into account designing programs to support them. One cannot talk to villagers who lack clean water about values of religious tolerance for example.

Recommendation

Based on these two observations, donors should invest in projects that bridge humanitarian assistance with programs on political and civil awareness. Funding this type of project will achieve two goals. It will, first, ensure the continuity of funding for programs focusing on values such as political and social rights, religious tolerance, citizenship even in moments of humanitarian crisis.

And second, offering basic services to local societies increases the legitimacy of civil society groups operating in these societies.

7. Don't compete with local organizations

Findings

Civil society organizations in the region complained during fieldwork about donor institutions opening their own local branches in the region, which end up competing with other local civil society organizations, not supporting them.

Recommendation

Donor institutions shouldn't compete with local partners through their local offices in the region and focus instead on supporting civil society organizations in the region."