Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs

Policy Research Institutes and the Arab Uprisings:

Agenda Setting and Beyond

Strategic Workshop organized by the
Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI)
at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI)
American University of Beirut (AUB)

January15-16, 2012

Workshop Summary report

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The first Consortium of Arab Policy Research Institutes (CAPRI) workshop, organized by the Issam Fares Institute's (IFI) Research Advocacy and Public Policy-making (RAPP) program, took place on January 15th and 16th 2012 at the American University of Beirut. A group of approximately 10 policy research institute (PRI) directors and policy advisors gathered from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The small gathering was conducive to open discussions related to PRIs in the Arab world in the current state of uprisings. The aim was to discover common opportunities and challenges during this time period and discuss strategies for moving forward. The main themes that emerged centered on the relationship between the state and PRIs and accountability. It was generally accepted that since the uprisings began in the Arab world over a year ago, a new kind of space for policy-making and citizen/state power relationships started to form. It is yet to be defined who will be the main actors shaping this relationship and *how* it will be shaped. As such, a major goal of the first CAPRI workshop was to identify what role Arab PRIs have had and could have in this process.

Each country representative described its nation's unique setting during the current transformations and distinctive relationship between the state and citizen. It was highlighted that each country still suffers from the same issue of government repression and control on civil society. It was also reported that policymakers remain not fully accountable to the public. Some of the participants explained the emergence "safe spaces" within which they concentrate their work on topics deemed permissible and non-threatening to the regime. Other participants reported that working on "unsafe" topics was halted once the uprisings began in their country.

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The first day was specifically designed to focus on strategic questions related to PRIs during this historic period, including: *How have Arab PRIs responded? What are some emerging concerns during this time? What does it mean to have policy impact during a time of structural change? What is the relationship between the state, private sector, civil society, and other PRIs during the uprisings?*

Many PRI directors regretfully stated that at the start of the uprisings in their respective countries their initial reaction was a "no-response". In some cases, this was because they were hopeful that the government would handle the situation appropriately before it became destructive. In other cases, PRIs did not respond because of fear of repression. The question remains of a PRI's role within the existing state and societal structures. Should a PRI have then become an advocacy organization and "taken to the streets" to demand the reforms and policies they are trying to advance through research? Or should a PRI be viewing the situation as an "objective" outsider capable of analyzing and critically analyzing the changes as they occur. And how can the PRI be an "objective" outsider when presumably it already has a role in the policy-making process and calls for changes?

The second day was designed to tackle a practical issue of funding. Among the pressing issues of funding that were discussed was the question of "who sets the research agenda?" Most participants agreed that setting the research agenda is still largely internal and autonomous, despite varying degrees of governmental control and oversight and the accessibility to funding.

It was reported that both political and financial factors are taken into consideration when adding a new project to the agenda. Still, participants perceive their institutes as accountable to both the civil society as well as to the government because their work is relevant to policymakers and also responsive to the needs of the people. This is a difficult balance with the limitations set by funding institutions who are also trying to push their own agendas. Participants also discussed their common challenges related to reporting to donors and seeking funding that does not severely alter their own agendas.

It was agreed that a stigma is associated with foreign funding and relations with some foreign institutions or governments. This is mainly a problem with regards to accountability and credibility toward the public because the consensus was that there isn't a "foreign" topic per say. The topics are universal, humanistic, globalized, and more importantly, indigenous. The "westernized" topics may have been repressed by Arab dictators for many years and thus we were conditioned not to attribute it to "indigenous" or local practices. The dilemma remains of how to accept certain funds without losing one's local reputation or legitimacy.

Another concern about funding was related to the bureaucratic administrative tasks that donors required in reporting. In many cases, this dissuades some PRI directors from applying for smaller

grants. Instead, they may undertake more time-consuming searches for larger grants which may also impact the research agenda.

Recommendations/Suggestions

Following is a brief summary of the suggestions and ideas that were concluded from the two-day workshop:

Networking was one strategic suggestion in response to the regional situation. An important result of networking would be regional studies and reports. Networking and sharing resources provides a source of creditability and legitimacy for the PRI in the region. This is particularly essential when PRIs work on sensitive issues. This strategy helps relieve the responsibility of individual institutes in addressing topics which may be perceived by the state as a threat by pushing for certain policies as "regional" policies, rather than trying to push a sensitive policy locally.

It was also suggested that it would be helpful for PRIs to collectively decide on regional standards and self-regulation mechanisms as a form of accountability independent from the government. It was also agreed that these collective efforts would also serve to raise the credibility and legitimacy of Arab PRIs. Many PRI directors explained that the problem is not only that their role is unclear because policy-making processes are not clear in countries of the region, but also that their role toward policymakers and the public are not clear.

Regarding funding, a suggestion was made to **share funding information** among PRIs. This information becomes critical especially with respect to funders largely perceived negatively within the society.

It was also recommended to carry out a **media analysis** of how the local, regional, and international media portrayed the uprisings in various countries. This suggestion is a way to better engage PRIs within the society in order to serve the needs of the public by utilizing a major medium of communication.

Participants suggested that the **strategic missions of PRIs** geared towards opening a space for dialogue rather than restricted to changing laws. It was emphasized that once the idea is in discussed openly, changing the laws will eventually follow.

Finally, it was commonly perceived that we do not have **clarity in the decision-making process** where/how to affect change in Arab states. Some participants agreed that in certain situations, as the current uprisings, the answer is to work on both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Accountability also emerged as one of the dominant themes of discussion in the meeting. If the government is not accountable to the people, it was questioned whether or not the people should

then be accountable to the government. Civil society was encouraged to take the lead in searching for alternatives and solutions to the societal concerns, where research would play a crucial part in formulating and informing civil society to advocate for sound suggestions. Participants also stressed the imperative involving the **private sector**.

The workshop concluded with more clarity in addressing the state of PRIs in the Arab world, and their accountably, in times of the uprisings. A more detailed follow up report will follow this overview and regional workshops are forthcoming to include participants from more countries in the Arab world. A collective summary and analysis of these workshops will form the basis for an in-depth research study and collaboration on PRIs in the MENA.