

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: Syria

Syrian Civil Society: From the Beginning to The War

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The civil society in Syria has witnessed many transformations since establishing the first associations in the late nineteenth century. Over long decades, the form of these organizations, their role, effectiveness, and relationship with the state, until the movement in 2011 that is considered as the most prominent and a critical turning point in this long path, have changed. In fact, these associations were the most visible reflection of the political, security, economic and social situations in the country in all its phases.

Before 2011, the number of civil society organizations was low, but it was possible to conduct studies about some of their models. After the outbreak of the war, circumstances changed, and this process became more difficult, as the number of these organizations increased and the scope of their work expanded in organized and random forms; and war, asylum, violence, humanitarian priorities and the absence of basic services changed their functions and working mechanisms.

Furthermore, the phases that the Syrian civil society witnessed can be divided into four basic stages:

THE BEGINNING AND UNTIL THE PERIOD PRIOR TO HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S REGIME

The first association was established in 1874 in Damascus under the name "The Bond of Love." Political parties, civil associations and social clubs have evolved in the country since the beginning of the twentieth century. Trade unions were also formed with the establishment of the Bar Association in 1912. According to their relationship with the ruling authorities during the period of Ottoman rule, these entities went through many transformations,

the French mandate and the post-independence period. Moreover, Associations Law No. 47 was promulgated in 1935, and it allowed the formation of associations and political parties. Later in 1958, it was replaced by Law No. 93 that provided the state with great powers to grant license and dissolve associations without the possibility of resorting to the judiciary. It was then amended in 1969, which increased the state's domination over civil society.

THE PERIOD OF HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S REGIME FROM 1971-1999

After the President, Hafez al-Assad, took power in 1971, the Baath Party controlled the state and dominated the society and economic activity in accordance with the 1973 Constitution. It also established entities and agencies to monopolize the civil field, such as the "Baath Vanguard Organization", the "Revolutionary Youth Union", the "Women's General Union" And the "National Union of Syrian Students" and others, but most of the associations outside the party's scope were limited to charity, and most of them were religious.

After the disorders in the eighties of the last century, security institutions' domination over public life increased. They controlled most civil institutions that represented the authority within a society, seeking to control and dissociate it instead of developing its role and increasing its effectiveness. Most of the associations and syndicates withdrew from their civil role and started breaking advertising and oversight. At that phase, the media played a directing role serving the authority and its goals, especially after the private media's absence and being limited to the official media.

THE END OF HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S REGIME AND THE PERIOD OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S REGIME UNTIL 2010

Before Hafez Al-Assad's death, some civil actions and dialogues about political, social and economic realities emerged, taking advantage of the easing of restrictions on civil society. After President Bashar Al-Assad took power and pledged to carry out reforms and promulgate laws for parties, media and associations, the country witnessed a phase known as the "Damascus Spring". Therefore, social forums, human rights advocacy, anti-corruption organizations, women's rights associations, environment associations and others had spread... At that phase, a new media law was promulgated, allowing to grant a license to private media, but it remained affected by the security services, which could close any media outlet without referring to the judiciary. Later, the Damascus Declaration was issued in 2005 and included activists' demands for peaceful changes that would result in a democratic national system.

This phase did not last for long, as the authority ended it with a wave of arrests under the pretext of preserving the country's security and rejecting civil events accused of receiving funding from the West to overthrow the regime. However, these practices led to a different political, social and civil awareness among many Syrians and created the nucleus for a new form of civil society.

Later, between 2005 and 2010, attempts were made to limit the civil movement through peaceful confrontations, represented by some organizations' financial and organizational support, or the indirect participation in establishing others. The Syria Trust for Development, affiliated with the First Lady, Asma Al-Assad, played a key role in monopolizing civil work. It worked to control many associations and individuals, which was more evident after 2011.

AFTER 2011

The civil society map has experienced radical transformations during the years of conflict. Hundreds of initiatives have spread, and their tasks and areas of operation have diversified in all the Syrian geography of the various forces controlling it. In fact, there is no debate about the root of civil initiatives after the 2011 movement, but the debate focuses on their dynamics and transformations that have been affected by developments in the military and political scene, the absence of state institutions in some cases and their compulsion to work outside Syria according to the laws of the host countries and with foreign workers and volunteers sometimes. Therefore, the common definition of civil organizations may not be applied to many of them.

In general, the Syrian civil society in 2019 can be divided into five categories, each with different characteristics and playing different roles depending on the political, cultural and legal circumstances in which it operates:

1. Organizations and initiatives in areas controlled by the authority, which play a complicated role among dangerous attempts to expand the margin of freedoms and call for civil peace, and a fully integrated role in the authority. In fact, many of these organizations' efforts shed light on the relief, development side and non-problematic issues that do not lead to any clash with the authority. First, they prioritize humanitarian issues and receive hundreds of thousands of displaced people from opposition-controlled areas. Secondly, the military and security authorities' violence increased, as well as the margins of civil society's operations are limited, without being exposed to surveillance and security harassment, which may cause revoking licenses, prohibiting activities or changing their nature.



2. Organizations and initiatives in areas controlled by the armed groups, which essentially work to fill the void left by the absence of the central authority (the state). These associations are distinguished among themselves according to their political, legal and financial reference, especially in their relationship with political actors, on the one hand, and militants on the other hand. These associations witnessed variable phases and were affected by the complicated field scene and the control of the militant groups, which greatly restricted their work, before regaining their military control over the areas within which these organizations were established, forcing them to stop working or move to other regions or outside Syria.
3. Organizations and initiatives in neighboring countries of asylum, namely Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, play a role in relief activities and cultural activities. Their work varies according to the host country's political situation and their relationship with funders, particularly international institutions. It is worth noting that many institutions in Syria now have offices abroad, or transformations into a functional extension of one of the institutions residing in neighboring asylum countries.
4. Organizations and initiatives in non-neighboring countries of asylum, precisely in European countries, where they work mainly in the cultural field and through opposing paths such as promoting integration with the country of resettlement, defending cultural heritage in the face of European values, or working on introducing the Syrian issue, etc.
5. Organizations and initiatives in areas controlled by the Kurdish Autonomous Administration, where it is subject to supervisory pressure from the Labor and Social Affairs Authority, which restricts projects according to their political orientations and demands licenses for every activity and project. Furthermore, these organizations suffer from major financial problems due to the Turkish blockade of their activities and local tensions between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Central Authority at one point and, sometimes, the opposition factions.

The Syrian civil society has shown during the years of conflict its ability for solidarity, organization and civil resistance, as many organizations have constituted a source of community cohesion, despite their targeting and their workers facing various challenges in terms of their effectiveness, personal safety and sustainability of their livelihoods, as well as operating under difficult conditions that start from corruption, violence, insecurity and asylum conditions outside the country, which have led to deep gaps in the structure of civil society that was forced to play roles that may cause conflict with its functions, its lack of influence on Syrian policies and laws, and the dispersal of a large part of civil efforts abroad.

In this context, it is evident that civil tensions on both sides of the conflict and a divided society pose challenges to the Syrian civil society organizations to establish their legitimacy and their ability to work at the national level. The limited space available for civil work has prompted a focus on the priorities of donors rather than the needs of local beneficiaries and manipulation of the civil agenda to achieve political goals, whereby an “elite” was formed that relies on civil work and enhances its patronage networks, in exchange of its lack of sustainable resources and transparent administrative systems that affect its financial and political immunity, impede its effectiveness and prevent it from establishing networks and pressure groups on the Syrian authorities and external supporters.



BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.


THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.


THE ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT


The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB Policy Institute) is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. Inaugurated in 2006, the Institute aims to harness, develop, and initiate policy relevant research in the Arab region. We are committed to expanding and deepening policy-relevant knowledge production in and about the Arab region; and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society and policy-makers.


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