



Arab Reform Initiative

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The Road Ahead: The Future of Human Rights Movements in MENA

→ Arab Reform Initiative



A mural near Cairo's Tahrir Square drawn by Egyptian artists on concrete blocks that bar the way to the Ministry of Interior headquarters, March 2012.

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Paris, 10 December 2019 – On the occasion of Human Rights Day, the Arab Reform Initiative released a collection of research papers looking at the evolution and current challenges of the human rights movements in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

The book, titled *The Rugged Road: The Emergence, Evolution and Challenges of Human Rights Action in Arab Countries*, is a collection of 18 research papers analysing the history, evolution and impact of human rights organizations as well as their relationship with the state and social movements. It examines the current external challenges facing human rights activism while also exploring the internal challenges of governance, funding and independence of relevant organizations.

“Human rights activism in the region is a complex, multi-faceted effort that defies the simplistic narrative of “rise and fall” that we have often heard since 2011,” said Nadim Houry, executive director of the Arab Reform Initiative. “As protesters demanding rights occupy the streets from Algeria, to Iraq to Lebanon, it is essential to take stock of the history and challenges of the human rights movement in MENA in order to assess its prospects and contributions to a region undergoing major changes.”

The book covers six main themes:

- the emergence and evolution of human rights organizations in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia with a largely unprecedented history of the first organizations that were formed in the 1970s;
- the complicated relations between human rights activists and the state;
- the relationship of Islamists and Islamist movements to human rights discourse and activists;
- the human rights movement’s interaction with other social movements (trade unions, other NGOs, or political parties);
- the internal governance of human rights organizations; and
- the impact of human rights action.

The papers in the book examine the legal, social and repressive context in which human rights organizations in North Africa have evolved and how this has weakened their internal governance systems and affected their ability to fund themselves locally. These groups were often concerned about protecting



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themselves from infiltration by security agents, but this legitimate fear came at the cost of reduced transparency and ability to engage in broader outreach.

The book looks at the growing trend of professionalization of human rights organizations and increasing reliance on foreign funding as local laws and repressive measures reduce local financial support or render it impossible. While professionalization has improved research capacity, it has unintentionally weakened ties to local communities in some cases, including to survivors, and has in other cases driven human rights organizations to become or be perceived as elitist and donor-motivated.

The book tries to assess the question of the impact of human rights organizations while recognizing the general difficulty of measuring the impact of civil society actors due to the near impossibility of attributing certain social, legal or policy changes exclusively to their efforts. The paper on Egypt focuses on the gains made by human rights organizations in the period between 2011 and 2013 when the regime was open to reform but that these gains were fragile and ultimately reversed after the 2013 military takeover. The study on Tunisia finds that the human rights movement played a key role in the adoption of certain laws and policies but that it is harder to ascertain at this stage whether these changes will impact actual practices.

The book's aim is to provide an assessment that would enable the human rights movement in MENA to address its weaknesses by reviewing its governance, the way it is engaging with other actors and the way it has been working to ensure its continuity and increase its impact. The hope is to strengthen the human rights movement and contribute to a necessary discussion between human rights organizations and other social movements.

“While human rights organizations are facing major challenges today and are increasingly isolated, the demands for human rights and social justice remain strong across the region,” said Houry. “The main challenge for human rights groups is how to build on and assist this citizen movement in pushing for more accountability, social justice and equality.”



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About the author



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The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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