



Arab Reform Initiative

Press Release, 31 July 2019

# What Can Syria Learn from Decentralization Experiences in Other Arab Countries?

→ Arab Reform Initiative



© Arab Reform Initiative



## ***ARI launches new report ahead of a new round of negotiations***

Paris - July 31, 2019 – The Arab Reform Initiative released today a report on lessons for Syria from decentralization experiences in other Arab countries. In recent years, more attention has focused on decentralization as a possible contributor to a political solution in Syria. Opposition-held areas across the country experimented with different forms of local governance and the Syrian government, adopted but has yet to implement, Legislative Decree 107, a law that would give more power to local authorities. The issue of decentralization is expected to be on the agenda of the future constitutional committee that is envisaged as part of UN-led negotiations on Syria.

The report offers insights from recent comparative experiences through research papers on institutional design and challenges of decentralization reforms in Iraq, Morocco, and Tunisia, and draws a road map for a decentralization scheme for Syria. It also highlights Syrian civil society perspectives on decentralization collected during a conference ARI organized in Paris in January 2019 and showcases the results of an online survey carried out through ARI's social media accounts in December 2018 that sought to measure views and perceptions of decentralization processes.

“Decentralization can play a key role in facilitating Syria’s transition and political reform. For it to have the intended positive impact, there needs to be a number of safeguards as well as an inclusive process,” said Nadim Houry, ARI’s Executive Director. “The devil will be in the details and the experience of Morocco, Tunisia, and Iraq, can help identify some of the pitfalls and recommend safeguards for a democratic decentralization.”

Ninety one percent of those who responded to the online survey believed that a decentralized system can increase citizen inclusion and participation in decision-making processes, while 81% believe accountability would be improved. These results indicate that there is a high support – at least among ARI’s diverse followers – of the devolution of power from the centre to local government, which can be explained by local populations’ high disenchantment with centralized



## Arab Reform Initiative

authoritarian rule exerting close surveillance on citizenry and affecting service provision and political representation.

### **Lessons learned from Iraq, Tunisia, and Morocco**

The case studies highlight several pre-conditions for a successful decentralization design and implementation from legal, political and urban development perspectives. These include inclusive processes, clear principles and mandates enshrined in the constitution, a democratic central state that respects the rule of law, the equitable distribution of fiscal resources, and capacity building support at the local level.

While Iraq shares a number of characteristics with Syria, such as a diverse population and a legacy of authoritarian rule by a Baathist regime, the Iraqi experience of a federal power-sharing formula based on ethnic and sectarian criteria obtained through a hasty American-led process of administrative and political transformation is perceived by most Syrians as having broken the country and a path to avoid for their own country. The paper on Iraq warns against the consequences of a top-down, politically motivated decentralization process that state elites have used to retain power and patronage while diverting blame to local officials.

“Decentralization was put in place to assure the Iraqi people that the country could be put back together through a new power-sharing arrangement,” said Ali Al Mawlawi, who authored the study on Iraq. “In Iraq’s politically charged context, the central government realized that it could potentially divert public disquiet towards local officials. So, it was politically expedient for the central government to decentralize blame, and this represented a key incentive to accelerate plans to enforce Law 21 of the provinces.”

According to Lotfi Tarchouna, who authored the study on Tunisia, the constitution drafting process is the most important phase as it sets the basis of decentralization and requires clarity of mandates and principles. “When it comes to framing a constitutional text, a mid-way position is strongly recommended. This should not be either too detailed or limited to a synthetic approach,” he said, recommending that the process of decentralization be flanked by a control mechanism to examine the constitutionality of laws.



## Arab Reform Initiative

One of the issues raised in the report is the human and financial resources available to local authorities and their ability and independence to manage them. While local authorities' budget in Morocco is higher than several neighbouring MENA countries, it is still far from covering the increasing needs linked to the delivery of the required infrastructure, equipment and services. Lamia Zaki, a local governance expert and author of the study on Morocco, questions the administrative freedom of local governments, arguing that decentralization reforms need to be more closely linked to more efficient fiscal arrangements for municipalities as these need to develop their own resources for an effective decentralization to take place.

### **Negotiating decentralization for Syria**

The UN-led process started in 2016 in Geneva has yet to produce a serious negotiation between the Syrian parties. Although decentralization was not explicitly identified among the priority themes, it has been on the UN mediator's agenda from the start and is likely to be one of the most important issues a constitutional committee will tackle as soon as it convenes.

“Negotiating a set of guiding principles for decentralization in the early stages of the constitutional committee could reassure the parties, primarily the Arab majority and the Kurdish component of society about the basic rights of the latter and the safeguards for the former,” said Bassma Kodmani, author of the paper on decentralization in Syria.

According to Jihad Yazigi, who spoke about economic decentralization at ARI's conference, “fiscal decentralization is a critical aspect of the discussion on decentralization in the Syrian context because of the continuing existence of geographically based social and economic disparities, the unequal flow of foreign investments and post-conflict reconstruction plans. This discussion cannot be separated from a political solution to the conflict and an understanding that the challenges raised by the uprising were at the source of the centralized political system.”

There have also been several Track II efforts gathering Syrians to discuss governance reform and Syrian national identity. These dialogues are key to informing issues that will inevitably be addressed by the constitutional



## Arab Reform Initiative

committee.

“It is time to take the recommendations and lessons that experts have been working on for years and translate them into an official process that can deliver the change so many Syrians are hoping for,” Houry said.

The report is part of ARI’s project “Transitioning to Decentralized Governance: Lessons for Syria” that has been running since 2016. The purpose of the project is to draw lessons learned for countries transitioning out of conflict with a view to informing a discussion on decentralization reform for Syria.

The list of papers includes:

- Decentralization in Morocco: Promising Legal Reforms with Uncertain Impact, by Lamia Zaki, Urban Development and Local Governance Expert (Morocco)
- Exploring the Rationale for Decentralization in Iraq and its Constraints, by Ali Al-Mawlawi, Head of Research at Al-Bayan Center for Strategic Studies (Iraq)
- The Tunisian Experience of Decentralization Since 2014, by Lotfi Tarchouna, Professor of Public Law at Sousse University (Tunisia)
- A Safe Path for Democratic Decentralization in Syria, by Bassma Kodmani, former Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative

For more information & media inquiries, contact:

[ari-communications@arab-reform.net](mailto:ari-communications@arab-reform.net), +33 1 48 06 93 06



# Arab Reform Initiative

## About the author



Arab Reform Initiative

## About Arab Reform Initiative

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.

[arab-reform.net](http://arab-reform.net)

[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)



© 2019 by the Arab Reform Initiative.

To view a copy of this licence, [click here](#)