

For Immediate Release



## **AUB Asfari Institute panels: Foreign intervention and corrupt elites in Arab countries obstacle to change, social justice and democracy**

Beirut, Lebanon- 27/05/2012 -The inaugural conference of the Asfari Institute of Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut closed late on Friday, culminating two full days of engaging discussions among experts from the region on civil society's role in promoting change and rights-based advocacy.

Entitled "New Spaces of Civil Society Activism in the Arab World," the conference was held in partnership with the Arab Studies Consortium (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University, Arab Studies Institute at George Mason University) and Legal Agenda Beirut.

Following [opening remarks by AUB Provost Ahmad Dallal](#) and Marieke Bosman, the CEO of the UK-based Asfari Foundation, whose \$10-million donation helped set up the Asfari Institute at AUB, Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies in the Department of History at Columbia University, gave the first keynote speech entitled "Geopolitical Considerations for Democracy Struggles in the Arab World."

"There are three main geopolitical obstacles to social justice and democracy for the Arab world," said Khalidi. "Those wielding influence and power, in league with the wealthy classes, are, first and foremost, the major obstacles and opponents to any form of change of the existing status quo."

"The second factor is US policy, publicly in favor of democracy, but which nevertheless is contradicted de facto by the close relations the US has with the regimes in power and the support it offers for its own interests," he continued. "The third and least important is Israel, which supports sectarian agendas."

On the positive side, Khalidi considered that the ability of Arab uprisings to reach international ideals, could create a sense of solidarity and support that would aid the transition but nevertheless is difficult to rely on.

The first debate of the event focused on "Civic Struggles in Turbulent Times." Bassam Haddad, director of the Middle East Studies program and a professor at the Department of Public and International Affairs at George Mason University, gave an exposé on social transformation in Syria between 1940 and 2010, and how power changed hands from one party to another.

Joel Beinin, the Donald J. McLachlan Professor of History at Stanford University, considered it very imprecise to comprehend the situation simply through civil society actions and noted how the state intervenes to tip things in its favor. “The solution has to be political,” he said.

According to Abla Amawi, the Governance Team Leader and Senior Governance Adviser of the United Nations Development Program of Assistance to the Palestinian People, the Jordanian authorities highlighted the example of Syrian refugees on their territory as the outcome of revolution to instill fear of displacement among its populace, thus successfully quelling any desire among the disenfranchised to mimic the Arab uprisings.

“What has occurred has been unprecedented on many levels, leaving us academics befuddled,” said Khaled Fahmy, professor and chair of the Department of History at the American University of Cairo, during the second keynote speech entitled “Transitional Justice in Post-Revolutionary Egypt.”

“In the wake of realizing all the upcoming challenges, social sciences have failed us in the sense that there have been no documented precedents on which to base the unfolding events.”

Fahmy, who has been appointed by the Egyptian Minister of Culture to chair a committee to document the events within the National Archive after the revolution started in Egypt, considered that bringing to justice the perpetrators of torture in all its forms, is at the heart of the Egyptian revolution and that Egypt, so far, has failed in this case of transitional justice.

According to Fahmy, security forces, police and army brutality and torture have been endemic and continue to be so even after the revolution. As the existing legislation gives a very narrow definition of what is considered as torture, and the reality that the forensic authorities are complicit with the various security apparatuses, in addition to the fact that ordinary citizens cannot directly file suit for torture crimes but according to the law have to submit a petition to the attorney general who deems whether it should go to court or not, it comes as no surprise when very few cases get to court, with the majority resulting in acquittals.

“The solution remains in completely overhauling and restructuring the security apparatus, starting with uniforms and academy training,” he said. “But our pleas have fallen on deaf ears, even after President Mursi took over and the fact that the members of the Muslim Brotherhood were the prime targets, suffering from torture during the Mubarak era.”

The second panel discussion focused on “Debating Justice” and the role of an independent judiciary that protects and guarantees rights. “Transitional justice is not due to the revolution but to the demands of judges and civil society,” said Yassine Moukhli, a Moroccan judge and President of the Club des Magistrats du Maroc. “Whereas many judges in the Arab World simply voiced the rhetoric of the executive authority, nowadays they are complaining and voicing their concerns openly.” Moukhli described how the new paradigm shift involves judges talking among themselves, demanding independence of the judiciary, demanding the lifting of press restrictions and overseeing of elections.

In the Tunisian context, Afif Jaidi, a Tunisian judge and professor of law in the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences of Tunis, explained how the revolution was against oppression and injustice and supported demands for accountability. “It is very difficult to ask the judiciary to deal with corruption when it, itself, is corrupted,” he said.

“In case of the disappeared, families were only allowed to receive compensation but barred from knowing the episodes and whereabouts of their kin and more importantly the identity of those responsible,” said Maged Almadhaji, affiliated with the Center for Civil Rights and Democracy in Yemen. “We still have had no transitional justice and to top it off, the law totally exonerated the former president Saleh from any form of prosecution.”

In the case of Syria, Abdulhay Sayed, a lawyer and former lecturer in law at the Damascus University Faculty of Law, outlined how the Syrians had missed the opportunity to revert back to the state that existed before independence from the French where everyone accepted the other and their differences.

“The current conflict is the result of each side building imaginary illusions to justify all types of actions, no matter how horrendous,” he said. “The fact remains that each side demonizes the other and sees themselves as the victim, resulting in a deadlock. The reconciliation has to take place within society itself, changing the mentality of justifying all sorts of criminal acts.”

In his keynote speech entitled “Thoughts on the Arab Spring from the Perspective of Other Episodes of Democratization,” Walden Bello, Member of Parliament in the House of Representatives for the Republic of Philippines, considered that despite his pro-revolution stance and the overthrow of tyrants like Gaddafi, he was totally opposed to the intervention of foreign powers like the case of NATO in Libya.

“Only genocide should mandate foreign intervention and in the case of NATO, its direct interventions divided the parties in Libya, opening the doors for foreign manipulations,” he said. “Each intervention forms a precedent for future ones, like it started with Yugoslavia moving on to Afghanistan then Iraq and finally Libya.”

He considered that Syria was also on the road to foreign intervention and that would lead to the resurgence of sectarianism and not allowing the natural unveiling of such situations will in no way benefit those suffering in the current situation. Bello also foresaw such conflicts extending to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries.

“The Arab revolutions seemed to have opened a Pandora’s Box,” he said. “They seem to be taking two steps forward and one step back but the general movement seems forward.”

The “Battling for Rights” panel featured Ray Jureidini, a research consultant for the Migrant Worker Welfare Initiative in the Qatar Foundation at the Center of Design Innovation, Doha, who lamented the working conditions of menial laborers and the paucity of research on migrant workers.

“We have set forth a study and operating guidelines that all Qatar Foundation subcontractors have to abide by and that will eliminate the exploitation of migrant workers through the corruption of recruiting agencies and/or their managers,” he said. “We are also setting guidelines for the minimum that is required for decent worker housing and facilities.”

“When workers fight for their rights in Lebanon they are subject to terror campaigns, add to that the fact that the supposed legislation protecting their rights are full of holes, and Lebanon’s case is far from unique,” said Charbel Nahas, a consultant and economic

researcher and former Lebanese Telecommunications and Labor Minister. “Even in the West the change has only meant that wealth has exchanged hands between the elite classes without others benefiting. Such practices have led to the rise of mafias, communities and other groups who go after their own share of the pie.”

“While the Arab Spring was in full swing in the lands surrounding Palestine, the Palestinians were experiencing a winter,” said Islah Jad, associate professor in the Women’s Studies Institute and Cultural Studies Department of Birzeit University in the West Bank. “Both the Palestinian Authority and the NGOs have stifled the civic society activities...Before the Oslo Agreements, there was a vibrant civic society movement and activities which now have been pooled and monopolized by a handful of the elite, pushing ahead with foreign donor agendas as those are what bring in the cash flow.”

Atiaf Alwazir, a freelance researcher and activist based in Sana’a Yemen, highlighted the role of the youth in getting things done without the need to depend on foreign funds. She gave examples of “No one is above the law” and the “Walls Remember” actions in Yemen as raising consciousness and battling for rights.

In his keynote address entitled “Everyday Life and Arab Revolutions,” Asef Bayat, the Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transitional Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana - Champaign, delved into the issue and mechanisms of how the mundane transmutes into the monumental and how where there was nothing an action springs forth.

“Many people were surprised by the events, but every revolution is a surprise,” he said. “We still do not know the mechanism of why it happens, or why it doesn’t happen, and I have been obsessed with this issue.”

According to him, governments are not able to stop such movements which at one point, see the dispersed individual struggles and actions coalesce into one big event, resulting in the emergence of various kinds of movements, and not necessarily ones to some people’s liking such as in the case of the Salafis.

The final panel of the event, entitled “New Actors and Novel Approaches’, highlighted the new means and methods that were used in the Arab Spring Revolutions. Karima Khalil, an Egyptian doctor specialized in public health and a social researcher and photographer, showed how the Egyptian youth led their actions through photographs, graffiti and crowd-sourced videos uploaded on YouTube to lead their own brand of revolution.

Irada Al Jabbouri, a Lecturer in the College of Mass Media at the University of Baghdad, described how Iraqi civil society and civil class was wiped out during Saddam’s regime and in the aftermath of its downfall, led to spontaneous demonstrations, without due permission from the authorities, to the resignation of the Minister of Electricity in the wake of the “electricity intifada” in 2011.

Nadir Bouhmouch, a filmmaker, human rights activist, feminist, active member of the Moroccan pro-democracy “February 20<sup>th</sup> movement” and cofounder of the Guerrilla Cinema movement, showed how his group battled for democracy through film-making.

“You can’t promote the new without building on the older bases,” said Samah Idriss, editor of Al-Adab Magazine and founding member of the Campaign to Boycott Supporters of Israel. “In

writing children's stories in literary Arabic I'm shying away from translations that are foreign to our culture as well as avoiding sinking in the olden Arabic stories that are out of place and time." Idriss is still actively pursuing the boycott of Israel despite the fact that most have given up the struggle.

In closing, the participants had the opportunity to address their questions to a round table of the keynote speakers.

The conference was live-tweeted under the hashtag, #AICC2013, with about 300 tweets posted during the two-day discussions, reaching more than 47,000 accounts. Exposure was high with more than 192,000 impressions generated.

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**For more information please contact:**

Maha Al-Azar, Associate Director for Media Relations, [ma110@aub.edu.lb](mailto:ma110@aub.edu.lb), 01-75 96 85

**Note to Editors**

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