

Jordan: New Opportunities for Civil Society Development

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As a result of recent social developments in the Arab region, civil society activism tends to be associated with electoral processes or street riots. Meanwhile, the authors argue, CSOs in Jordan have been working intensely, and with visible results, on issues such as gender equality, youth participation in the public sphere, and contributing to economic well-being for the society. Economic growth in the country impacts favourably on people's expectations for the future, and offers new opportunities for scaling-up civil society activities.

Civic participation is at the centre of discussions on the changing nature of politics in the Arab world, and Jordan is no exception. Social activism in the region, particularly in relation to the region-wide uprisings, is often understood in terms of its ability to bring about democratisation or regime change. Consequently perceptions of civil society are two-fold, referring either to election-related activities or to contentious events such as strikes and protests. The result is a stereotyped image of social activism in Arab countries labeled as either weak and ineffective or as riotous and erratic.

Belief in social participation

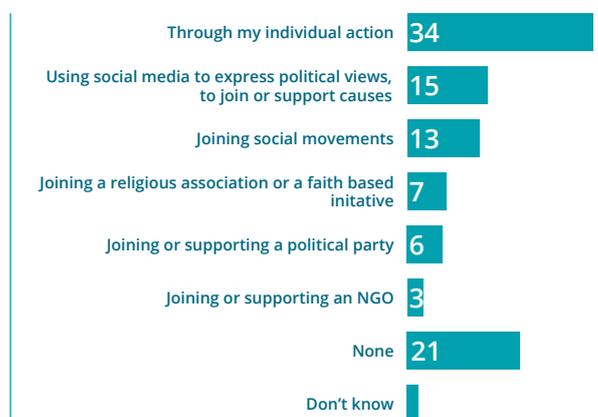
Despite this, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Jordan expend a large amount of resources to address a wide range of social and political issues through persistent and conventional associational activity. Promoting and advertising these activities, as does the Anna Lindh Foundation, is therefore critical to the substantive impact of the organisations themselves and to breaking stereotypes of political participation in Jordan and the region. Jordanians generally feel empowered to ameliorate problems facing the country. In the 2012 Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll, 78% of Jordanian respondents identified ways in which they could efficiently contribute to solving the country's challenges. At the same time, only 10% of respondents find conventional civil society like non-governmental organisations (3%) and faith-based initiatives or religious associations (7%) to be the effective channels for these endeavors. Compared to participating in social movements (13%), social media activism (15%), and individual actions (34%), organised civil society is not seen as a primary vehicle for confronting the country's problems (Chart 23.1).

Why is there skepticism over whether Jordanian CSOs are a useful medium for solving problems? As the arena outside the family and the state where group interests are formulated and expressed, civil society is fundamentally a public and independent enterprise.

But like many southern and eastern Mediterranean countries, the pervasiveness of the family and the state in Jordan poses challenges for independent associational activity. As primary relations (personal and familial) constitute a large amount of communal activity, active membership in secondary associations like CSOs is a relatively recent phenomenon. Alternatively, the state is prevalent in societal life through onerous bureaucratic requirements and the sponsorship and direct funding of many societal organisations, raising questions about their independence. Foreign donors are the primary alternative to government support, but this poses its own set of challenges for Jordanian CSOs. Foreign sponsorship engenders a similar perception problem over the independence of activities and agendas.

The question of civil society effectiveness is also answered, in part, by the bounded nature of civil society in Jordan. The civil society sector in the Kingdom often resembles a society of its own in which the stakeholders, partners, and participants are composed of a relatively

Chart 23.1 Most efficient ways of solving problems in Jordan



Survey Question: How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

fixed population. Within this community of the civically engaged, however, remains atomization among organisations with little direct collaboration toward shared agendas. Competition among organisations vying for scarce resources impedes coordination among potential partners working on similar initiatives. This is also a geographic issue as CSOs have little reach outside of the capital Amman and other select towns. This condition is changing, however, as organisations direct their work toward the governorates.

Economic growth: a basis for people's optimism and civil society opportunities

Despite social challenges requiring the work and attention of civic groups, the survey suggests that Jordanians observe an upward trajectory in their quality of life. A majority of respondents report progress in their life situations and hope for future improvement. Specifically, 58% say that they live in better conditions than in preceding years while 77% have a positive outlook on their situation five years in the future. These observations mirror the feelings of Jordanian respondents on the role of women in society as 78% perceive an expanding role for women both in the recent past and in expectations for the future. This general optimism is an important resource to be tapped by societal organisations, and it suggests that respondents observe viable options for personal and social progress.

The survey must also be understood in the context of the Kingdom's economic development. King Abdullah, like the late King Hussein, has called for a "white revolution" linking progress toward modernisation with increased political participation. Despite underlying economic hardship, the growth of Jordan's private sector and entrepreneurship creates an environment ripe for renewed and sustained civil society activity. The surveyed Jordanians report that obtaining information about European economies is of paramount interest (71%) over other areas of European life. Innovation and entrepreneurship ranks second, only behind respect for cultural diversity, for what Jordanian society could gain from cooperation with other Euro-Mediterranean countries and business or work (36%) constitutes the leading way for Jordanians to interact with Europeans. (Chart 23.2)

The focus on economic conditions reflects Jordanians' interest in the growth of the national economy. Alongside the growing Jordanian private sector, civil society has opportunities for increasing its impact. Particularly in the framework of corporate responsibility, a model to be furthered in the country, businesses serve as both potential sources of funding and targets of initiatives related to consumer advocacy and employee rights. The boom of Jordanian entrepreneurship increases

Chart 23.2 Jordanians' Interest in news and information about European countries



Survey Question: Thinking about the European countries, how much interest would you say you personally have in news and information about their...? **Base:** % of all respondents, by country; % of the sum of 'Very interested' and 'Somewhat interested' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh/ Gallup Poll 2012).

collaborative possibilities for civil society organisations and even models for efficient organisational management.

The extensive amount of civil society organisations and activities in Jordan bode well for building social capital and an appreciation for diversity. The Jordanians polled demonstrate an appreciation for civil equality (95%) and cultural and religious diversity (85%) in society. Underlying social differences – whether ethnic, religious, or socio-economic – remain a concern for some respondents (34%) and are best ameliorated through sustained civil interactions guaranteed by active citizenship.

The Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll sheds light on the status and trends of social development in Jordan. Escalating in recent years, civil society activities are a vibrant part of Jordan's reform and attracts the most important segment of Jordanian social progress – its youth. Infusing the values of civil society – dialogue, cooperation, participation, and equal opportunity – in the next generation of Jordanians lies at the heart of incubating both national and regional culture.

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