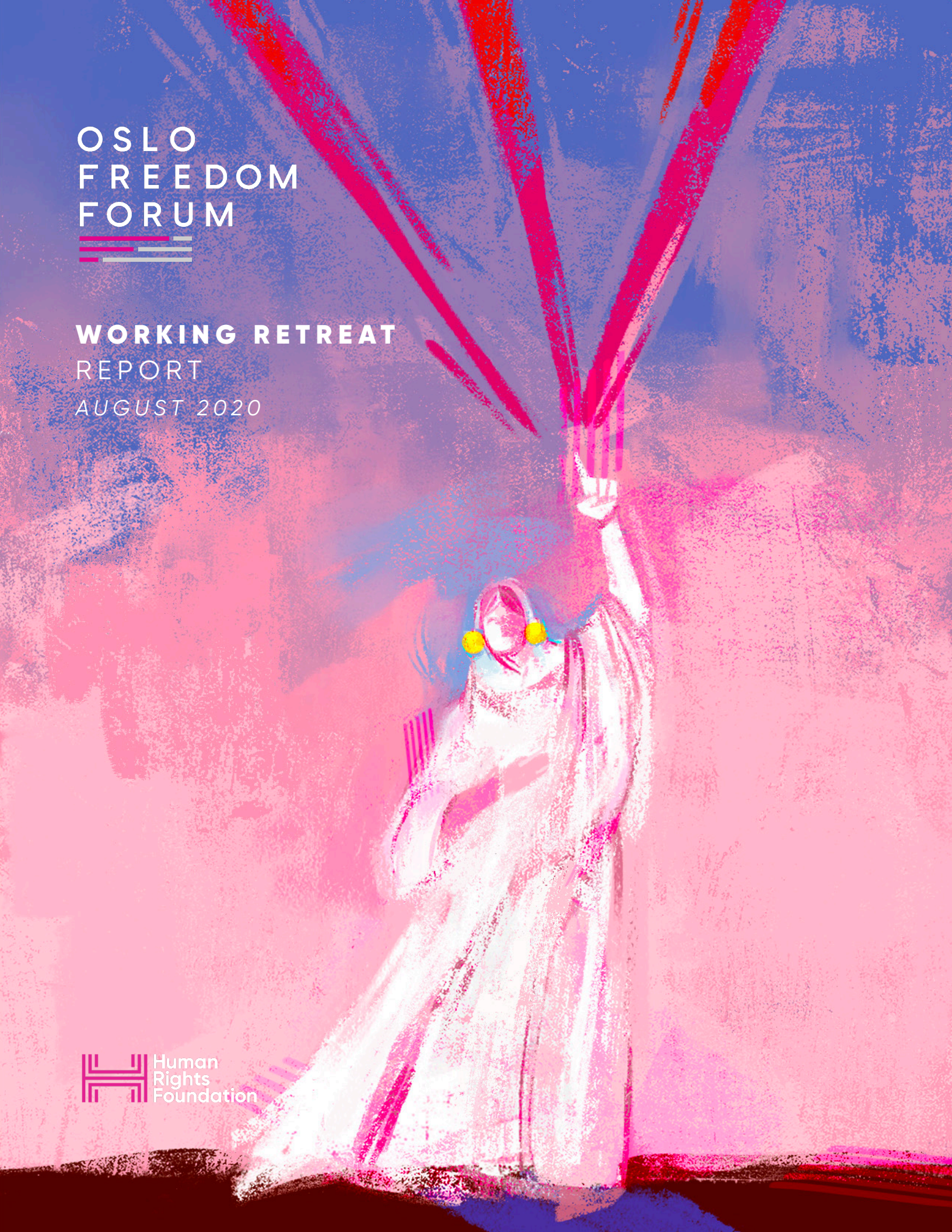


OSLO
FREEDOM
FORUM



WORKING RETREAT
REPORT
AUGUST 2020





**BUILDING & UNITING
A MOVEMENT IN THE
ARAB WORLD**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The [Human Rights Foundation](#) (HRF) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes and protects human rights globally, with a focus on closed societies. HRF is one of the few international organizations that focuses exclusively on countries under authoritarian rule. We believe that our resources can make the greatest impact in countries where independent media, activists, think tanks, opposition parties, and NGOs are under constant threat and are systematically prevented from expressing themselves regarding domestic policy. This is the case in most of the countries in the Arab World, and we believe that authoritarianism is at the structural root of the major issues this region is facing today: corruption, poverty, wars, and refugee crises.

In November 2019, HRF held its first Oslo Freedom Forum (OFF) Working Retreat for the Arab World, bringing together a group of 60 human rights advocates. The global community established by OFF believes that all people are entitled to live freely without fear of government oppression. In that spirit, we are dedicated to representing a diverse group of voices and bringing their stories to the world. In addition to our global experts, participants at the OFF Working Retreat hailed from 13 countries within the Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. Given the revolutionary developments that took place throughout 2019 in the region, including countrywide



Bloomberg journalist Bobby Ghosh held a media session with participants at the OFF Working Retreat.

protests demanding representative governance, this event could not have been more timely.

Our main objective for this Retreat was to unite a community of individuals working on and in the Arab World, who can inspire one another and share best practices for fortifying human rights under authoritarian rule. Therefore, the event was off-the-record, and conducted following Chatham House rules, to provide a space for participants to freely express themselves during programming and to ensure their safety. We also wanted to connect human rights advocates with digital security, movement-building, media, and mental health experts in order to provide them with the support and access to resources and tools that they need to carry out their important work.

We held a series of workshops and exercises that brought together participants to think about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats they face in their work — and then brainstorm ways to capitalize on these strengths and overcome the weaknesses and threats. Key issues that participants identified as decisive to their work included: legal impediments, access to funding, relationships with the media, healing from the trauma of living under a repressive police state, and wellbeing. Digital privacy and surveillance, government and self-censorship, the role of public and private spaces, and partnerships also emerged as important topics during the Retreat.

A main takeaway on which participants agreed, is that advocates from the Arab World need a community. They need allies from within their own countries and beyond, and members of their diasporic communities to help them bring about sustainable change. Building this commu-

nity may also include leveraging regional and/or international solidarity with a cause. Advocates from the Arab World need to mobilize around shared objectives to accomplish them in the most effective and strategic ways, and in spite of the massive repression that regimes in the region carry out.

With this report, we want to maintain the momentum from the OFF Working Retreat by providing a roadmap for activism in the Arab World that can serve as an initial step in identifying strengths and similarities in the struggles of advocates from the region.



OFF Working Retreat participants engaged in an introductory networking exercise, sharing strengths, on the Retreat's opening day.



OSLO FREEDOM
FORUM COMMUNITY
& THE ARAB WORLD

HRF's annual conference, the [Oslo Freedom Forum](#) (OFF), is a transformative conference and a global community that brings together the world's most engaging human rights advocates, artists, tech entrepreneurs, journalists, and world leaders to share their stories and brainstorm ways to expand freedom and unleash human potential across the globe. Over the years, it has grown and expanded into a series of events around the world, including the OFF Working Retreat for the Arab World.

Along the way, we have sadly lost members of our community from the Arab World whose work continues to inspire us in our commitment to create a better and freer world.

2018-2019

In the spirit of remembrance, we held a vigil during the OFF Working Retreat to honor members of our community who dedicated their work to advocating for freedom and lost their lives in 2018 and 2019:

“

HONOR THE
DEAD, FIGHT
LIKE HELL FOR
THE LIVING.

”



From left to right: Jamal Khashoggi, Raed Fares, and Suleiman Bakhit



Jamal Khashoggi (1958–2018)

Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist, a *Washington Post* [contributing columnist](#), and one of the most prominent political commentators of his generation. For his courageous journalism work, he was brutally murdered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018.

Khashoggi was a close advisor to the Saudi royal family, who later became critical of Saudi domestic and regional policies, and particularly Saudi Arabia's current regime under Mohammed bin Salman. His final, posthumously-published column, "[What the Arab world needs most is free expression](#)" (also published in [Arabic](#)), captured what he was most passionate about: bringing freedom of expression to the Arab World.

In May 2018, just months before his murder, Khashoggi attended the Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway. He wrote [two columns](#) inspired by his time in Oslo for the Arabic-language outlet [Raseef 22](#). HRF has translated them into English [here](#).



Raed Fares (1972–2018)

Raed Fares, who [spoke](#) at the 2017 Oslo Freedom Forum, first became known outside of Syria in early 2014, when he started writing [eye-catching, often sarcastic protest signs](#), and sharing photos of them on social media. From there, he expanded his activism and journalism and quickly became one of the most trusted sources of on-the-ground footage and information on Syria's continuing conflict. In November 2018, Fares — who had been targeted many times by ISIS, al-Qaeda, and supporters of the Assad regime — was assassinated by gunmen in Kafranbel, along with fellow activist Hamoud Jneed.

Fares was dedicated to teaching his fellow Syrians the skills they would need to [build democracy in Syria](#). He founded Radio Fresh out of Kafranbel in 2013 to give Syrians a source for unbiased reporting, working to counter fundamentalist narratives and the Assad regime's propaganda. Radio Fresh trained more than 2,500 students in journalism, and employed more than 600 people. Fares also led trainings in nonviolent activism and devoted special attention to empowering the women in his community, whose leadership he felt was essential to Syria's future. With his death, reporters outside of Syria lost a vital and increasingly rare source of truth.



Suleiman Bakhit (1978-2019)

In August 2019, Suleiman Bakhit, a Jordanian artist, entrepreneur, and human rights activist passed away after battling cancer. He was the founder of the Hero-Factor project, an organization dedicated to promoting heroism as an antidote to extremism for Middle Eastern youth. Bakhit believed that cultivating a heroic moral imagination among children is the most effective technique for disrupting the vast recruitment networks of terrorist organizations. He dedicated his work to the development of stories, myths, and heroes that promoted tolerance and the empowerment of women and girls, and to countering extremist narratives by providing Arab youth with positive role models. Bakhit was motivated to create his company after experiencing a violent attack in the United States after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In 2014, Bakhit [spoke](#) at the Oslo Freedom Forum, and used the platform to share the lessons he had learned during his long career as an activist.

2020



Lina Ben Mhenni (1983-2020)

We were very fortunate to have had Tunisian activist, journalist, educator, and Nobel-nominee Lina Ben Mhenni participate in the Working Retreat just a few months before she passed away in January 2020, after battling a chronic illness. She is often described as one of the bravest bloggers in the world, whose work was instrumental in documenting, informing, and mobilizing citizens during the Revolution. Ben Mhenni was one of the only Tunisians to openly criticize the repressive government before the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, and her impactful achievements earned her the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize nomination. She authored and published a book the same year entitled, "[Tunisian Girl: A Blogger for an Arab Spring](#)."

Ben Mhenni [spoke](#) at the 2011 Oslo Freedom Forum, urging the outside world to continue to follow events in Tunisia and other Arab countries where revolutions appeared to have ended. In recent years, Ben Mhenni continued to

press for human rights and democratic reform. In 2016, inspired by her political prisoner father, she began the “[Books to Prison](#)” campaign to counter extremism within Tunisia’s prisons; it has since collected more than [45,000 books](#).

Apart from her calls for democratic reform, Ben Mhenni taught linguistics at a university in Tunisia and was a professional translator. She also brought awareness to the issue of organ donation and, after undergoing a kidney transplant, amazingly received a silver medal in 2009 in the [World Transplant Games](#).



In March 2020, stamps celebrating Lina Ben Mhenni as an icon for freedom of expression began circulating in Tunisia.

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS FROM THE OFF COMMUNITY & THE ARAB WORLD

Since the OFF Working Retreat took place, there have been some other developments from our OFF community from the Arab World in 2020.



Remembering Shady Habash

On May 1, 2020, Egyptian photographer and filmmaker Shady Habash [died](#) at age 24 in Egypt’s Tora Prison, where he had been illegally detained for more than two years for producing Egyptian musician and Havel Prize laureate Ramy Essam’s music video “[Balaha](#).” His case never went to trial or received a verdict.

Ramy Essam gained international recognition for his performance of his anthemic song “[Irhal](#)” in Tahrir Square in Cairo, at the height of the Arab Spring protests in Egypt in 2011. He became known as [the voice of the uprising](#) and the [singer of the revolution](#), and was subsequently arrested and tortured by state security forces, and barred from performing in Egypt. In 2014, Essam left Egypt when he was offered safe haven in Sweden, where he became the city of Malmö’s first safe haven musician. Since then, he has continued to write songs that critique Egyptian politics and call for democracy and respect for human rights. In his [acceptance speech](#) for the 2019 Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent, he acknowledged the artists, creators, and activists who face imprisonment and punishment for their work, including those who collaborated on his own musical projects.

A promising cinematographer and editor, Habash had worked on a number of

projects for various artists, and had no input on the message or lyrics of “Balaha.” He was only 22 years old when “Balaha” was released and he was arrested, along with several others — including the song’s lyricist, [Galal al-Behairy](#) — on trumped-up charges of “insulting the military” and “spreading false news.” Habash spent the [remainder of his life](#) in Tora Prison, where he was tortured for more than 800 days until his death from medical negligence, despite Egyptian law which permits no more than two years of pre-trial detention. At the time of Habash’s death, Essam had been setting the words of Habash’s final letter from prison to music, for a song that was meant to be part of a campaign for Habash’s release. Instead, the song — [“Prison Doesn’t Kill/The Last Letter from Shady Habash”](#) — is now a memorial, and its proceeds will go to filmmakers and photographers at risk of state suppression.



Nabeel Rajab’s Release From Prison

On June 9, 2020, Bahraini activist and opposition leader Nabeel Rajab was conditionally released from prison, nearly four years after he was arrested for social media posts criticizing the regime on June 13, 2016. He will now be able to serve the remainder of his sentence at home. While

his arrest and conviction are unjust, HRF celebrates Rajab’s release and reunion with his family.

Rajab co-founded the Bahrain Human Rights Society in 2000 and is a Founding Director of the [Bahrain Centre for Human Rights](#), which won the Index on Censorship’s [Freedom of Expression Advocacy Award](#), among others. For his work focusing on the rights of migrant workers and prison conditions, as well as civil rights in Bahrain, Rajab became known as one of the [most revered leaders](#) of the Arab Spring uprising in Bahrain. Despite having been frequently targeted by the regime, with multiple arrests and prison terms, torture, beatings, smear campaigns, travel bans, threats against his family, and home raids, Rajab remains a staunch defender of human rights. He has received international recognition for his work, including the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars’ 2011 [Ion Ratiu Democracy Award](#).

In 2015, Rajab was scheduled to speak at the Oslo Freedom Forum, but was [arrested that year](#) for a social media post documenting torture within Jaw Prison and comments about Bahrain’s involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Bahraini activist Said Yousif Almuhafeed [read](#) a letter from Rajab on his behalf at the Forum that year.

INTRODUCTION

“

IF WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF AN ARAB SPRING 2.0, THEN IT IS GREAT THAT WE ARE EMPHASIZING THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING POST-REVOLUTION INSTITUTIONS.

”

2011 marked an important year in the history of the Arab World. Years of frustration with repression and injustice sparked protests and revolutions across many countries in the Arab World, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. Although each country in the Arab World had its own social, political, and economic complexities, they held one thing in common: the collective changemaking acts of individuals (such as peaceful protests, campaigns, or other civil society mechanisms) that created broader social movements.



In 2019, protests against government corruption emerged in Iraq.

Nearly a decade later, using well-tested tactics and the wisdom of experience, activists in the Arab World have continued to march in protests in countries like Algeria, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan. However, the state of civil society and social movements in the Arab World, and their ability to perform following the crackdown by Arab regimes after the 2011 uprisings, remain critically at risk. Will the spirit of the Arab Spring fade away or lead to lasting change?

The response of Arab regimes to the democratic aspirations of their people has been to close all avenues within which civil society can effectively operate. The fundamental challenge that activists face is the difficulty of turning their ideas and initiatives into institutions (associations, foundations, etc.). Activists are struggling to transform their work into larger and more unified social movements, mainly because of targeted smear campaigns, arrests, harsh intelligence and counterintelligence hacking, foreign meddling, restrictive legal frameworks and dysfunctional court systems, and in some cases, limited access to tangible resources and relevant trainings and workshops. Furthermore, funding for the promotion of democracy and human rights-related work has dramatically declined in the last decade, as compared to the previous decade. Within the context of the current coronavirus pandemic, funding has also increasingly been shifting toward responding to the global health crisis and away from funding human rights organizations.

Another challenge for activists and movements in the Arab World is the fact that there is no consensus on how to negotiate and speak in Arabic about methods of nonviolent action, mental health, or LGBTQI rights, among other issues. The absence of this kind of terminology in Arabic is an area that advocates from the Arab World can prioritize by defining terms. For instance, in the arena of strategic nonviolent resistance, it is very important to have clear distinctions in Arabic about what constitutes a *strategy* versus what constitutes *tactics*; strategy is the campaign in which civil society and social movements are engaging, whereas tactics are the actions applied throughout a specific geography and scope of time. A lack of clarity on these and other key concepts has historically impeded the effective use of nonviolent resistance.

With these challenges — which stem from a mixture of fear, despair, and dire circumstances — the effectiveness of mass mobilization has declined over the years. Scholars have attributed this decline to opponent adaptation. Authoritarian regimes are using more sophisticated means to undermine and defeat nonviolent struggles. Activists are addressing this reality with great creativity, bravery, and tactical innovation, but require further strategic planning to develop the skills and structures needed to make their movements sustainable, especially in the face of new kinds of repression. Therefore, activists and their allies should continue to apply existing methods of nonviolent resistance which have proven to be successful, while working on an efficient long-term strategy and adaptable tactics.



Participants embrace during a session on community-building.

Key to all of this is understanding that movements begin when action is taken by individuals working with others who share an alternative vision for society. The power struggle between people and government in the Arab World has propelled the use of nonviolent action in movement-building and elevated the goal of building a network and creating coalitions of experts and activists who can pool resources.

Advocates from the Arab World have learned lessons from the protests of the Arab Spring and before, and need to capitalize on the strengths they acquired and the opportunities the protests presented. However, opponents of freedom have also adapted and are now better prepared to undermine movements for change. To build stronger and more sustainable movements that can succeed, advocates from the Arab World need to connect and develop bonds within their communities, but also ones that transcend borders, allowing them to rely on each other and share best practices on an ongoing basis and identify collective priorities to keep the regional momentum alive.

REPORT OVERVIEW

This report was created by and for our community, based on the findings that were generated from the active engagement and constructive discussions that took place during the Working Retreat. The purpose of this report is to (1) present a roadmap for activists on how to build and unite a movement in the Arab World and (2) share with a global audience an overview of the current state of civil society and social movements in the region.

The report is broken down into four main sections:

LEGAL

FUNDING

MEDIA

**MENTAL
HEALTH**



**WHERE THINGS
STAND IN THE
REGION**

**STRENGTHS TO
SEIZE UPON**

ACTION ITEMS

TAKEAWAYS

**QUESTIONS TO
THINK ABOUT**

LEGAL



WHERE THINGS STAND IN THE REGION

Activists in the Arab World are confronted with a variety of legal obstacles, including the existing legal framework, judicial harassment, and a lack of legal and human rights education. However, there are opportunities to overcome these obstacles.

Legal Framework in the Arab World:

Activists in the region are confronted with laws restricting, among other things, the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Technology and access to the internet give people a platform for their voices, but restrictive laws also amplify the risks people may face as a result of speaking out.



During the civil society and social movements session at the OFF Working Retreat, participants discussed the legal framework in the Arab World.

Restrictive and flawed laws on free speech that have been used against activists in the region include overly broad terrorism and national security laws, state of emergency laws, press and media laws, cyber-crime laws, penal code provisions, and

defamation and incitement laws. In Syria, for example, counterterrorism laws such as Law No. 19, use overly broad language to label providing humanitarian assistance, documenting human rights abuses, and peaceful protests as acts of terrorism; those suspected of these acts are sent to military courts, forced to confess, and deprived of due process — even their families' assets are seized, pursuant to such charges. Meanwhile, the [Law of Terrorism Crimes and its Financing](#) and the [Anti-Cyber Crime Law](#) in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain's penal code, press and publications law, and anti-cybercrime law have been used to stifle dissent in those countries.¹ Syrian human rights lawyer Khalil Matouk, Saudi human rights lawyer and activist [Waleed AbulKhair](#), and Bahraini activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja (and up until recently, Nabeel Rajab) are among those currently imprisoned as a result of the overly broad application of these texts.

Freedom of expression is one of the tools necessary for human rights activists to carry out their work, as it enables them to detect, document, and report on human rights abuses. The application of criminal law (in violation of international legal standards) when human rights activists exercise their right to freedom of expression unquestionably leads to restrictions on their work. For example, Morocco's penal code contains ambiguous language that can be used to impose heavy-handed restrictions on the press and on publication law. Even in Tunisia, where the civic space is freer than in other countries in the region, authorities use and selectively apply different laws and broad provisions to infringe upon digital rights and to jail bloggers. For example, in cases where the press code

¹These laws have been elaborated on as part of HRF's Free Speech Unlimited project, which analyzes domestic legal systems from countries around the world and contrasts them with international law's strictest and most protective standards for the right to freedom of expression. This project was designed to help activists and civil society groups understand their country's free speech regulations, and it includes information on at least one important free speech case per country, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (read here [defamation](#) and [incitement](#) cases from Saudi Arabia and [defamation](#) and [incitement](#) cases from Bahrain).

is applicable (Article 55), the courts are instead selectively applying the telecommunications code (Article 86) because it provides for harsher sanctions.

There are also NGO and/or “foreign agents” laws that impose restrictions on civil society in the Arab World. In Egypt, for example, the [2019 NGO law](#) places limitations on the ability of NGOs to carry out their work. The law uses vague language, such as “national security,” “public order,” and “public morals,” to [restrict](#) the scope of NGOs’ activities, and forbids NGOs from carrying out political activities, entering into agreements with foreign entities, and using local or foreign funding. Such provisions enable the regime to paralyze the work of NGOs and target human rights and pro-democracy groups in the country. In Algeria, parliament adopted a law to amend the penal code to impose a punishment of imprisonment and a fine on those who receive funds to perform acts deemed likely to undermine state security. In practice, labeling this as a crime impacts the freedom of association and legitimate cooperation between national and international associations to even perform simple studies on certain laws in Algeria.

Lastly, the lack of both independence of the judiciary and transparency in the legislative process — a result of the lack of separation of powers in the political systems of the governments in the region — poses serious obstacles to civil society in the Arab World.

Judicial Harassment and Legal Education:

- **Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) lawsuits are common in countries like Bahrain, Egypt, Jor-**

dan, Morocco, and Tunisia, which have used these lawsuits to crack down on freedom of expression. In effect, these lawsuits silence dissent through intimidation to prosecute acts of free speech,² and restrict activists and civil society from mobilizing by draining their resources.

- **There is also a lack of protection for legal representation, including protection against threats to lawyers.** How can lawyers defend victims of human rights abuses, if they themselves are being harassed for doing their work?
- **From an educational standpoint, there is a lack of legal literacy and training for lawyers specializing in international human rights law.**

STRENGTHS TO SEIZE UPON

1. **The possibility of joining forces against judicial harassment** — which is present in most countries in the Arab World — and leveraging international solidarity is a strength to capitalize on.
 - Activists from the region share a great deal of collective expertise and have the ability to register NGOs outside of their countries.
2. **The opportunity for civil society activists to push for a broad, regional movement that is committed to challenging restrictive laws**, which is another common obstacle that civil society activists in the Arab World face, also presents a strength for activists in the region to capitalize on.

²In Tunisia, for example, several journalists have had such pending cases against them for years, resulting in a form of harassment that manifests in repeated summons to the police or court, which can lead to psychological impacts on the activists and self-censorship.

3. **Advocates from the region should seize upon the use of universal jurisdiction.** Pursuing legal redress against abusive governments and officials from the region in democratic countries that adhere to the rule of law is a mechanism by which activists can hold governments accountable for their abuses.

ACTION ITEMS

1. **Leverage international solidarity on behalf of those facing judicial harassment by:**

- **Creating alliances to fight judicial harassment and SLAPP** in order to pool resources and recruit allies who are in a position to speak out about judicial harassment without reprisal. Diasporic communities can talk about judicial harassment without the risks that activists living in their home countries face.
- **Utilizing international bodies and special procedures** such as the submission of individual complaints, allegation letters, and urgent appeals to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the UN Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers.

2. **Push back against restrictive laws in the Arab World by:**

- **Creating coalitions and campaigns** that unite people from diverse fields. While it is important to leverage international solidarity to address judicial harassment, it is just as important to have region-wide solidarity and a strategy to push back against restrictive laws.

This requires consolidating activists' work around specific objectives and establishing standards for common phrases and terminology. Some campaigns that exemplify the strength of civil society activism in pushing back against repression and are a source of inspiration for challenging restrictive laws in the region include:

“كلن يعني كلن!”
“تسقط بس”

- Killun yani killun! All or nothing. All of them means all of them.
- #ArabTyrantManual
- We are all Darfur
- #JustFall “Tasgot bas”
- **Incorporating underrepresented groups** such as women, the LGBTQI community, people with disabilities, and religious and ethnic minorities into civil society campaigns related to the freedom of expression in the Arab World. To effectively push back against restrictive laws, these groups need to be given visibility within the public space, and their individual causes need to be accounted for.
- **Lobbying parliamentarians before domestic laws are adopted.** Building strong and reliable relationships with members of parliament (MPs) can be helpful in tackling despotic legislation. However, lobbying parliamentarians can only truly be successful in less closed states, as lobbying requires

MPs who are freely elected, rather than appointed by the ruling regime.³

3. Reform law school curricula and legal training of lawyers and judges in the region by:

- **Holding debates** to strengthen their critical thinking and analytical skills, for which they do not receive adequate training in law school. Some debates for inspiration include:
 - The debates organized by 7iber.com in small art spaces in Jordan at the height of the Arab Spring and
 - The presidential debates organized in Tunisia by the Munathara Initiative.
- **Identifying the legal obstacles faced by members of underrepresented groups** to ensure that lawyers and judges can

advocate on behalf of all people in an independent manner. Believing in human rights and fighting for underrepresented groups is not enough to win cases and address the root causes of the abuses they face. Therefore, it is important that lawyers are better informed about comparative decisions and arguments before judgments are rendered. Law school curricula — and laws more broadly — need to be inclusive of the rights of all people, including, but not limited to:

- Women
- The LGBTQI community
- Religious and ethnic minorities
- Indigenous groups
- People with disabilities; and
- Individuals struggling with mental health.



Agnès Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, led a conversation at the OFF Working Retreat.

³Although it is nearly impossible to effectively lobby parliamentarians in the Arab World, this method has worked in Tunisia. In Tunisia, civil society organizations succeeded in blocking a draft law that aimed to amend the penal code and introduce new crimes to fight against fake news and defamation online. Civil society organizations mobilized to publish a [joint press release](#) and impose other forms of pressure (e.g., through interviews and online communication), leading many MPs to see the law's dangers in relation to freedom of expression and [with-draw](#) their support for it.

By contrast, in Algeria, [two dangerous laws](#) were published when lobbying parliamentarians proved unsuccessful due to institutional opacity which prevented civil society from obtaining a copy of the draft laws to form a legal analysis. Both laws contain provisions attacking the freedom of association, freedom of expression, digital rights, and personal data protection.

QUESTIONS TAKEAWAYS

- Judicial harassment and a lack of independence of the judiciary are pervasive issues in the Arab World.
- Lawyers and judges need to challenge restrictive laws and think critically. In order to do so, there needs to be an improvement in legal literacy and training in international human rights law. This requires reform of law school curricula in the Arab World.
- The legal obstacles faced by underrepresented groups need to be

accounted for in the process of reforming law school curricula and the training of lawyers and judges. Legal professionals need to consider the risks and challenges that women, the LGBTQI community, religious and ethnic minorities, and other underrepresented groups face. There also needs to be a shift in the discourse on how these groups are seen in the region and the implications that this has in reforming law school curricula and the training of lawyers and judges.



Participants reflect on successful strategies for advancing freedoms.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. What are other strengths or opportunities that you can identify for activists in the Arab World to seize upon in confronting their legal obstacles?
2. What have activists from other regions of the world done to overcome legal obstacles? What are some lessons learned that can be applied to the social, political, and economic circumstances that activists from the Arab World are faced with?
3. What are some ideas of projects that can be pitched to provide solutions to these obstacles?

FUNDING

“

...THE SHEER POWER OF INFLUENCE OF THIS SPECIFIC GROUP COLLECTIVELY NEEDS TO BE LEVERAGED IN SOME FORM OF COLLABORATION BEYOND THE RETREAT.

”

WHERE THINGS STAND IN THE REGION

Due to the constant geopolitical shifts in the region, donor states are increasingly cutting their funding for their human rights and democracy promotion efforts. This has created an unprecedented lack of funding opportunities for local actors in the Arab World. The current challenge today is to revive a civil society that is on life support due to a lack of funding and interest from foreign donors in combination with the comprehensive crackdown from Arab governments. As a result, civil society is “all but dead” in the Arab World.

The obstacles to funding will be addressed as they relate to NGOs and civil society, as well as donors. Although activists have trouble getting funding for their work, there are ways to overcome these obstacles.

Funding, NGOs, and Civil Society:

- Funding fragmentation, shifting political agendas among donor states, and cause-/issue-based funding present obstacles for activists and NGOs in the Arab World. Because foreign governmental and non-governmental donors often fund on issue-based advocacy, this fragments the sources of funding and creates incentives for local activists to shift their work in order to meet the requirements of these narrow projects. This limits access to funding and interferes with the growth of local NGOs and activists as they become dependent on these sources of funding and particular issues. Consequently, when the political agenda shifts amongst state and/or private donors, activists and NGOs have to start all over again to meet new funding requirements.
- An example of the impact of shifting agendas on activists and NGOs is the prioritization of anti-terrorism and counter-radicalization efforts. When funding for human rights work dries up and when anti-terrorism and counter-radicalization become prioritized for funding, NGOs and activists shift their work in order to meet new funding requirements. As a result, their previous work is lost, and they are forced to become experts on something unrelated to their initial cause and on work they may not be able to effectively carry out. This example showcases a fundamental structural problem: funding is often tailored to the needs of the funders, and not to the objective reality on-the-ground which deals with promoting democracy and advancing human rights. These causes may no longer be viewed as relevant amongst donor countries and private/international donors.
- Another example is related to the COVID-19 crisis and the fact that many donors have shifted away from funding human rights organizations, instead prioritizing health-related responses to the pandemic. Human rights organizations working in or on the Arab World have started reporting a shift in donor interest from international support to localized, national support, as a result of the economic crisis arising from the pandemic.
- A large number of NGOs in the Arab World lack the institutional knowledge and skills that are required to fulfill the drafting, submitting, and reporting requirements of donors.



Participants were split into groups to discuss funding for NGOs in the Arab World.

This means that NGOs need to figure out how to register legally, how to write grant proposals, and/or how to meet reporting requirements, for example, when donor funding comes without providing the support and training that is necessary for NGO institution-building in the Arab World.

- **Fundraising and NGO registration restrictions also exist in some countries.** For instance, it is illegal to fundraise locally and internationally in Oman. Furthermore, it is illegal to establish an organization whose activities might be considered contrary to society, its values, or the political system under Oman’s penal code. Meanwhile, in Egypt, under The Law on Regulating the Work of Civil Associations, NGOs cannot receive foreign funding without government approval.
- **As an underrepresented group in the region, the LGBTQI community faces its own set of obstacles in receiving funding for activism-related work.**
 - Many grants — such as those for operational and digital support — are given to general human rights organizations because they are well-versed in writing proposals.

- Given that homosexuality is considered a crime in countries across the region, LGBTQI organizations cannot register in their own countries, which impacts their ability to appeal to donors and file for grants.
- **There is a need to improve the ability of women in the region to become more financially independent.** Even NGOs are affected by norms and values within the Arab World which cement a woman’s place as in the home, leading to few women in high administrative levels or in trustee roles. In humanitarian contexts, most working women hold lower-level positions, rather than management or leadership positions.
- **Government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) also represent a threat to human rights,** as they are created by governments mainly for political purposes to counter independent civil society organizations and human rights activists. In reality, GONGOs are often controlled by the government or its security apparatus with the aim of undermining legitimate, independent NGOs and civil society groups. This results in the following consequences:
 - GONGOs monopolize access to foreign donors and partners, thus blocking legitimate civil society groups in the region from much-needed funding.
 - Independent civil society activists and NGOs compete with one another for the same sources of funding from international private or governmental donors.
 - GONGOs often pursue the government’s point of view, preventing reform by shifting the focus of international private and governmental

donors to match the government's narrative. As a result, donors end up investing in GONGOs instead of legitimate, civil society organizations in the Arab World.

Morocco and Egypt present prime examples of how only a few organizations, which are very close to the regime, receive enough funding for their activities, which aim mainly to wipe clean the regimes' hands.

Funding & Donors:

From a donor's perspective, there are several issues that need to be taken into account in providing funding to activists and NGOs in the Arab World, including:

- **Competing interests and agendas between NGOs in the region**, which can be mitigated by encouraging partnerships and applications for grants in groups.
- **Prioritizing the safety of activists** and protection of their identities in order for them to continue to engage in their advocacy.
 - Given the situation in the region, donors should be aware that a broad scope of activities that activists engage in can be described as being against the state or societal values. Balancing donor requirements with the activists' situation on-the-ground (such as by not requiring a registration certificate from them) should be an important consideration.
- **Corruption that exists within certain NGOs, and nepotism.**
 - Some NGOs serve as a one-man show and exist to gather funding at the expense of impact. Their impact is negligible compared

to the resources that they secure from donors. Because of the lack of vigorous financial and accounting controls, the line gets blurred by the heads of these NGOs between money earmarked for projects and personal revenue. As a result, much of the organization's funding gets diverted solely to the salaries of the heads of the organization and their family members, which is a common practice for these NGOs.

- In the relief and humanitarian aid sectors, corruption exists within some NGOs in the form of diverting donations of food and medical equipment and selling them in the market. In turn, resources are not used in the manner intended by the donor.
- Some NGOs are set up as fronts to launder money for government officials and even business groups. This discredits NGOs and civil society groups in the Arab World and undermines individual accountability in the eyes of the public; NGOs in the region are perceived as money-making entities that do not have any ethical or moral commitments. This ends up confirming government propaganda that paints civil society as stooges of foreign powers that are trying to undermine their countries. This is evident in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, and other countries in the Arab World.

- The long-term impact of the above occurrences boils down to the following:
 - When society is encouraged by authoritarian regimes to abandon the idea of individual responsibility, that concept becomes replaced by the idea that only the government can solve any problem. Thus, the idea of an engaged citizenry that takes matters into its own hands and creates innovative solutions to the various issues facing society is abandoned. As a result, the cause of democracy suffers as it loses its substance and authoritarian governments' domination of society is reinforced, resulting in the "tyranny of the few."

- Sanctions on certain countries.
- Excessive risk for foreign donors funding entities with little or no financial tracking and reporting capacity.
- Prioritizing funding for women and youth-led organizations.
- Putting in place a quota of women board of directors members for an organization to be eligible to receive a grant.
- Reconsidering eligibility and risk mitigation standards based on locations and contexts.

Other Issues:

A myriad of other issues that relate to funding activists and NGOs in the Arab World include the following:

- Accountability for donors and the monitoring of funds, due to instances of disappearing funding (e.g., USAID)
 - There are reports of money paid for by different parties, but without actual knowledge on how the money was spent.
- Poor legal infrastructure.
- Difficulty registering banking institutions abroad.
- Difficulty making financial transfers into war zones such as Syria.

STRENGTHS TO SEIZE UPON

1. Areas of sustainability, including small business incubation hubs, present an opportunity for activists from the Arab World to build even better business models and enhance their social impact.
 - Sustainability refers to the ability to reliably generate and secure monetary and human resources, as well as a legal framework that provides a layer of protection to activists and civil society actors that prevents the government from shutting them down.
 - These incubators offer the possibility to generate revenue for activists in NGOs in the Arab World through successful businesses or start-up ventures. These incubator models keep the most talented and driven activists focused on their work and allow them to maintain their independence and overcome any financial hardship that may lead them to abandon their work.

2. Opportunities to diversify sources of income through donors, donations, and memberships are also a strength.
3. Lastly, shareable crowdfunding techniques (such as the example of the Sudanese diasporic community successfully raising \$1 million through crowdfunding) can be very impactful.

ACTION ITEMS

1. NGOs should share grant application resources. Recipients of funding must cooperate with one another.
2. Utilize training centers on proposal writing to equip advocates with the skills necessary to most effectively and clearly provide examples of how to answer all of the questions in proposals.
3. As a complement to utilizing training centers, increase training in grant writing for advocates and NGOs, including how to create an acceptable profile for these organizations and how to improve projects annually to secure opportunities to increase funding.
4. Create a list of preferred donors.
5. Strategize how to increase individual donations, or at least maintain, core funding.

6. Encourage self-reflection by donors on how to provide infrastructure and institutional support to NGOs in the Arab World by seeking input from recipient organizations, and develop a new strategy based on regional specificity.
7. Establish a knowledge base on NGO registration and provide endorsement badges on reliability.
8. Create opportunities to provide financial assistance to NGOs affiliated with underrepresented groups in the region, including the LGBTQI community.
9. Create opportunities for women in the region to become financially independent, through the promotion of small businesses.

TAKEAWAY

- Funding to NGOs must go hand-in-hand with providing support for institution-building. This means assisting NGOs with developing the institutional knowledge and skills they need in order to fulfill their obligations to donors such as drafting and submitting update reports, and meeting the legal requirements to be registered as an NGO.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. What are other strengths or opportunities that you can identify for activists in the Arab World in confronting their funding obstacles?
2. What have activists in other regions of the world done to overcome funding obstacles? What are some lessons learned that can be applied to the social, political, and economic circumstances that activists from the Arab World face?
3. What are some projects that can be pitched to provide a solution to some of these obstacles?

MEDIA



WHERE THINGS STAND IN THE REGION

Activists in the Arab World face obstacles in presenting and branding their activism through the media, since popular topics will not necessarily create change or alter ways of thinking. Activists struggle with a lack of independent Arabic-language media in the region; a lack of interest from major Arabic media outlets; censorship and/or self-censorship; and media outlets that are unwilling or unable to promote campaigns which themselves have limited funding and communications leadership, and simultaneously target activists with government smear campaigns. However, there are opportunities to effectively present this activism.



Participants identify action items for civil society and social movements in the area of the media.

Little Interest from the Media:

- Every media agenda is driven by events and clicks, and there is a structural Western audience bias.
- Outlets lose money when they fail to accrue a very high number of readers,

which can result from covering controversial subjects. For example, Ra-seef22 loses 1% of its followers each time it covers taboo topics, such as LGBTQI news.

- A lack of positive feedback and/or pitching articles to journalists also presents a challenge for activists in the region.
- Funding structures and the economics of publishing complicate matters because funding becomes an impediment to publishing stories when they are merely published for clicks.
- Interviews can backfire if taken out of context, and might be used to undermine ongoing movements.

Censorship and/or Self-Censorship:

- Some activists and journalists limit their own freedom of speech through self-censorship. They find it ill-advised to post comments on social media that might cause people to further question the objectivity of journalists in general.
- Many stories are not reported by external stakeholders or by activists themselves, due to fear of repercussion.
- Fear of government reprisal is difficult to mitigate. Activists must constantly think of the implications of speaking out at risk to themselves and others. While anonymity may appear to be an initial solution, it can come at the cost of credibility.
- Activists are being blocked on social media and face retaliation for exposing regimes' abuses.
- Women, in particular, are consistently targeted on social media, and efforts

to control trolls and address this issue are severely lacking. Women have voices, but the tools to make them visible are nonexistent. In Lebanon, for example, women are more present than men in activism, but they often face sexist abuse and accusations of being “honorless.”⁴

- Regimes have sought to exclude largely positive representations of women in the media.

Unwillingness of Media to Promote Campaigns:

- There is a limited menu of options within the Arabic space for activists to get their message out to the greatest number of people. There is a consensus that those in the Arab World are consistently held to lower standards of freedom of speech, particularly in relation to topics such as religion, atheism, and authoritarian rulers. Most media outlets within the Arab World are also state-run, with very few exceptions.
- Social media companies consistently remove posts by activists for unexplained reasons, and the process by which an activist can report such violations of their free speech is long and arduous. For instance, activists noted that reporting violations to Twitter and Facebook is not a simple or short process, and it can take a long time before a post reappears or an activist is provided a reason as to why a particular post was removed. Furthermore, repressive governments have the resources with which to fight activists on social media platforms by targeting their posts with computer programs that create false positives for community standards violations.



Bloomberg journalist Bobby Ghosh and Deutsche Welle journalist Nick Spicer held media trainings with the participants. Naina Bajekal, the deputy international director at TIME, provided tips on how to pitch an op-ed.

⁴However, it is important to note that this is something that is getting weaker with time.

TAKEAWAYS

- **Social media usage is key for directly and immediately disseminating a message**, and social activists are at the forefront of change on social media.
- **Wide-reaching media options within the Arabic space are limited**, as is funding, but activists are part of a network. It is important to keep building upon a wide pool of creative and skilled people who can share resources and pitch stories, for example (and who often lack a platform of their own).
- **It is sometimes difficult for activists to focus the media's attention on their pertinent issues**, but the media can also be strategic in promoting issues of activism, so there needs to be a two-way relationship between media and activists.
- **Identifying dedicated allies and support** on a per-message or per-topic basis before speaking up on social media, can help avoid a backlash.
- **Mobilizing your audience into a community** that can actively support you when there is a backlash is vital. Ensuring that this community bridges across sectors and sects to overcome biases is an important component of this.
- **Think about the risks and challenges women face** both offline and online, as well as how to shift the discourse on how women are seen.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. What are some media-related tips that you can identify for activists in the Arab World?
2. What have activists in other regions of the world done to overcome media-related struggles? What are some lessons learned that can be applied to the social, political, and economic circumstances that activists from the Arab World face?

TIPS FOR ACTIVISTS

Here are some things to keep in mind when drafting a story or pitching one to the media:

1. Articles often get fewer clicks than tweets, but articles are important because they add credibility to a campaign, for activists and non-activists alike.
2. Clearly identify the goals you want to achieve with a story and the outlet you need for it — local, independent media, or global.
3. Summarize your findings in two sentences and ask yourself: “What is new, different, or personal in this story?”
 - If a story is declined, follow up with the editor to ask what the outlet might be looking for in a future publication.
4. Identify journalists who are likely to cover your cause or issue. When reaching out to correspondents or pitching stories, show that you have read their content. Circumvent the process by calling a local news correspondent at the desk who will fight for your story.
5. Topics vs. Stories: Topics invite curiosity, whereas good story ideas begin as a question, and have shape and specificity.
6. Journalists are looking for the *4W1H* in a story: what, where, when, who, and how (‘why’ is within the realm of opinion).
 - However, it is understood that not every individual story will contain all of the elements.
7. Providing only partial context can derail the truth, and partial truth is problematic because it creates a false narrative on-the-ground.
8. It’s better to speak directly with a journalist in a live interview. Writing out your responses suggests a lack of spontaneity, and an editor is never 100% sure precisely who is writing.
9. Pictures, sound bytes, and quotes from stakeholders are very important for stories and can see high social media penetration, so include these where possible. This is the difference between a page 20 and a front page story.
10. Maintain more than one social media account and try to get at least one verified and protected. When local media fails to cover your story out of fear of local government, you will still have your own independent outlet via which to convey the story.
11. Ask others in your network to help spread your desired messages. This may place pressure on local media to cover the story — albeit sometimes according to the local government narrative — and this is your chance to create needed debate and highlight an issue from your perspective.

MENTAL HEALTH

“

YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HELP
OTHERS IF YOU DO NOT HELP
YOURSELF FIRST.

”

WHERE THINGS STAND IN THE REGION

Proper mental health care is critical for activists who make up the broader movements within the Arab World. Activists experience both first and second-hand trauma in carrying out their work, but often do not or are unable to seek help to address these mental health and wellbeing challenges, due to the continued stigmatization of mental health issues in the Arab World and globally, as well as the general unavailability of such services. However, there are opportunities to overcome these struggles which fall under the categories of awareness & representation and regional contextualization, among others.



WHEN IT IS FORBIDDEN TO BE YOU, IT IS EVEN MORE FORBIDDEN TO ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CAUSE.



Awareness & Representation:

- **Activists need allies**, support, and a sense of community, especially when it comes to mental health.
- **Mental health and disability justice** are areas that need to be better represented in the Arab World.



Participants reflect on the importance of mental health and wellbeing.

- **Supporting the rights of underrepresented groups in the region**, including the LGBTQI community, can be achieved through the promotion of mental health. The LGBTQI community has played an important role in every revolution in the region. However, once the revolutions are over, it is one of the first communities to be forgotten.

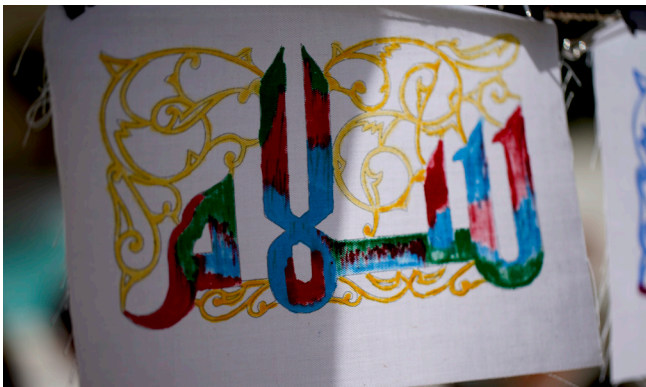
Regional Contextualization:

- **There is a need for culturally-inclusive care** that involves identifying what works for the Arab World and recognizing cultural definitions of terms like “wellbeing,” which often convey loving oneself as a selfish act. This leads to group and/or self-sabotage as well as a lack of compassion.
 - Whereas in some cultures — particularly in the West — “wellbeing” is based on the individual, the term is often considered to mean a collective wellbeing in the Arab World.

- The current terminology that exists in Arabic on mental health is insufficient, and linguistic barriers remain a challenge.
- There are few mental health services within the region, particularly for the activist and LGBTQI communities.
 - For many people in the Arab World, contact with LGBTQI issues is limited to online forums — and often in the form of insults in Arabic. Useful information on issues relevant to the LGBTQI community, including mental health, is not available in Arabic, making it difficult to fight stigmas and overcome obstacles.

Other Issues:

- A lack of time, productivity, professionalism, self-care, health, wellness, and definitions of such terms are also among the challenges that activists in the Arab World face, which contribute to their mental health problems.
 - For instance, how can activists overcome their trauma without the proper resources or terminology for defining the trauma they are experiencing?
- Financial security also is a challenge, particularly when the field of mental health is often viewed as a side project and few NGOs, entities, and institutions have dedicated mental health professionals who can secure funds, and specialize in this field.
 - How do activists raise money specifically for mental health-related causes?
 - What is the best way to spend or allocate that money?



Lebanese artist and activist Zena el Khalil invited the participants to take part in her Mantra Matrix project by painting the word “salam” (peace). This interactive art project uses mantras as words of consciousness to initiate group healing.

STRENGTHS TO SEIZE UPON

1. The stories of activists who are working on coping with mental health challenges can serve as a source of inspiration and a resource to fellow activists who are facing similar struggles. Leveraging existing activists' networks to share experiences with trauma, as well as a desire to avoid confronting that personal trauma, allows them to become "wounded healers" for each other.
2. Making connections and recognizing that individuals have needs, present activists in the region with opportunities that should be built upon because it can create a community that can heal and support its members.

TAKEAWAYS

- Human rights advocacy can be taxing on one's physical and mental health, and a lack of awareness by activists and their allies around poor mental health and wellbeing can lead to dysfunctional activism, which sometimes translates into a conscious choice to deprioritize oneself.
- It is important to recognize that it is not wrong to pause and take some time to care for oneself while in a mental state of survival. Self-awareness reminds us of why we are doing good, and allies can help by taking charge and offering other kinds of support and aid in those moments.
- Post-traumatic growth is possible when a problem is acknowledged and professional support is provided. Activists can transform the trauma they experienced into knowledge and power. The decision to take action and embrace the possibility for positive outcomes avoids passivity and a state of mind centered on victimhood.

TIPS FOR ACTIVISTS

1. Turn your pain into a strength or develop a community by focusing on inspiring stories and communication. In order to empower ourselves, we need to translate our stories of trauma into heroic narratives, and remove the victim mindset.
2. We need to develop culturally-sensitive Arabic terminology, support communities, and trust circles to remove stigma, break taboos, and help us develop critical perspectives. This includes defining terms such as “wellbeing” and “consent” as well as what they mean on both individual and collective levels.
3. Share information with each other in order to develop an awareness, so that it is common to say, “It’s okay to ask for help.” Normalize the idea and importance of seeking professional help when needed.
 - Develop healthcare that is culturally-sensitive, in order to educate societies, share stories, break taboos, and remove the stigma surrounding this topic.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. What are some other mental health-related tips that you can identify for activists in the Arab World?
2. What have activists in other regions of the world done to cope with mental health-related issues? What are some lessons learned that can be applied to the social contexts that activists from the Arab World are faced with?



Mental health was among the many topics that was addressed at the OFF Working Retreat.



RETREAT IMPACT

The OFF Working Retreat forged a community of advocates from the Arab World and experts from the media, digital security, and mental health fields, among others. It facilitated the free and unhampered flow of information between advocates from the region and global experts through the creation of a digital forum on an end-to-end encrypted platform through which participants frequently exchange updates, lend their expertise and support, share presentations and resources, and keep one another informed about important developments in the region. Exchanges that have taken place since the Retreat include journalists reaching out to advocates for interviews, advocates providing support for each other's campaigns, and experts providing advice on digital security matters.

Here are our top examples of impact and collaborations that are a direct result of the OFF Working Retreat:

1. Nonviolent Education Action Center

- An important collaboration is being developed by participants Jamila Raqib, Iyad el-Baghdadi, and Ahmed Gatnash who are designing an experimental space focusing on advancing nonviolent action education among activists and organizers. It is envisioned as distinct from a classical training program — using innovative online and offline training methods to connect people to tools and resources to help them develop wise strategic plans that incorporate insights and experience from their own struggles.

It will also serve as a means to continuously refine the existing resources and advance our understanding of how global movements are conducting their struggles for human rights, freedom, and democracy; the challenges they face; strategies and

tactics that are effective and those that may be contributing to defeat; relevant emerging trends; how repressive entities are responding to nonviolent demands; and how groups are themselves adapting their struggles against these increasingly sophisticated opponents.



THE OFF WORKING RETREAT PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN HELPING TO CLARIFY OUR THINKING

about how we can leverage our existing knowledge and resources on strategic non-violent action by innovating the process of collecting and sharing knowledge among a new generation of activists and organizers.

Jamila Raqib, Executive Director of the Albert Einstein Institution



2. Growth of HRF and OFF Community -

By holding the OFF Working Retreat, HRF expanded its community, which now includes over 30 new members who had never been to an OFF event before. The group has already taken advantage of this network via the end-to-end encrypted digital platform that HRF created to connect this community.

For example, one of the main Retreat sessions emphasized the importance of sustaining mental health. Through the digital platform, activists have provided one another with psychological support since the Retreat, which has strengthened the sense of community among the participants.

3. Oslo Freedom Forum Regional Experts & Speakers -

With the expansion of our community from the Arab World, HRF has a wider network of activists and experts from the region who serve as consultants or potential speakers for our events. For example, after giving opening remarks during the Retreat's session on civil society and social movements in the Arab World, one of our participants will be a speaker during the 2020 Oslo Freedom Forum. One of our mental health experts will also be featured as a mainstage speaker at the 2021 Oslo Freedom Forum.

This network of activists and experts will also more broadly provide consultative advice on HRF's work on the Arab World, including with regard to the submission of cases from the region to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, advocacy campaigns, and research.

4. Oslo Freedom Forum and COVIDCon Panel Discussions -

OFF Working Retreat participants have also taken part in panel discussions at HRF and OFF events. In April 2020, for example, HRF held [COVID-Con](#), which featured a panel discussion en-

titled, "[Keeping Protest Movements Alive During the Pandemic](#)." Among the speakers, were two participants who met at the OFF Working Retreat. With the growth of our community, HRF has a highly qualified pool of potential panelists for the 2020 and 2021 Oslo Freedom Forums to cover a variety of pressing issues.



OFF community and Retreat members participated in a COVIDCon panel, "Keeping Protest Movements Alive During the Pandemic."

5. OFF Working Retreat Design Sprint Workshop -

The OFF Working Retreat and this report are just two components of a multi-step process. If public health allows for it, at the 2021 Oslo Freedom Forum in Norway, HRF plans to host an OFF Working Retreat Design Sprint Workshop to build on the discussions that took place during the Retreat, along with the findings of this report. The objective of this workshop is to gather a select group of activists from the Retreat, along with members of HRF's and OFF's donor community, to design a project or initiative that will address at least one of the issue areas identified during the Retreat: legal, funding, media, or mental health. The long-term goal of this workshop is to execute a funded project stemming from the actions identified during the workshop.

6. Op-eds + Media Placements - During the OFF Working Retreat, TIME deputy international director Naina Bajekal presented a session to participants on how to pitch an op-ed. The tips Bajekal provided have been successfully utilized by Retreat participants, including by HRF staff members who placed an op-ed in [The Independent](#) regarding Saudi Arabia’s history of sportswashing and attempted takeover of Premier League team Newcastle United.



Premier League cannot risk turning a blind eye over Newcastle takeover



In addition, the source of inspiration for the “[Keeping Protest Movements Alive During the Pandemic](#)” COVIDCon panel discussion, was Bloomberg journalist Bobby Ghosh’s op-ed “[Coronavirus Blunts Momentum of Second Arab Spring](#).” During the Retreat, Ghosh led a media training session, and while writing this op-ed, reached out to Retreat participants about the subject, through the digital platform that HRF created. The content of his op-ed also includes Gene Sharp’s [198 Methods of Nonviolent Action](#), which was addressed by Jamila Raqib and Iyad el-Baghdadi during the movement-building session they led at the Retreat.

Bloomberg Opinion

Politics & Policy

Coronavirus Blunts Momentum of Second Arab Spring



Lastly, Raseef22 translated and published in [Arabic](#) an article about cryptocurrency and freedom by HRF’s Chief Strategy Officer.

7. Interviews - During the OFF Working Retreat, Deutsche Welle journalist Nick Spicer led a training on how to conduct Skype, FaceTime, and other video interviews. After the Retreat, he shared with participants a guide summarizing the information that was presented during his session, including web links to the session videos and photos and links for elementary gear, such as a lavalier microphone. He offered his assistance to participants, helping them set up proper home studios and conducting practice interviews via Skype.

In response to this session, one of our participants noted: “*I had a Skype interview today and I followed your advice, it was the best interview I did in a while...*” Through Nick Spicer’s facilitation, that same participant took part in an interview with Deutsche Welle regarding Syrian refugees and the assault in Idlib in December 2019.

8. Global Magnitsky Submissions - As part of its Anti-Corruption Initiative, HRF documents the links between corruption

and authoritarianism and submits evidentiary case files under the Global Magnitsky Act, which allows the President to block or revoke U.S. visas, and to block all U.S.-based property and interests owned by foreign individuals and entities who have committed, overseen, or financed serious human rights abuses or acts of corruption. As a result of partnerships forged during the OFF Working Retreat, HRF is currently pursuing cases against individuals in the Arab World, for eventual inclusion on the Specially Designated Nationals List for sanctions.

9. Technology Partnerships - Jigsaw, a technology incubator created by Google, was represented at the Retreat, and one of its team leads presented a session on censorship and VPNs, which encouraged participants to examine their practices and provided them with the tools to fortify their own digital presence. Jigsaw expanded its network through this Retreat and is now more aware of the ongoing issues and needs of activists in the Arab World, which is informing its product decisions and prioritization.

10. Twitter Account Verification - During the OFF Working Retreat, one of our participants moderated a virtual discussion with Colin Crowell, the former vice president of Global Public Policy at Twitter. Some of the topics that were raised included:

- The deletion or suspension of human rights activists' accounts;
- Twitter's ties with governments in the MENA region, and what this means for the safety of human rights activists; and
- Hacking and how activists can protect themselves on Twitter.

As a result of this discussion, several Retreat participants were able to have their Twitter accounts verified.



Twitter presented a virtual discussion that was moderated by one of our participants.

11. Digital Security Support - Since the Retreat, digital security experts who presented training workshops have frequently offered their assistance and provided the most up-to-date tips and information through the messaging platform that HRF created, so that participants can protect themselves and securely carry out their work. Activists, too, have been able to directly reach out to the technology and digital security experts to discuss topics ranging from VPNs to internet shutdowns.

12. Connection with UN Special Rapporteur & UN Special Procedures - During the Retreat, Agnès Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary, or Arbitrary Executions, held a conversation with participants about her investigation into the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Participants learned more about her mandate and now have a direct line of contact with her and access to other UN Special Rapporteurs and/or procedures.

13. Research & Report Collaborations - The collective knowledge of participants at the OFF Working Retreat presented opportunities to collaborate on research. For example, HRF and the Syria Campaign are currently collaborating on a policy brief that will address justice and accountability for war crimes that have been committed in Syria.



CONCLUSION

The 2011 Arab Spring and 2019 protests demonstrated that activists from the Arab World continue to take a stand against oppression and injustice. The ideas presented in this report were inspired by the lessons learned from these nonviolent movements.

While activists from the Arab World face obstacles on both individual and collective levels, there are many strengths and



Participants engaged in an escape room game curated and presented by Maze of Tales.

THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES ACTIVISTS CAN SEIZE UPON. THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THEM BECAME APPARENT DURING THE RETREAT.

opportunities they can seize upon in a variety of areas, including legal, funding, media, and mental health. What became apparent from the engaging discussions during the OFF Working Retreat was that these different areas all intersect with one another, and there were many creative ideas generated about movement-building. Activists identified the following action points as priorities to work toward in building and uniting a movement in the Arab World:

1. Activists and movements in the Arab World need to define their narrative by identifying their goals and what they want to achieve.
2. Activists must always remember to focus on what inspires their movement and use that to develop their messaging.
3. To promote unity and maintain the momentum of the movement, activists need to create coalitions and networks that include people from diverse fields and backgrounds, including, but not limited to, experts and members of diasporic communities.
4. Reinforced by the creation of coalitions and networks, activists in the Arab World need to pool resources in order to sustain the movement.

And it is with these building blocks that the ideas from the OFF Working Retreat can be transformed into tangible, on-the-ground policy change in the Arab World.

TESTIMONIALS

“

قد يكون الوطن أرضنا وجذورنا. قد يكون الوطن أبًا وأماً وعائلة. ولكن عندما كنت بعيدًا عن الوطن ، اكتشفت أن الوطن قد يكون أيضًا عندما ترى آمالك في عيون أولئك الذين يشتركون في نفس السبب وعندما يلمس ألمك وصراعاتك قلوبهم ، وتدرك أنك لست وحدك. في حضورك ، وحتى لو كنت بعيدًا عن المنزل ، كنت في وطن من المشاعر الصادقة والجميلة.

HOMELAND MAY BE OUR LAND AND OUR ROOTS. HOMELAND MAY BE A FATHER, A MOTHER, AND A FAMILY. BUT WHILE AWAY FROM HOME, I DISCOVERED THAT HOMELAND MAY ALSO BE WHEN YOU SEE YOUR HOPES IN THE EYES OF THOSE WHO SHARE THE SAME CAUSE AND WHEN YOUR PAIN AND STRUGGLES TOUCH THEIR HEARTS, AND YOU REALIZE THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE. IN YOUR PRESENCE, AND EVEN IF I WAS AWAY FROM HOME, I WAS IN A HOMELAND OF SINCERE AND BEAUTIFUL FEELINGS.

”



I AM HUMBLLED AND INSPIRED BY YOUR DETERMINATION AND STRENGTH. KEEP RESILIENT UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN.

Thank you, HRF team, for giving this platform to form a community and for your sincere great efforts and dedication to support the route to democracy.

THIS WAS ONE OF THE BEST HUMAN RIGHTS EVENTS I'VE EVER BEEN TO. IT ENABLED MULTIPLE BIDIRECTIONAL EXCHANGES; I WAS ALSO ABLE TO ESTABLISH MANY NEW RELATIONSHIPS, INCLUDING FINE MEMBERS OF THE HRF FAMILY!

YOU DID SOMETHING UNIQUE. PLEASE CONTINUE DOING THIS. WE NEED IT.



WHAT AN AMAZING OFFSITE. I ENJOYED MEETING EVERYONE, AND I LEARNED A LOT. I HAD READ ABOUT YOUR GREAT WORK AND COVER YOUR STORIES. RASEEF22 IS AT YOUR DISPOSAL TO HIGHLIGHT YOUR CAUSES AND ASSIST IN EVERY WAY.

Always at your disposal, I hope we meet again. A big thank you to HRF.

LISTENING TO THE STORIES AND DISCUSSING POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR MENA WAS A MUCH-NEEDED DOSE OF INSPIRATION IN THESE TROUBLED TIMES, SO I'M DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR IT.

IT'S BEEN SUCH AN HONOR TO SPEND THIS TIME WITH YOU. YOU INSPIRED ME, YOU MADE ME LAUGH, AND YOU MADE ME CRY. I HOPE THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING.



'My greatest superpower is hope.' 'The helicopter is in the sky to film the story of your story of being a hero' – said to a 5 year-old on a Lesbos beach. 'Dictators can be re-tuned.' I cannot forget the people who said these, and many other things. You people who have given up so much personally so that universal values – most of all freedom – can be shared by others.

I FELT DEEPLY HUMBLLED BUT ALSO GREATLY INSPIRED TO MEET YOU ALL AND HEAR SOME OF YOUR STORIES.

A very big thanks as well as to the Oslo Freedom Forum team for its vision and hard work and adding, somehow, a magical dose of fun to the proceedings.



I AM REALLY GRATEFUL TO HRF FOR GIVING ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN, SHARE AND CONNECT WITH THE COMMUNITY.

I'm humbled by all the stories I've heard, the heroism of the activists, and the effort you all put to make the world a better place. [...] I had such a fantastic experience.

APPENDIX A:
GENE SHARP'S
198 METHODS
OF NONVIOLENT
ACTION

During the OFF Working Retreat, executive director of the Albert Einstein Institution and former OFF speaker [Jamila Raqib](#) led a session dedicated to movement-building, along with [Iyad el-Baghdadi](#). The [Albert Einstein Institution](#) is an organization which conducts research, issues publications, and conducts workshops on strategic nonviolent action worldwide. Upon joining the Institution in 2002, Raqib worked closely with its founder, Gene Sharp, the world's leading scholar on strategic nonviolent struggle. Together, they published "[Self-Liberation: A Guide to Strategic Planning for Action to End a Dictatorship or Other Oppression](#)," which has been used throughout the world as a practical guide for nonviolent resistance.

Gene Sharp's [198 Methods of Nonviolent Action](#) was the focus of Raqib's session. The methods are the individual actions that have been historically taken by people conducting struggles, including the methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion (such as vigils, marches, and petitions); the methods of social, economic, and political noncooperation (such as economic boycotts, labor strikes, and boycott of elections); and the methods of nonviolent intervention (such as hunger strikes, sit-ins, and creation of alternative institutions).

The session aimed to simulate the process of strategic planning — the sequencing of methods in order to build power and conduct struggle by denying cooperation and obedience to the opponent, in order to make the pressure on unjust systems unbearable.

Iyad el-Baghdadi helped to contextualize the workshop to the Arab World, and to encompass the distinct political prob-

lems that exist in specific countries, including ongoing struggles, consolidation of authoritarianism, civil war, and countries in transition.

Participants selected methods of nonviolent action and sequenced them in accordance with their specific contexts, considering the following questions:

1. Why did you sequence your methods this way?
2. Which of them build power and which of them undermine your opponent?
3. How relevant are they to your context or others?
4. Have you used the methods, and how far did they work?

198 METHODS OF NONVIOLENT ACTION



The Methods of Nonviolent Protest and Persuasion

Formal Statements

1. Public speeches
2. Letters of opposition or support
3. Declarations by organizations and institutions
4. Signed public statements
5. Declarations of indictment and intention
6. Group or mass petitions

Communications with a Wider Audience

7. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
8. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
9. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
10. Newspapers and journals
11. Records, radio, and television
12. Skywriting and earthwriting

Group Representations

13. Deputations
14. Mock awards
15. Group lobbying
16. Picketing
17. Mock elections

Symbolic Public Acts

18. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
19. Wearing of symbols
20. Prayer and worship
21. Delivering symbolic objects
22. Protest disrobings
23. Destruction of own property
24. Symbolic lights
25. Displays of portraits
26. Paint as protest
27. New signs and names
28. Symbolic sounds
29. Symbolic reclamations
30. Rude gestures

Pressures on Individuals

31. "Haunting" officials
32. Taunting officials
33. Fraternalization
34. Vigils

Drama and Music

35. Humorous skits and pranks
36. Performances of plays and music
37. Singing

Processions

38. Marches
39. Parades
40. Religious processions
41. Pilgrimages
42. Motorcades

Honoring the Dead

43. Political mourning
44. Mock funerals
45. Demonstrative funerals
46. Homage at burial places

Public Assemblies

47. Assemblies of protest or support
48. Protest meetings
49. Camouflaged meetings of protest
50. Teach-ins

Withdrawal and Renunciation

51. Walk-outs
52. Silence
53. Renouncing honors
54. Turning one's back

The Methods of Social Noncooperation

Ostracism of Persons

55. Social boycott
56. Selective social boycott
57. Lysistratic nonaction
58. Excommunication
59. Interdict

Noncooperation with Social Events, Customs, and Institutions

60. Suspension of social and sports activities
61. Boycott of social affairs
62. Student strike
63. Social disobedience
64. Withdrawal from social institutions

Withdrawal from the Social System

65. Stay-at-home
66. Total personal noncooperation
67. "Flight" of workers
68. Sanctuary
69. Collective disappearance
70. Protest emigration (hijrat)

The Methods of Economic Noncooperation: Economic Boycotts

Actions by Consumers

71. Consumers' boycott
72. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
73. Policy of austerity
74. Rent withholding
75. Refusal to rent
76. National consumers' boycott
77. International consumers' boycott

Action by Workers and Producers

78. Workmen's boycott
79. Producers' boycott

Action by Middlemen

80. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott

Action by Owners and Management

81. Traders' boycott
82. Refusal to let or sell property
83. Lockout
84. Refusal of industrial assistance
85. Merchants' "general strike"

Action by Holders of Financial Resources

86. Withdrawal of bank deposits
87. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments
88. Refusal to pay debts or interest
89. Severance of funds and credit
90. Revenue refusal
91. Refusal of a government's money

Action by Governments

92. Domestic embargo
93. Blacklisting of traders
94. International sellers' embargo
95. International buyers' embargo
96. International trade embargo

The Methods of Economic Noncooperation: The Strike

Symbolic Strikes

97. Protest strike
98. Quickie walkout (lightning strike)

Agricultural Strikes

99. Peasant strike
100. Farm Workers' strike



APPENDIX B: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

OSLO FREEDOM FORUM PANELS

During the early years of the Oslo Freedom Forum, there were two discussions that took place that were about the Arab Spring. You can find them here:

- [Dawn of a New Arab World](#)
- [Arab Uprisings: One Year Later](#)

OSLO FREEDOM FORUM RECAP VIDEOS

You can also learn more about the Oslo Freedom Forum with these recap videos:

- [2018 Oslo Freedom Forum recap video](#)
- [2019 Oslo Freedom Forum recap video](#)

HRF & PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE FROM THE ARAB WORLD

HRF's [Impact Litigation program](#) provides international legal representation to prisoners of conscience whose cases are emblematic examples of the brutality of dictatorship. HRF's team of international attorneys litigate on behalf of these courageous individuals before international courts and semi-judicial bodies, such as the [United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention \(UNWGAD\)](#).

Throughout the years, HRF has supported human rights advocates from the

Arab World who were jailed in violation of their rights to freedom of expression and association, including [Mahmoud “Shawkan” Abou Zeid](#), [Waleed Abulkhair](#), and [Raif Badawi](#).

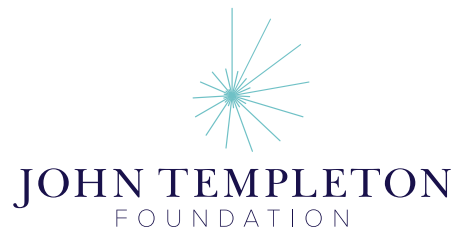
HRF's Center for Law and Democracy has had a 100% success rate petitioning the UNWGAD.

If you would like to suggest a political prisoner case from the Arab World, please contact legal@hrf.org.



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-  [+1 \(212\) 246-8486](tel:+12122468486)

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