

Research Briefing Notes

Challenging and Reinforcing the Status Quo: Services, Civil Society and Conflict in the MENA Region

Summary

This project examines how and why civil society organisations (CSOs) in the MENA region engage with service delivery and with what consequences for political change in conflict-affected contexts. We address the following project research questions: How can policy actors within or outside conflict-affected MENA societies mobilise political support and resources for social protection from governments, international actors and civil society groups to undertake timely and effective conflict prevention? Where are citizens and residents located in this process?

By examining the experience of CSOs in three countries in the region – Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia – we show that engagement with services plays a crucial, yet highly varied role in these organisations' efforts to build legitimacy and pursue their political goals, with potentially important implications for peace and conflict dynamics. The research has allowed us to develop a novel tripartite framework for understanding civil society engagement with service delivery.

We identify three main patterns where CSOs' engagement with services contributes to political change and highlight the dynamic interaction between these three patterns: *providing to initiate a challenge* (where services provision is used as a means of establishing new organisations that are critical of the status quo by bolstering community-level legitimacy), *protesting* (where services are used as a focal point for critical groups' mobilisation and coalition building) and *providing to reinforce* (where groups that are supportive of the status quo use civil society service provision to shore up support).

Research Background

Most existing work on CSO engagement with services focuses on specialist NGO service provision, concluding that this remains a relatively apolitical sphere of activity with little relevance for peace and conflict dynamics. We take a broader approach by examining a wide range of civil society efforts to provide services in three MENA countries – Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia – including both groups that are supportive and those that are critical of the political status quo.

The study draws together academic literature on social movements and research on NGOs and civil society in conflict settings. We also draw on insights from 25 interviews with key informants (academics, civil society representatives, and officials) from across the three countries and the wider region.

Key Findings

We show that in the MENA region, civil society's engagement with service delivery makes an important but mixed contribution to political change. While it can contribute indirectly to political transformation by cultivating the legitimacy of new civil society groups or provide a focal point for a

wider critique of the status quo, it can also undermine a shift towards political transformation by entrenching the position of existing elites.

Our framework presents a more complex picture of how services can contribute to political change in conflict-affected and authoritarian contexts by highlighting the dynamic interaction between different spheres of civil society including protest movements, liberal and conservative CSOs, and political elites, which have tended to be analysed in isolation from each other in existing literature.

Engagement with services can contribute to incremental processes of change by helping CSOs to mobilise from the bottom up, generating small-scale and often very localised challenges to existing powerholders. At the same time, engagement with services can contribute to more transformational processes of change by providing a focal point for protest movements, which present a broader challenge to regional or national level powerholders. Finally, we emphasise that providing services is also used by groups that seek to consolidate the position and agendas of existing powerholders.

Key Explanations for Findings

Our research has identified and illustrated three patterns where CSOs' engagement with services contributes to political change in the MENA region. Our analysis shows that CSO engagement with services is not a necessarily depoliticising move, but rather can contribute both to incremental and transformational processes of political change which challenge existing powerholders in different ways.

Our discussion of the three patterns has pointed towards some tentative conclusions about when, why, and how CSOs engage with services to promote political change, which we hope could be tested further in future research on the region and in other conflict-affected contexts. Some of the patterns identified are more clearly associated with certain temporal contexts. The *providing to initiate a challenge* pattern appears to have special relevance in situations where the barriers to CSO activity are reducing but where social and political constraints remain, as seen in Iraq and Tunisia.

The *protesting* pattern emerges at critical junctures and is often closely related to a crisis in the provision of services as occurred in Basra in 2018 or in Beirut in 2015. These two patterns do not operate in isolation from each other, and our study has pointed to important linkages between them. Legitimacy and organisational capacity forged during the *providing to initiate a challenge* pattern can form an important foundation for the more politicised interventions that characterise the *protesting* pattern.

While we see examples of the *providing to reinforce* pattern across the MENA region, our analysis suggests that is particularly marked in contexts such as Lebanon where sectarian politics is most entrenched, or in contexts like Tunisia where Islamist groups play an established or emerging role in politics.

Key Implications

While our framework for understanding civil society engagement is applied here in relation to the MENA region, these findings will resonate beyond the region. The *providing to reinforce* pattern, for example, is closely related to characteristics that are common in conflict-affected or authoritarian contexts where state authority is contested, where state service provision is weak, and where the state or political elites may work closely with CSOs in pursuit of their agendas. The *providing to initiate a challenge pattern*, similarly, closely relates to other characteristics common to these

regions such as a lack of political space for mobilisation and the tendency for the state to closely monitor and restrict CSOs' work.

To what extent can civil society engagement with services promote positive peace in the MENA region? Our findings show that the potential contribution is mixed – there is strong evidence that services are used by CSOs in the region both to challenge and to reinforce existing social and political structures. How these patterns translate into transformation or entrenchment of conflict structures is likely to be equally mixed. On the one hand, the examples discussed above suggest that services have supported emerging social movements in all three countries, which in Iraq and Lebanon have made some tentative progress towards more inclusive political systems. On the other hand, it is also clear that the achievements of these movements are incomplete and appear highly susceptible to reversals. Serious questions remain about the extent to which CSOs in the MENA region can mount a sustained challenge to long-standing authoritarian governments.

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More About the Research

Further publications: Challenging and reinforcing the status quo: Services, civil society and conflict in the MENA region <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X24001554#s0120>

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