

MAKING MEMORY

Memorialization Efforts in the Middle East and North Africa



Participants visit the Initiative Urbaine Offices in Ain Sebaa-Hay Mohammadi, Morocco.

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A Report on the First Meeting of MENA Memory Initiatives

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INTRODUCTION



The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) is the only worldwide network of “Sites of Conscience” - museums, memorials, historic sites, and memory initiatives dedicated to transforming places that remember the past into spaces that promote civic action. The Coalition recognizes that the power of sites of memory is not inherent; it must be harnessed as a deliberate tactic in the service of human rights and citizen engagement. Sites of Conscience, like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in the United States, the Gulag Museum in Russia, and the District Six Museum in South Africa, foster public dialogue on social issues to build lasting cultures of tolerance and human rights. This conscious effort to connect past to present and memory to action is the hallmark of the Sites of Conscience movement. As a network of more than 300 members in 47 countries, the Coalition engages tens of millions of people every year in using the lessons of history to take action on challenges to democracy and human rights today.

In 2009, ICSC in partnership with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) began working with local NGOs and victims groups on issues of memory and memorialization in Morocco. ICSC has since received increased calls from organizations in the region interested in connecting with other Sites of Conscience to exchange program ideas and develop strategies to address some of the challenges and opportunities that they face in developing cultures of human rights and democracy.

The 2011 Arab Spring brought new opportunities for citizen engagement and democracy building. As countries across the Middle East and North Africa attempt to come to terms with past regimes of repression and authoritarianism, key questions remain: What are the mechanisms that need to be put in place to allow societies to come to terms with the past? How can a society that was entrenched in a culture of silence and repression rebuild relations among citizens by promoting civic engagement and dialogue? What is the role of memorialization in coming to terms with the past?

In attempting to address some of these questions, ICSC hosted a regional meeting from 18-20 January 2012 in Casablanca, Morocco. This introductory meeting of Arab states brought together 20

participants representing the diverse fields of arts and culture, memory and memorialization, heritage, human rights and transitional justice. Participants from Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan came together with the goal to:

- Share, through their work, the successes, challenges and opportunities for working on issues of memory and memorialization in the region, and
- Collectively develop strategies to work together and support each other towards the common goal of using Sites of Conscience methodology as a tool to promote justice, democracy, human rights and truth-seeking in the region.

The following report outlines some of the key themes discussed at the meeting, identifies some of the challenges and successes in implementing memory work in the region, and reflects meeting participants' recommendations for the way forward for the ICSC MENA regional network.

THEMES

Post-Conflict Memorialization and Symbolic Reparations: Recognizing Victims and Rewriting the Past

Memorialization has always been a significant aspect of nation building projects. National memorials seek to portray the triumphs and victories of a nation, highlighting the sacrifices of martyrs that have been made on behalf of the larger citizenry over time. In post-conflict contexts memorialization can serve the function of launching a new or revised era of remembering, providing new narratives of inclusive citizenship and marking a new era of democracy. For societies emerging from long-term repression or conflict, memorials can serve as important catalysts for healing, recognizing the atrocities experienced by survivors, re-integrating survivors into society and setting the historical record straight. The spontaneous memorials at Tahrir Square following the January 2011 revolution and the change of names of public facilities in Tunisia immediately after the ousting of Ben-Ali highlight the role of memorialization in celebration, victory, and mourning.

Despite the positive potential of memorialization in post-conflict environments, it can also be used as a hegemonic mechanism by the state to fulfill political agendas, mitigating unjust political practices and policies. Workshop participants noted that in many countries in the region such as Morocco, Egypt and Lebanon, memory has thus far been used as an instrument of the state to promote repressive regimes, with a single perspective on the past. Participants noted that the role of memory in emerging democracies in the region is significant in promoting multiple perspectives on the past, allowing victims'



Participants at La fabrique culturelle des Abattoirs in Ain Sebaa-Hay Mohammadi, Morocco

experiences to become a part of the national narrative and to provide current and future generations with lessons on the past, thereby promoting cultures that respect justice, peace and human rights.

Participants from Morocco highlighted that the implementation of recommendations from the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation Commission (*Istance équité et réconciliation* – IER) still remains a challenge. The IER recommended individual compensation and community reparations, a key component of which was memorialization through the conversion of former detention centers into sites of memory. Despite progress made by Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme (CCDH) in following up on the recommendations, some participants argued that processes of individual compensation payouts failed to be accompanied by any recognition of the victims' suffering. Compensation was made with no state apology or acknowledgement of the former monarchy's role in perpetrating the atrocities.

Victims' representatives noted that the implementation of community reparations in the form of development projects, while implemented to meet the multiple needs of the broader communities that were marginalized in the past as well as victim's needs, fails to adequately acknowledge victims.

Victims' representatives argued that as it is the role and responsibility of government to invest in



Exterior of Derb Moulay Cherif, former detention center in Casablanca.

development, random development projects framed as reparations do not fulfill the goals that a reparations program aimed at victims alone could achieve. Participants noted that an apology from the state and financial reparations specifically targeted at victims of human rights violations remained some of the outstanding issues for the implementation of the IER's recommendations.

Participants from Egypt noted that memorialization has always been a significant aspect of Egyptian culture with national identity based on active memory-making processes led by the state. However,

the 2011 revolution provided new opportunities for citizen engagement with the past, with ordinary citizens reclaiming public spaces through marches, makeshift memorials and the renaming of public facilities. The uncertainty of Egypt's transition, with some groups supporting the transition while others oppose it, is exemplified through the contestation over public spaces and victims' claims for recognition. Given that the country is still in transition, there are multiple narratives in the public and political domain clamoring for legitimacy. Additionally, the martyrs of the January revolution are still in the process of advocating for reparations. Apart from the opposition to the government's declaration that only those victims that suffered gross human rights violations or families of victims that died before Feb 1 2010 will be eligible for compensation, even those victims that do qualify for compensation have not received the compensation promised by the government.

Participants working in Egypt noted that virtual media and social networking which was widely used to mobilize public action during the January revolution and the Arab Spring, has gained increased usage in Egypt. Diverse sectors of society have begun to use virtual spaces to launch online archives and virtual memorials as new memory tools. With the democratization of memory through the virtual world, the state no longer has sole authority over memory and memory-making processes. As such the virtual world has provided the broader public with opportunities to present multiple truths and narratives of the past and present countering the hegemonic state-driven memory practices.

The increased opportunity for broader public participation in memory-making has brought with it the challenge of a memory-making process of extremes, with some groups attempting to make a clean break with the past by destroying memory sites while others seek to preserve specific sites. Participants noted that there is a need to create public spaces of memory that promote critical engagement with and thinking about the past. Drawing on the experiences of Morocco, participants noted that the numerous detention centers need to be converted into Sites of Conscience, recognizing victims of human rights violations as well as serving as centers that inspire and work towards building a culture of human rights and justice.

Documentation and Archives: Preserving a Future for Never-Again

Authoritarian and repressive regimes are often characterized by silences, denial of atrocities and a rewriting of history that seeks to legitimize their rule. For post-conflict societies attempting to set the historical record straight, archives and documentation serve the important function of exposing the truth about the past. Archives not only provide evidence for the prosecution of perpetrators but also provide information about human rights violations related to disappearances. Further, given the denial, distrust and silences that are often characteristic of post-conflict societies, archives and documentation seek to legitimize victims' experiences of the past, providing opportunities for redress and reintegration. The opening of national archives, for example, often serves as a form of symbolic reparations for victims of gross human rights violations. Finally, archives serve as repositories of memory for lessons of the past, the utility of which may last beyond the transitional phase to contribute to long-term democracy building and human rights processes.

Despite attempts by CCDH in Morocco to preserve the truth commission's archives and make them accessible to the public, participants felt that the archives remained inaccessible to the public and were inadequate in chronicling the history of Morocco, the truth commission, and Morocco's work towards reconciliation.

In Lebanon, the government's lack of will to ensure public access to the national archives or to preserve documentation related to the civil war has resulted in civil society-led memory initiatives. UMAM, based in Beirut, has played a leading role in collecting and developing an archive on the civil war. Through the use of archival material, UMAM uses memory as a tool to engage the public in dialogues and debates about violence, justice and accountability. One of the key challenges for organizations working on issues of memory in Lebanon is that the civil war and the massacres are still by and large taboo subjects. Despite these silences, the public, especially victims of the war and families of the disappeared, continue to participate in memory programs as they offer the rare opportunity for dialogue and coming to terms with the past. Despite the success of civil society-led memory initiatives, participants noted that given the instability in the country, a major challenge is ensuring that memory work and dialogue about violence and the past do not incite new patterns of violence.

Arts and Culture: Engaging Communities, Empowering Youth

Artistic expression in the form of dance, drama, visual art, film, music and poetry is often used as a tool for resistance, protest, and celebration. In societies that experience conflict or repression, the arts have been used during all phases of the conflict and post-conflict as a form of social and political commentary and a catalyst for socio-political transformation.

Located at King Hassan II University in Casablanca, the Ben M'sik Community Museum uses arts, culture and dialogue programs to promote the stories and heritage of the local population. Established in 2006, the museum was created with the goal to improve the relations between the people of



The neighborhood of Ben M'sik. Photo courtesy: Samir El Azhar from the Ben M'Sik Community Museum.

Ben M'sik (one of the poorest neighborhoods in Casablanca), and the university. Through oral history programs, dialogue programs such as 'coffee and conversation,' and skills training such as language workshops, the museum uses the arts to highlight the community's broader contribution to the country, working towards community empowerment and recognition. Similarly, Association Initiative Urbaine, based in Casablanca's Hay Mohammedi, a neighborhood renowned for its culture of political activism and historic struggles for social justice, uses arts and culture to engage local youth in issues most relevant to them and their community. By creating spaces for theatre and musicals well as various education and skills programs, the organization uses the rich history and heritage of the community to inspire and empower young people.

For Al-Jana based in Lebanon, the arts are an important tool for its work with communities, youth and children facing difficult social and political situations. Through the use of theatre, puppetry, film, oral history, visual art and creative writing, Al-Jana works in the area of conflict transformation

to convert experiences of violence and trauma into artistic expression. The organization has successfully undertaken projects such as a documentary film project with women at the Ain il Hilweh camp which resulted in an internationally awarded film "Kingdom of Women," and engaged displaced youth and children from the Naher El Bared refugee camp in creative learning projects focusing on displacement and rebuilding community. An ongoing challenge for Al-Jana is determining how to use community oral history and cultural archives as proactive learning resources that will engage youth in documentation, critical study, and creative expression.

The Arab Education Forum (AEF) based in Jordan uses arts and cultural initiatives as tools for conflict transformation, working with communities in the region that are living under stressful political, economic and social situations. By providing a network for like-minded institutions, AEF emphasizes the central role of arts and culture in inspiring change and promoting unity to work together towards a better future. Hakaya, a member of AEF, uses the power of storytelling for individual development and cultural growth. Through the use of storytelling, Hakaya brings together its own network of cultural activists to use storytelling methodologies and oral traditions for literacy development and the formation of identity and inter-cultural dialogue. Hakaya is currently in the process of organizing a workshop and conference in Egypt looking at some of the linkages between personal and public narratives, posing questions of ownership, authorship and broader public participation in the evolving narrative of Egypt's revolution.

Opportunities, Challenges and Successes



Participants discuss how to address their common goals and challenges.

Common Goals: Participants noted that they all shared the common goal of using memory, arts, and culture to address histories of repression with a view to building a culture of human rights, peace and justice in the region. The recognition of this common vision for the region was the basis for the establishment and launch of the ICSC MENA regional network.

Coordination: Participants noted that a key issue for organizations in the region was the overall lack of coordination. For some participants, the meeting was the first opportunity to connect with other organizations doing similar work in their countries or the region more broadly.

National Narratives vs. Public Narratives: Many participants argued that a key obstacle to the progress of memory work and human rights in the region was that perpetrators of gross human rights violations in many countries continue to operate with impunity. Given the lack of vetting processes in many countries in the region, perpetrators or those biased to previous authoritarian regimes remain in power, often hindering or interfering with memory and human rights work.

Funding: In noting their lack of institutional capacity to fundraise, some participants noted that the ICSC network provided an opportunity for organizations in the region to raise funds together and share limited resources more efficiently. While the Arab Spring has allowed for more fundraising opportunities in the region, some participants noted that donor priorities have shifted from some countries such as Lebanon to other countries such as Egypt which are viewed as having more urgent needs. However, participants agreed that to ensure regional stability as well as ensure that the gains

made by the Arab Spring are fully realized, it was necessary that all work together build a movement that addresses questions of justice, memory and human rights.

Work with organizations in Israel: Participants discussed at length the issue of engaging with organizations based in Israel as well as working with organizations based in the region that are working in Israel. Participants were divided on questions of *normalization* and its social and political implications. However, due to the legal issues that Israeli organizations' participation at regional meetings would raise for members from the Arab states, workshop participants agreed that the network would, for now, include only Arab states. It was agreed that questions of normalization and related questions of membership will be discussed at the next meeting.

CONCLUSIONS

In establishing the ICSC MENA regional network, participants outlined the following as priority activities to support the development of the network:

Communications: To ensure ongoing and regular communication and sharing of ideas amongst members in the region, participants suggested that the MENA network have its own Sites of Conscience web page. It was also noted that ICSC members have access to the ICSC online resource center which provides members with a platform to share events and program models and to discuss issues related to their work.

Exchanges: Participants noted that they would like to learn from, as well as share some of their own projects and ideas, with members from the Latin American, African, and Asian Sites of Conscience networks. Staff exchanges to build skills and capacity as well as programmatic exchanges such as traveling exhibitions were identified as the most useful areas for exchange.

Meetings: Participants agreed that annual thematic meetings were necessary for members to engage with each other as well as together to determine the strategic direction of the network. It was noted that apart from a thematic focus, all meetings should include a skills or capacity building focus.

Way Forward: Given the current threats to human rights and democracy-building and the overall instability of the region, participants noted that the next meeting should be held in six months rather than wait a full year. Participants identified archives and the preservation of memory as the theme for the next workshop. AEF and Hakaya in Jordan and UMAM in Lebanon volunteered to co-host the next regional meeting.

APPENDIX ONE

PARTICIPANT LIST

1. REEM ABUKISHK - HAKAYA (JORDAN)
 2. KRISTEL ABU HABIB - INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE (USA)
 3. OUZZANE ABDELKRIM - C.C.F.D. (MOROCCO)
 4. ABDELJALIL BAKKAR - ASSOCIATION INITIATIVE URBAINE (MOROCCO)
 5. AFEKOUH M'BAREK - C.R.D.H. (MOROCCO)
 6. JUDY BARSALOU - AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO (EGYPT)
 7. DOUNIA BENSLIMANE - CASA MEMOIRE (MOROCCO)
 8. MONIKA BORGMAN - UMAM DOCUMENTATION AND RESEARCH CENTER (LEBANON)
 9. SAMLANCHITCH CHANTHAVONG - NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY (USA)
 10. MOATAZ DAJINI - AL JANA (LEBANON)
 11. SAMIR EL AZHAR - BEN M'SIK COMMUNITY MUSEUM (MOROCCO)
 12. FATNA EL BOUIH - RELAIS LOCALE DU PROGRAMME DE RAPORTEUR COMMAN
 13. MOHAMED EL KHAMLICI - CONSEIL NATIONAL DES DROITS DE L'HOMME (MOROCCO)
 14. SERENE HULEILEH - ARAB EDUCATION FORUM (JORDAN)
 15. ABDERRAHIM KASSOU - CASA MEMOIRE (MOROCCO)
 16. ANNE MASSAGEE - INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE (LEBANON)
 17. ERESHNEE NAIDU – ICSC PROGRAM DIRECTOR (USA)
 18. MOSTAFA SHAAT - CAIRO INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES (EGYPT)
 19. FARIS SHALAN - FRIENDS OF MIDDLE EAST (JORDAN)
 20. NORA SOLIMAN - AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO (EGYPT)
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