**STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH
IN THE MIDDLE EAST / ARAB REGION**

**EXPLORING THE FEASIBILITY OF AN ARAB SOCIAL SCIENCE
RESEARCH COUNCIL**

A Regional Experts' Workshop

**The Dubai School of Government, Dubai
November 26-27, 2006**

Summary Report

by Necla Tschirgi

I. Introduction and Background

The regional experts' meeting held at the Dubai School of Government on 26-27
November 2006 was the culmination of an informal process of consultation and
collaboration among a number of institutions and individuals with a special interest in
strengthening social science research in the Middle East region in general and the Arab
countries more specifically. The initiative started in late 2005/early 2006 through an
informal partnership involving the Regional Bureau for Arab States at the United Nations
Development Programme, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of
Canada, the Middle East Program of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in
New York and the Regional Office of the Population Council in Cairo.

One of the principal driving forces of the initiative was the UNDP's Arab Human
Development Reports (AHDR) Series which identified knowledge as one of three
cardinal deficits impeding the advancement of human development in the Arab region.
The second AHDR focused exclusively on building a knowledge society, providing in-
depth analyses, as well as key recommendations for action. To that end, UNDP's
Regional Bureau for Arab States has launched its own Knowledge Programme,
spearheading regional efforts to bridge this gap. As part of this programme, the
"Knowledge Acquisition, Generation and Utilization in the Arab Region" (KAGUAR)
project supports a number of feasibility studies for the establishment and possible
operationalisation of a series of mechanisms conducive to the transition toward
knowledge-based societies in the Arab region. To that end, UNDP will conduct
partnership meetings to assess and garner stakeholder support for the progression toward
several initiatives, including a mechanism to strengthen social science in the region

through the possible creation of a Center for Economic and Social Policies in the Arab Countries (CESPAC).[1]

Meanwhile, building on its extensive support for research in the MENA region, IDRC supported a research project by Necla Tschirgi to examine the feasibility of promoting closer collaboration between the social science communities in the Arab countries, Iran and Turkey to address issues of common interest from a regionally-based and regionally-informed perspective. Concurrently, the regional office of the Population Council in Cairo and the Middle East Program of SSRC in New York initiated discussions about strengthening research networks in the Middle East region. Given the overlap among these projects, the four institutions jointly convened a workshop in Beirut on 11-12 April 2006 to engage a larger group of researchers based in the Middle East region. Involving over 20 researchers from various universities and research institutions in the Arab region, the workshop reviewed the state of the social sciences in the Middle East. The participants at the Beirut meeting endorsed the need for further research on the topic and recommended a follow-up meeting to discuss the outcome of the IDRC-funded feasibility study.[2]

The diagnostic study was conducted by Necla Tschirgi in collaboration with Dr. Kian Tajbakhsh in Tehran and Dr. Manal Jamal in New York. The researchers respectively reviewed the state of REGIONAL social sciences in Turkey, Iran and the Arab world. Stretching over six months from April through October, the IDRC-funded research project involved extensive secondary research as well as two field visits to the Middle East by Necla Tschirgi in April and August 2006 to consult with a wide range of researchers and research institutes in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey.

Key observations of the mapping of existing Arab social science research centers were: (1) Arab universities are marginalized; (2) External funding has played a fundamental role in shifting research capacity from universities to NGOs and private sector, which has in turn impacted the autonomy of the research agenda; (3) There is a lack of coordination between local and foreign funded organizations. (4) The shortage is not in institutions, but in the caliber of such institutions.

The research report which was submitted to IDRC in October 2006 did not endorse the presumed need for a new regional social science initiative that would bring Arab, Iranian and Turkish scholars under a common umbrella. Instead, arguing that the current climate is not particularly conducive to promoting deeper interaction and joint work among the three social science communities in the Middle East, the report proposed the creation of a new institution tentatively called the Arab Social Science Research Council (ASSRC) and offered a plan of action that would help move that proposal forward.[3]In light of the results of the IDRC-funded diagnostic study, the four original partners were joined by the Dubai School of Government and the regional office of the Ford Foundation in Cairo in holding a second regional meeting in Dubai on 26-27 November. The Dubai meeting was

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[1] The project document for KAGUAR and the proposal for CESPAC are available from UNDP/RBAS.
[2] The minutes as well as the summary report from the Beirut meeting are available separately.
[3] The IDRC feasibility study is available separately.

designed to discuss the merits of the proposal to establish an Arab Social Science Research Council and to examine the modalities for implementing the proposal. The meeting was attended by representatives from the six partner institutions and over 30 social science experts and practitioners representing leading regional social science institutions and universities. Although the focus of the debates primarily targeted the social science deficit in the Arab world, selected participants from Turkey and Iran were also invited to attend in order to optimize on broader regional experiences and lessons learnt.

Based on the original IDRC-funded study, a condensed discussion paper summarizing the main findings of the IDRC feasibility study was presented by Necla Tschirgi for the Dubai meeting. [4] It was accompanied by a paper by Manal Jamal on the state of the social sciences in the Arab World as well as a map of institutions engaged in regional social science research in the Arab countries.[5] The Dubai meeting agenda, list of participants and detailed minutes of the workshop are available separately. This summary report presents the main highlights and key conclusions from the meeting.

II. Highlights of the Meeting

Although most of the participants at the Dubai meeting were newcomers to the project and had not been part of the earlier deliberations in Beirut, based on the extensive background materials they readily endorsed the need to urgently address the weaknesses of social science research in the Arab world, which was ascribed to a lack of institutional mechanisms to strengthen existing Arab research institutes. While noting that the background papers needed further work to deepen the analysis of the state of the art, they endorsed the overall diagnosis presented in these papers. In specific, they confirmed the following weaknesses as confronting Arab social sciences: a) persistent data deficits; b) the fragmented nature of social science research and its absence from playing an important role in the public sphere; c) the absence of an effective research infrastructure; d) lack of outlets for, and access to, research outputs; e) the short-termism and transience of research agendas; f) lack of institutional mechanisms to ensure quality control and to assemble scattered research.

The participants usefully elaborated on many of the issues identified in the workshop papers from their own disciplinary and institutional perspectives and provided additional insights on the state of the social sciences in the Arab region. Unlike the Beirut meeting where there were different perspectives on the definition, scope and boundaries of the problem, the participants at the Dubai meeting rapidly reached a consensus about the need to strengthen social science research in the Arab region through the creation of a new mechanism. However while the creation of a new mechanism was deemed necessary, it came with a clear qualification, namely that the Center not duplicate or

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[4] See *"Strengthening Social Science Research in the Middle East/Arab Region: Exploring the Feasibility of an Arab Social Science Research Council"* by Necla Tschirgi

[5] See *"Background Paper: Regional Social Science Research in the Arab World"* and *"Mapping of Institutions and Networks Engaged in Social Science Research in the Arab Region"* by Manal Jamal.

compete with existing efforts but rather seek to strengthen and reinforce existing research institutions. Since the group's decisions are covered in the next section, the following points selectively cover the key issues that were raised but not fully resolved at the meeting.

a) *Definition of the Social Sciences:* The background papers intentionally refrained from providing a list of disciplines falling under the social sciences. Instead, they loosely referred to the social sciences as "academically grounded fields of study and research incorporating the humanities, the social and behavioral sciences and other related disciplines." Participants felt that it was important to identify the core disciplines that would fall under the proposed ASSRC in order to better define the initiative's key constituencies and target audiences. This task was left to a subsequent stage.

b) *Nature of Social Science Research:* As in the case of the Beirut meeting, there were differences of opinion about the type of research that merited priority attention. The main controversy was as to whether the Center will limit itself to policy-oriented research alone, or whether social science research ought to be self-reflexive instead. It was recognized that different types of research (e.g. basic vs. applied research; academic vs. policy research; theoretical vs. empirical research) confronted different problems. The discussion focused mainly on academic or basic research although the distinction between university-based research and other social science research was not always clear. While some participants argued that policy-relevant, development-oriented research deserved priority, others felt that critical, theoretical, self-reflexive research needed greater attention. It was, however, recognized that these are not mutually exclusive and could be promoted simultaneously.

c) *Need for further research:* Recognizing that the background papers were an initial attempt to map out the field and were primarily based on secondary research, it was strongly urged that they be updated through further field research involving direct communication with those Arab social science centers. In specific, it was felt that the lack of a qualitative evaluation of research outputs and the omission of numerous institutions and countries from the institutional map needed to be redressed. The former would require the development of an appropriate methodology to allow a comparative assessment while the latter could be undertaken relatively quickly through country-based field research and questionnaires as well as a survey of regional institutions.

d) *Key tasks that require attention*: The main discussion paper identified a large menu of possible tasks for the proposed ASSRC. Participants felt that these needed to be reduced to a smaller set of priorities, including a) networking between, reinforcing and strengthening already existing Arab social science research centers; b) building capacities and training social science researchers; d) addressing the data deficits through the establishment of a space/institutional mechanism which will act as a repository for social science research, rendering it more readily accessible to the public; e) establishing clear regional benchmarks and quality control mechanisms; f) convening and taking the lead on certain thematic topics of research as necessary.

f) *Potential pitfalls and dilemmas:* The participants recognized the pitfalls of undertaking any new undertaking to redress the shortcoming of the social sciences in the Arab region in light of previous failed efforts. They pointed to several perennial challenges such as institutional sustainability, financial stability, effective governance, and credible leadership. There was no agreement on how best to avoid these pitfalls. Some participants argued in favor of a strong and well-funded mechanism from the start while others suggested a minimalist, incremental approach.

g) *Learning from other models:* To avoid the fate of similar failed initiatives in the Middle East and other regions, participants urged a closer evaluation of lessons learned from other experiments and models. In this context, it was noted that models like ESCWA and CODESRIA belonged to a different era and were consolidated over a considerable period of time.

h) *A phased approach:* Acknowledging both the need and the challenges of the proposed ASSRC, the participants favored a phased and systematic approach to its creation.

i) *Resisting Insularity:* While the diagnostic study's recommendation to focus on the Arab region was accepted, the group was decidedly in favor of an outward-looking, internationally-oriented approach. Consequently, participants strongly favored that the Center be multi-lingual, while strongly discouraging an insular, Arab-centric initiative that would serve to isolate Arab scholars from their counterparts globally.

j) *The role of ICTs:* Although there was a special session on applying information and communication technologies to address the chronic problems of information management and dissemination in the Arab region, it was clear to all that the Center's objectives had to be clearly defined first, for ICT to then act as an enable rather than a driver to enhance and facilitate the achievement of those objectives. They did, however, acknowledge the merits and utility of the assr.org website as a natural platform and urged support for it.

III. Key Decisions

a) *Establishing a Steering Committee:* The major outcome of the Dubai meeting was the decision to establish a Steering Committee to oversee the next phases of the creation of an Arab Social Science Research Council. With the participants at the Dubai meeting constituting themselves as the founding members, the Steering Committee was set to consist of the six institutions that supported the Dubai meeting (UNDP/RBAS, IDRC, the Ford Foundation, the Population Council, the Social Science Research Council and the Dubai School of Government) as well as an additional seven new members (5 elected at the meeting and at least 2 more to be invited from the broader community.)

Participants agreed that the Steering Committee will serve in an interim capacity for a maximum period of two years, but will report on its progress to the broader group of stakeholders in no more than one year. The Committee will:

1. Oversee the preparation of a report summarizing the consensus reached in the Dubai meeting;
2. Draft a funding proposal to be presented to donors;
3. Prepare a charter for ASSRC;
4. Recruit working groups, experts consultants and other staff to elaborate the organizational and institutional structure of ASSRC;
5. Oversee a broad public dissemination and consultation process around the creation of ASSRC, possibly through a website.

Following voting by secret ballot, the following were selected to the Steering Committee:
- Aziz El-Azmeh (Central European University, Budapest)
- Ahmad Galal (Economic Research Forum, Cairo)
- Eileen Khuttab (Birzeit University, Ramallah)
- Karim Makdissi (American University of Beirut, Beirut)
- Hoda Rashad (American University of Cairo, Cairo)

Original Partners (with the donors serving in an ex-officio capacity)
- Ragui Assaad (Population Council, Cairo)
- Dina El-Khawaga (Ford Foundation, Cairo)
- Azza Karam (UNDP, New York)
- Tarik Yousef (Dubai School of Government, Dubai)
- Seteney Shami (Social Science Research Council)
- Tim Dottridge or another IDRC representative

b) *The Venue:* The participants discussed possible institutions to host the Steering Committee including one of the regional offices of the UNDP, the Economic Research Forum or the Dubai School of Government. Each was considered to have certain weaknesses and no decision could be made. Since this arrangement would be temporary, it was decided that the Steering Committee should choose its own host institution based on pragmatic considerations.

c) *Funding:* It was envisaged that the original donors (IDRC, UNDP and the Ford Foundation) will continue to support the two-year planning phase for the creation of the proposed ASSRC under the direction of the Steering Committee.

d) *Basic Principles for the proposed ASSRC:* While they were not formally enumerated, the basic principles that were advanced repeatedly for the proposed Arab Social Science Research Council deserve to be underscored—albeit in no particular order of priority:

- The Council should not be inward-looking but regional/international in orientation; it should aim at strengthening links between Arab scholars and their regional and international counterparts;
- Accordingly, the Council should be multi-lingual from the start;
- It should build upon and strengthen existing institutions through its value-added programs and activities;

- It should promote excellence and quality in research while supporting capacity building;
- It should serve both individuals and institutions;
- It should promote critical thinking and knowledge to serve the public interest;
- It should be an autonomous NGO—free from governmental interference;
- It should specifically target and engage the next generation of researchers as well as women and diaspora scholars;
- It should strive for widespread membership through an inclusive, participatory process;
- It should aim at long-term sustainability, possibly through an endowment;
- It should have a strong outreach and networking function;
- It should play a convening role, taking the lead in organizing conferences, meetings and other activities to promote linkages between different research communities, facilitate joint research and encourage wider dissemination of research findings.

VI. Post Plenary Follow-Up

The Steering Committee had its first meeting immediately upon the adjournment of the meeting on 27 November and took the following steps:

- Aziz el Azmeh was elected as Chair;
- The Dubai School of Government was selected as the interim "home" for the Steering Committee; Tarik Yousef offered to provide space as well as staff to support the work of the Steering Committee;
- It was agreed that the Committee would need two staff members: a full-time associate and a part-time assistant. The Steering Committee asked Necla Tschirgi to remain as a part-time senior consultant to the project, while Nesrine Halima a research associate at the Dubai School of Government, was identified as part-time junior researcher;
- Recognizing the need to move forward with the project rapidly, the Committee decided to have its first formal meeting in Cairo on or around 19 February 2007;
- The agenda for the Cairo meeting would be developed through electronic consultations;
- Necla Tschirgi agreed to prepare a summary report of the meeting and to work with the Chair in drafting a quick proposal for interim funding—followed by a proposal for longer term funding—ideally for presentation at the forthcoming donors' meeting to be hosted by UNDP in the summer/fall of 2007;
- The Committee agreed to develop its internal modus operandi while keeping its constituency fully abreast of its work and decisions;
- In this context, the existing assr.org website would be used as the main platform for outreach and communication; all relevant documents and information will be made available on assr.org;
- Finally, it was decided that the Steering Committee would publicize the initiative in order to expand its reach and scope through all available means.