The Arab Council for the Social Sciences:
a new regional institution for the enhancement of the
arab public sphere

Introduction and Overview
Seteney Shami
Coordinator, Steering Committee

I. Introduction

Today's meeting is a product of a major two-year collaborative initiative to create a new institution, The Arab Council for the Social Sciences, dedicated to strengthening the social sciences in the Arab region.

The initiative is led by a Steering Committee of Arab scholars

Ragui Assaad (University of Minnesota)

Soukaina Bouraoui (Center of Arab Women for Training and Research - CAWTAR)

Ahmed Galal (Economic Research Forum)

Bassma Kodmani (Arab Reform Initiative)

Eileen Kuttab (Birzeit University)

Karim Makdisi (American University of Beirut)

Hoda Rashad, SRC (American University in Cairo)

Seteney Shami (Social Science Research Council)

Tarik Yousef (Dubai School of Government)

The planning phase was funded by the Ford Foundation and the International Development Research Centre of Canada.

The Mohamed Bin Rashid al Maktoum Foundation joined the project as an observer in 2008 and provided guidance as a prospective donor.

Aims of the meeting

- To formally launch the Arab Council for the Social Sciences
- To ratify the charter and mission statement
- To elect the first Board of Trustees, which will constitute the "Founding Committee" of the ACSS
- To have an initial discussion of the intellectual agenda and research priorities of the ACSS

II. Rationale

- Arab states and societies are facing unprecedented socio-economic, environmental, political and security challenges.

- A strong and vibrant research community is needed
    - to shed light on the mounting challenges and societal responses
    - to initiate and nurture public debates
    - to inform public policy

- Over the last decades, only a limited number of research organizations, or even programs, have been established on the national and regional levels to address the needs of the social sciences in the region.

- Due to resource limitations, financial un-sustainability and narrow mandates, these efforts remain sporadic and/or limited to specific aspects of capacity building.

III. A Short History: From Concept to Reality

From April 2006 – December 2008, the initiative undertook extensive preparatory work examining the feasibility and sustainability of the proposed Council. Several working meetings were held.

Beirut Meeting (April 11-12, 2006)

- Conveners:
  - The Regional Bureau of Arab States at UNDP
  - The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada
  - The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York
  - The Regional Office of the Population Council in Cairo
- About 20 researchers from the region met to review the state of social science institutions and capacities in the Middle East.

Recommendation: A follow-up meeting is needed based on further research to explore options for redressing this serious gap.

IDRC supported additional research on the topic during the latter part of 2006.

Dubai Meeting (November 26-27, 2006)

- Conveners:

  - The Regional Bureau of Arab States at UNDP
  - The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada
  - The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in New York
  - The Regional Office of the Population Council in Cairo.
  - The Dubai School of Government
  - Regional office of the Ford Foundation in Cairo

- Around 30 participants from the region reviewed several studies, which described the shortcomings of the social sciences in the Arab region and underscored the need for a regional institution to support individual social scientists as well as social science institutions.

Recommendation: The participants unanimously endorsed the proposal to establish a new institute provisionally titled the *Arab Social Science Research Council*.

– This name was subsequently changed to the *Arab Council for the Social Sciences* at the Cairo meeting

Constituting themselves as the "founding members" of the proposed institution, the participants at the Dubai meeting elected a Steering Committee:
– to oversee plans to establish the proposed Council
– to report back to the founding members within two years

- Steering Committee:

  - Aziz al-Azmeh (CEU – Budapest)
  - Ahmed Galal (ERF)
  - Eileen Kuttab (Birzeit University)
  - Karim Makdisi (AUB)
  - Hoda Rashad, SRC (AUC)

- + conveners:
  - Ragui Assaad (Population Council)
  - Seteney Shami (SSRC)
  - Tarik Yousef (DSG)

- + two additional members were invited to join:
  - Soukaina Bouraoui (CAWTAR)
  - Bassma Kodmani (ARI)

Cairo Meeting (February 19, 2007)

The Steering Committee met to discuss the objectives, functions and nature of the proposed entity and created three Task Forces to investigate the legal, organizational and financial requirements for creating an Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Following the Cairo meeting, a funding proposal was drafted and submitted to IDRC and the Ford Foundation and funding was secured by the fall of 2007.

The Dubai School of Government took on the responsibility to serve as the administrator of the grant for the new planning project.

Aziz al-Azmeh withdrew from the Steering Committee and Seteney Shami was asked to serve as coordinator.

Several studies were commissioned to generate various options for the Steering Committee's consideration and a website was designed and populated.

Amman Meeting (March 1-2, 2008)

The Steering Committee met to examine two main studies and to review the project's financial requirements

- A legal study prepared by Mr. Abdullah Khalil on legal conditions governing autonomous organizations in Arab Countries.

- An institutional study prepared by Ms. Moushira Elgeziri comparing different possibile governance structures and programmatic modalities.

Provisional decisions were made concerning governance, structure, functions – but were not finalized pending further studies.

A consultation meeting was also held with a group of social scientists at Jordanian research institutions and universities.

Tunis Meeting (July 8-9, 2008)

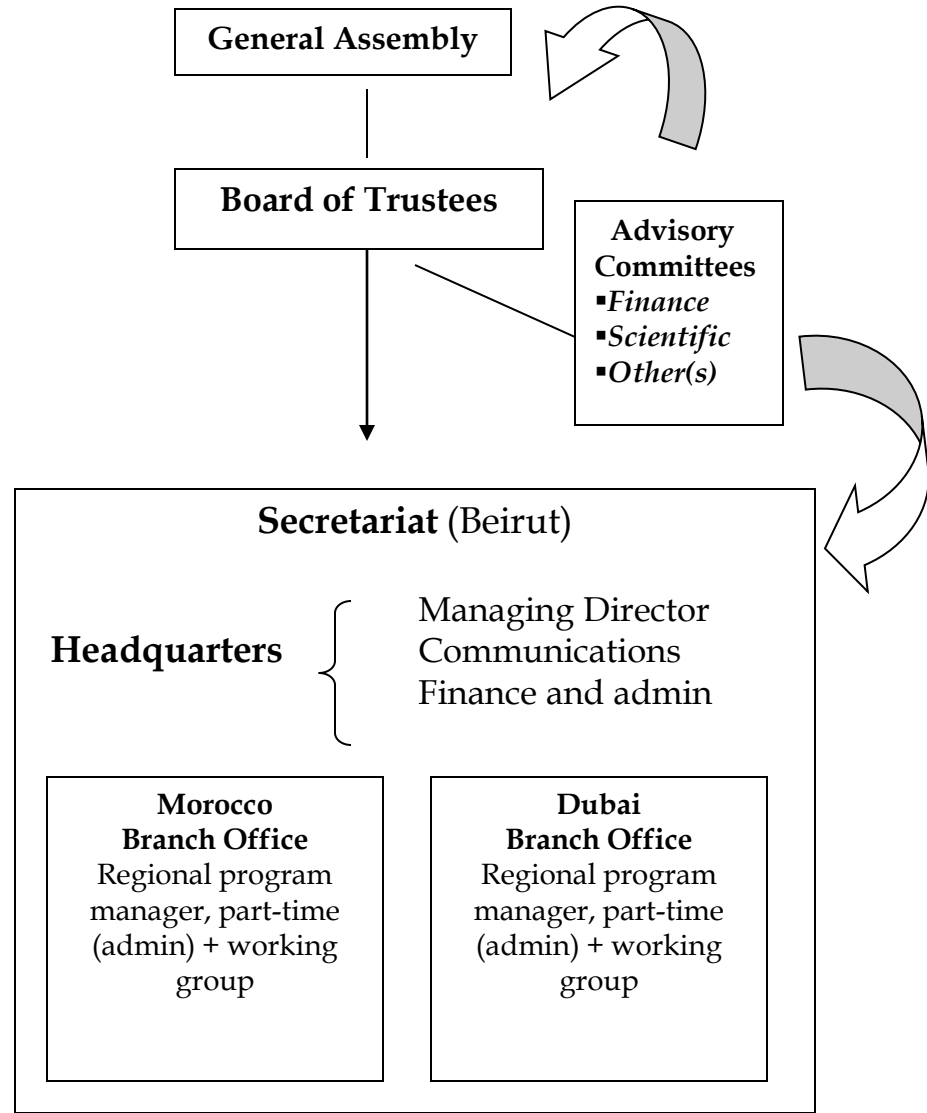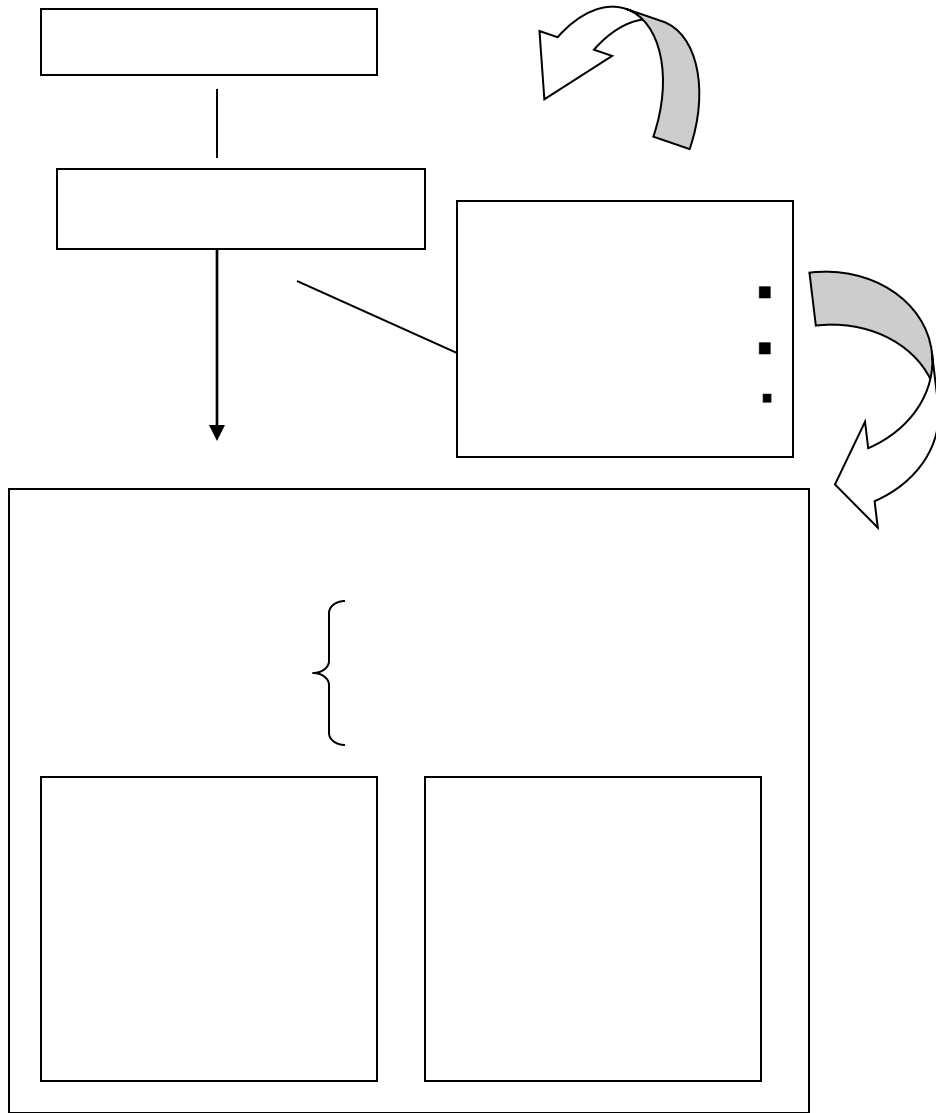The Steering Committee reviewed a range of studies:

Country Legal Study on Jordan
Country Legal Study on Morocco
Draft Charter

Decisions were reached on the new institution's mission, objectives, charter, membership, structure, work program, main activities, venue, and budget.

- The Committee decided to proceed with plans for a General Assembly to be held in Cairo on 17-18 December 2008 in order to establish the Council.

- Following the Cairo meeting, the Steering Committee would turn over the direction of the new institution to a duly-elected Board.

- A consultation meeting was also held with a group of social scientists from North African research institutions and universities (including Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria and Libya).

IV. Governance

- The Council will be an autonomous, non-profit, regional organization.
- It will be headquartered in Beirut, Lebanon and will have branch offices in Dubai, UAE and Morocco.
- It will be composed of individual and institutional members
- It will consist of a General Assembly, an elected/co-opted Board of Trustees and a Secretariat.
- Representatives of the donors will be ex-officio members of the Board of Trustees.
- The Secretariat will be headed by a Managing Director, and will include two regional program managers and other staff.
- The Council will be a democratic institution accountable to its members.

General Assembly

Board of Trustees

Advisory
Committees
▪*Finance*
▪*Scientific*
▪*Other(s)*

Secretariat (Beirut)

Headquarters   {   Managing Director
Communications
Finance and admin

**Morocco
Branch Office**
Regional program
manager, part-time
(admin) + working
group

**Dubai
Branch Office**
Regional program
manager, part-time
(admin) + working
group

V. Foundational Principles

Quality:

– The ACSS will work towards promoting excellence in social science research in both disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields

– Capacity building will be a part of every aspect of the work of the ACSS

– The ACSS will employ mechanisms such as peer review to ensure quality of publications

– Quality of teaching and training will also be central to the concerns of the ACSS

- **Inclusivity:**
  - The ACSS will employ a broad definition of the social sciences including the following:
    - the core social sciences such as anthropology, demography, economics, political science, psychology sociology
    - as well as allied disciplines such as art, architecture, geography, history, law, literature, philosophy and public health
    - as well as interdisciplinary fields such as gender studies, cultural studies, urban studies and so on.

- The ACSS will work to strengthen links between Arab scholars within the region and the diaspora
- The ACSS will especially work on targeting and engaging the next generation of researchers
- In many of its activities, the ACSS will work in partnership with other social science entities such as disciplinary associations, universities, NGOs and GOs
- The ACSS will working regionally but also cross-regionally (south-south) and globally
- The work of the ACSS will be multi-lingual. Arabic, English and French will be the main working languages and other languages will be used as appropriate to particular projects.

Flexibility:

The ACSS is neither a think tank, nor an in-house research organization nor an association

It is a hybrid institution that brings together features of all of these types of organizations.

It will be responsive and accountable to its membership and General Assembly but committees, research networks and working groups will also be formed by decisions of the Board of Trustees, the advisory committees and the secretariat

The ACSS will have a small secretariat and administrative staff. It will be network based and work through committees and partnerships thus mobilizing the talent and efforts of large numbers of social scientists.

Through the multiplicity of its modalities and consultative processes, the ACSS will be able to respond quickly to new ideas, changing needs and research priorities.

- **Independence:**
- **The ACSS will be an autonomous NGO—free from governmental interference, or from funding that imposes restrictions on the freedom of expression**
- **The ACSS will develop mechanisms for supporting scholars at risk and for promoting academic freedom and the right to freely undertake research, writing and dissemination in the social sciences**

VI. Programs

When fully established, ACSS will undertake six areas of programming:

- Research and knowledge generation
- Publications and research dissemination
- Training, capacity building and the professionalization of the social sciences
- Strengthening the environment and infra-structure for the social sciences
- Convening, networking and outreach
- Advocacy and policy dialogues

Signature Activities: During its first two years, the Council will launch a set of signature activities:

- Research Working Groups
- A website and electronic information platform
- A bi-annual publication on the state of the art in the social sciences
- A small research grants program
- A bi-annual conference

VII. Budget and Fundraising

The global budget for four years from January 2009 through December 2012 is estimated at $8.9 million. Given the magnitude of the planned work, the project will require funding from multiple donors.

As mentioned, the work of the Steering Committee has been funded by the Ford Foundation and IDRC.

A full proposal soliciting funding for the coming four years is completed, and upon the successful launch of the ACSS at this meeting, it will be submitted to IDRC and The Mohamed Bin Rashid al-Maktoum Foundation, who have both expressed favorable and supportive attitudes towards the initiative and the draft proposal.

Next Steps

- Following the anticipated ratification of the Charter and the election of the Board of Trustees at this General Assembly, the Council will formally be established.

- However, it will become operational only after the securing of funding, legal registration and the recruitment of staff and the creation of the Secretariat.

Phase I (January 2009 through December 2010):

- **The Secretariat will be housed in a partner institution, which will provide the Council with a temporary home and the infrastructure to start its operations. An agreement has been reached with the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) which is based in Beirut and will provide space, facilities, financial services and specialized staff.**

- **Work is still underway to determine the most suitable host institutions for the branch offices in Morocco and the UAE.**

- **The Board will have at least four meetings in this first phase.**

- **The Board will immediately work to recruit a full-time, professional Managing Director who will lead and oversee the consolidation of the Council.**

The Managing Director will:

recruit staff, including a professional administrative/financial director and an administrative assistant

establish the Council's temporary headquarters offices, followed by two regional offices in Dubai and Morocco

oversee the creation of administrative/financial policies and procedures

implement the foundational programs and "signature activities" with the help of consultants and partner institutions

commission additional research to establish programmatic and thematic priorities

build constituencies and engage in outreach for the Council

establish strategic partnerships with key institutions in the region

Phase II: (January 2011 December 2012):

- The Council will deepen and expand its work under the leadership of the Managing Director and regional program managers.

- This phase will witness the establishment of the Council's independent premises as well as the diversification of the sources of funding