

Press Release

Civil society urges collective response to combat civic space violations in the Middle-East and North Africa

(Beirut, 28 August 2017)



A group of human rights activists and civil society organisations have issued a public call urging greater solidarity and strategic coordination to address the unabated assault on fundamental freedoms, including the fundamental right to freedom of expression and opinion, in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). During a meeting organised by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) on 21 and 22 August 2017 in Beirut, Lebanon, over 35 leading national, regional and international civil society organisations and human rights defenders committed to collectively identifying opportunities to proactively address chronic restrictions on civil society in the MENA region, and to developing a common plan of action to advance civic space across the region. The meeting also attended by the OHCHR Regional Office for ME in Beirut.

“To combat the systematic and widespread intolerance of any form of dissent in many countries in the MENA, a broad range of civil society must place a premium on working together,” said **Khalid Ibrahim**, Director of the GCHR. “The meeting convened this week represents an important first step to ensure that civil society can further harmonise its efforts to reclaim internationally enshrined rights to protest, organise, and criticise governments in the MENA region.”

The MENA region remains one of the most challenging regions in the world to advocate for the protection and promotion of human rights, and human rights defenders, activists and journalists are seriously at risk, as well documented by the organisations listed below. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, for which GCHR is a research partner, all countries fall into the three worst categories of civic space rating: six states in MENA are closed, six are repressed and six are obstructed. Worryingly, there are no countries in the MENA region with open or narrowed civic space. Governments in the MENA region have in the past few years seriously escalated their restrictions on civic space ranging from punishing citizens who express voices of dissent in Facebook posts and tweets with prison time; violently dispersing or even handing out death sentences to people who participate in protests; and extensively restricting foreign funding to civil society organisations even charging civil society leaders with crimes that could amount to life in prison for receiving foreign funding.

There is a lack of international response and lack of accountability towards the culprits who contribute to the clampdown on civic space, including during times of war. This issue is not solely restricted to the MENA region but rather is a global phenomenon where regression in civic space is rampant across the world.

In light of these restrictions, we the undersigned organisations, which met at the meeting “Responding to Closure of Civic Space in the Gulf and MENA” in Beirut in August 2017:

- 1) Urge all countries to create an enabling environment for human rights defenders and civil society organizations;
- 2) Call on the various International mechanisms including the UN system need to take effective actions to address the closure of civic space in MENA region;
- 3) Commit to developing concerted approaches to address restrictions on civil society groups at the national level and across the region.

Signed:

Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI)

Article 19

Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR)

Bahrain Nursing Society (BNS)

CIVICUS

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)

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Maharat Foundation

Media Association for Peace: MAP