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Volunteering in the Arab World: Bringing Back People into Politics?

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This article analyzes the concept of volunteering in the Arab world. The main argument is that the nature of the Arab world in addition to the historical development of civil society directly affected the philosophy of volunteering in the region. Since civic services were not framed nor included in the national agendas of the state, this had a direct negative effect on the development of the act. However, due to social, economic, and political factors, this trend is changing: As of 2000, organizations and societies started to understand the importance of volunteering and its link to the social and economic revival of societies; Arab states started to encourage the act by providing the right legal and political environment. However, these different policies are not building democratic societies nor encouraging civic engagement. The article concludes with recommendations for how to bring people back into civic and political society as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Arab World, Civic Engagement, Civic Service, Civil Society, Culture, Democracy, National Policies, Philanthropy, Religion, Volunteering

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is an important aspect for the development of any society; it mirrors the democratic nature of the state. The main goal of civic participation is to build a relationship between civil society and different institutions with the main aim of increasing “the voice of citizens in public life.”¹ In the recent decade, the Arab world witnessed an increase in the number of international donations and programs to support and encourage civic engagement in the region.² The main argument for such programs was that encouraging citizens and youth to be more engaged would lead to social development and political reformation in their region. Increased civic engagement will help fight

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corruption and strengthen weak governments; decrease violence and extremism; increase the percentage of employment; and, more importantly, create strong social and civic values.³ Furthermore, we are increasingly witnessing the development and existence of political, social, and cultural environment in the region that have led to the development of civil society, and in return affected civic engagement.

Although there is a vast literature about political participation in the Arab world, few have focused on the role civic engagement and youth involvement in the Middle East and Arab countries and their effect.^{4,5} Most of the existing literature argues that the concept of volunteering never fully developed in this region.⁶

In light of the above, this article raises three major questions: What is the relationship between the development of civil society and the act of volunteering in the region? What are the major factors that are affecting volunteerism and civic engagement in the Arab world? Is civic engagement really leading to building a civic society in the region?

The major assumption in this article is that civic engagement is not training volunteers to build their societies in the Arab world. In order to transform this civic engagement into a positive energy, states and international development agencies should work closely with civil society to build and forge a trust between the three different players.

To better understand the philosophy of volunteering in the Arab world and to answer the above questions, we should base our search on theoretical foundations. Hence, in terms of organization, this article is divided into five different parts: part one reviews the literature and theories of volunteerism; part two reviews the historical development of civil society in the Arab world; part three studies the different national policies that are encouraging the idea of volunteering in the region; part four analyzes civic engagement in the Arab world; and, finally, part five concludes with recommendations and suggestions for future research.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

Volunteering is an emerging societal norm and behavior worldwide.⁷ In the early 1980s, the idea of volunteering was not embedded in the culture and policies of the states, but with the beginning of the twentieth century, things began to change: international, regional, and nongovernmental organizations started to encourage the development and spread of the concept, and in turn states started embedding it in their national policies.⁸

Although the literature about volunteerism is rich and diverse, it is clustered around three major themes: (1) theorizing and understanding volunteering based on historical, cultural, and political dimensions, taking into

consideration different paradigms and disciplines; (2) motivations to volunteer answering the questions who (determinants of volunteering) and why (motivations and benefits); (3) the nature of volunteering: the major aim of these theories is to conceptualize the complex nature of volunteering and study how it evolves over time and how it interacts with its environment, mainly answering the question “How do people volunteer?”

In an attempt to understand the nature of volunteerism in the Arab world, the study will focus mainly on the first cluster of theories working toward understanding the philosophy of volunteering in the society through looking at it from different perspectives and paradigms.

Theorizing Volunteerism

In 2010, Hustinx et al. argued that to understand volunteering one should look at three different elements.⁹

1. *The definition of volunteering*: historically, the understanding of “volunteering” changed based on the political, cultural, and economical development of the states.^{10,11} In other words, the development of the culture of volunteering differs from one state to another and is based on three internal structural factors. (a) The first being the *level of socio-economic development*: there is a direct positive link between the increasing level of industrialization within a country and the increasing level of volunteerism; the rate of volunteering increases in the state when societies move from an agrarian economy with traditional values toward an industrial economy with secular–rational values¹²; (b) the second factor is related to the structural *values of the society*: the level of volunteering is affected by the political system of the state, its experience with democracy, its ideology, its level of economic development, the income equality between citizens, and the age of ethnic structure of the society.^{13,14} The types of regime and state ideologies directly affect the understanding of volunteerism in the society; in liberal states, volunteering is embedded in the culture and has a very important political and economic role.¹⁵ In corporatist regimes, volunteering is instrumental for the state that tends to work toward preserving it. When it comes to social democratic states, where the state is the main service provider, volunteering is related mainly to community building. While the trend in the statist societies was for ignoring the importance of volunteering, these regimes are now becoming more supportive of the idea.¹⁶ (c) The third factor is related to the *cultural values of the society*, which focus on individualism determining the level of religiosity and trust within a country.¹⁷

Thus it is normal to witness the development of different definitions of volunteerism in each state due to the above factors. To illustrate the above, we will look at how different countries view volunteerism. Although in the

United Kingdom volunteering is defined as unpaid work,¹⁸ in Sweden it is viewed as an idealistic effort, and in Germany to volunteer means to be a board member; On the other hand, countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States, and some Asian countries focus on volunteering by and for older people, and this is related mainly to the increasing aging population.¹⁹ In Mexico and Armenia, volunteerism is viewed mainly as youth service that is encouraged by government and is directly related to the demographic factors of these countries²⁰; when it comes to the former communist Eastern European countries, volunteerism is viewed as a means for encouraging civic engagement.²¹ Hustinx et al., in their attempt to find a common ground for understanding the act of volunteering, discovered four major elements that are present in every definition of volunteering: (1) free will; (2) availability and nature of remuneration; (3) the proximity to the beneficiaries; and (4) formal agency.²²

2. *Disciplines and paradigms*: different disciplines tend to define or view volunteerism based on their own paradigm and assign to it different functions. In this regard, the economics perspective argues that although there is an absence of a rational explanation behind the act of volunteering, there exist microeconomic theories that explain such an act: the benefits received from volunteering such as training and human capital skills as well as the “warm glow” volunteers would get gives them an incentive for doing it. The sociologist perspective is more interested in studying “who volunteers” and “why do they volunteer” as well as their social profile.²³ Volunteerism, in this perspective, is viewed as mirroring core human values, mainly altruism, compassion, generosity, and social responsibility²⁴; it is the basis of group identity and social integration, social cohesion, and social welfare.²⁵ The psychological perspective is more focused on identification of personality characteristics that label the volunteers as opposed to non-volunteers; they are more focused on individual traits of the volunteers.²⁶ From a political scientist’s perspective, volunteerism is considered a prerequisite and the basis for the development of a successful civil society and the promotion of democracy. Through leading and creating their own organizations, volunteers will get the proper training to raise their voices, ask for their rights, and develop their communities. They will help volunteers develop their leadership and organizational skills and train them to become agents of development in the political community. This paradigm argues that civic organizations rely on volunteers to develop and sustain their work as well as create programs and become a catalyst between the citizens and the governments. In return, these voluntary-based organizations will become schools for democracy.²⁷ This volunteering aspect will help society develop a democratic environment and prevent it from falling back into totalitarianism and oppression. Volunteerism thus will help citizens develop their civic skills

and political participation.²⁸ It is also viewed as expression of core societal principles such as solidarity, social cohesion, and democracy.²⁹

3. *A multidisciplinary approach*: The third issue is the need for the development of a multidimensional theory. Most of the theories consider the idea of volunteerism as unidimensional, taking empirical data as the major reference; thus there is a need to develop a multidimensional theory linking all the different perspectives of volunteering together.

This part synthesized and organized the literature about volunteerism into three different clusters answering the questions: What is volunteering? Who volunteers and why? How do citizens volunteer? It further argued that in every society, volunteerism developed based on the history and regime type of the state. Furthermore, from a political scientist's point of view, literature argued that volunteerism will increase the level of participation in the society and will help develop communities and a sense of citizenship and thus bring back people into politics. It argued that there is a direct link between the development of an active civil society and the institutionalization of volunteering in the society: citizens through volunteerism will become more active and assist in the transformation of their societies.

Conceptual Framework

When studying civic engagement, two different forms are presented: cooperative and expressive.³⁰ Putnam explains that the cooperative type of civic engagement is more focused on the public interests, which is more and more declining and leading to “weakening the civility of contemporary political discourse”³¹ compared to the expressive, which is more individualistic and has a defined scope of interest.

In this article, volunteerism will be analyzed based on the political scientist framework. In this regard, volunteerism will be synonymous with civic engagement. It is explained as “a process through which civil society is invited to participate in the ongoing political, economic, and social efforts that are meant to bring about positive change.”³² In this same line of argument, Edwards also defines civic engagement as “a composite of associational life and voluntary interaction . . . that provides societies with sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity . . . channels of communication through which trust is developed . . . templates for collaboration . . . and a clear sense of the risks of acting opportunistically.”³³

Civic engagement in this article will be defined as based on the cooperative form—that is, taking part in activities in the community with the main aim of linking the individual to his or her society and environment.³⁴ This definition includes involvement in public and political affairs; participation

in associations, work organizations and unions; in addition to participation in informal events in the community such as parties and sports leagues.³⁵

In order to get a fuller understanding of this type of civic engagement in the Arab world, it is important to understand and define civil society, its relationship with the states, and the degree of institutionalization of the civic engagement philosophy in the region.

PART II: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE ARAB WORLD

The civil society in the Arab world was shaped by many political events. These events are mainly the rise of the Ottoman Empire, the colonial rule that governed the region, the independence phase, and the creation of the states as well as the authoritarian regimes that governed the region.

The spread of civil society in the Arab world goes back to the eighteenth century. During that era, the Ottoman Empire introduced radical changes in an effort to modernize and counter the challenges faced by the West. As a result, clubs, associations, and urban centers started to appear³⁶; the first autonomous associations were created, and the region witnessed the development of community-based organizations. These organizations were mainly religious, charitable, and educational in their nature and were largely funded by the *awqaf* (i.e., religious and Islamic endowment). However, these organizations slowly disappeared under the colonial and the postcolonial rules; in return, the region witnessed the development of new types of civil society organizations (CSOs): modern associational organizations, such as professional associations, secular charities, cultural clubs, and trade unions.³⁷ A major characteristic of these newly established organizations was that they were generally more politically active than the civil society organizations of the Ottoman era. These organizations were playing a crucial role in the nationalist struggles and were the main supporters of the pan-Arab cause. With the independence of the Arab world and the end of the direct and indirect colonial rule, the development of civil society was halted across the region; new radical military regimes ruled different states, mainly Syria, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and Yemen. With the creation of the Arab states, the different regimes became vulnerable to any quest for legitimacy. These new regimes started to feel that the success of these independent and pluralistic associations would undermine their consolidated power. In order to gain legitimacy and control over the state, these ruling regimes oppressed and controlled all organizations; as an example, the military regimes in Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya banned all civil society organizations or obliged them to submit to the government's rules and regulations³⁸; in addition, people were requested to renounce their basic rights as citizens.³⁹ This in return diminished the potential for the development of

the civil society. The main argument provided by these regimes was that the strong presence of the state will help countries reach Arab unity, face common enemies, and achieve economic growth and social justice. All these factors in return had a negative effect on the development of the culture of volunteerism and civic engagement in the region.

The role of the civil society in the Arab nations has been suppressed and restrained over the decades; however, important national and international events led the Arab states to start taking a more open approach opening their regimes (these factors in return allowed the reemergence of civil society in the region⁴⁰):

1. Massive urbanization led to increasing socioeconomic needs in the society, while at the same time many Arab states became incapable of providing adequate employment and education opportunities for their citizens.⁴¹
2. The expansion of education and the increase in the number of university graduates led to increased expectations and ambitions among youth; they started organizing themselves to present their demands, especially for human rights and women's rights.⁴²
3. International organizations, international donors, UNDP, the World Bank, and the European Union started to fund the vulnerable social groups such as women's groups and the disabled and assist them in projects related to sustainable development.⁴³
4. Based on the demands and advice of Western allies, many Arab rulers started to open up their regimes. This reformation was not intended to lead to the renunciation of power but, on the contrary, was motivated by their desire to keep it. This reformation led to the freedom of expression and allowed many social groups and nongovernmental organizations to emerge.⁴⁴

It is important to note that this new wave of reform in the 1980s and 1990s was "largely infused into a bureaucratic and legal domain that allowed states to manipulate civic engagement by providing utilitarian incentives."⁴⁵

More recent events are also leading these governments to change in the ways they are dealing with civil society organizations. The decline in authoritarian regimes allowed for the emergence of civil society organizations. As a result, civil society organizations (CSOs) started to develop in the Middle East and Arab world, mainly in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. The post-Gulf War led to an increase in civil society expansion, and in the 1990s CSO registration started to increase; by the end of 2002, there were more than 130,000 CSOs registered in the region.⁴⁶ All these issues in return had a direct effect on the citizens who started to feel that their voices could be heard and thus were encouraged to volunteer more.

Furthermore, with the millennium development goals, the Arab Spring, and the democratization processes that are taking place in the different states in the Arab world, organizations have a more flexible environment to work in and encourage the participation of citizens. The process of nationalization of organizations and the interference in the boards of these organizations are changing to more flexible laws.⁴⁷ Furthermore, in many states, mainly the Gulf States, royal families are encouraging the establishment of Waqf and philanthropic organizations and are providing them with the right environment in which to function.

PART III: CIVIL SOCIETY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Between 1991 and 2001, more than 150 million dollars were spent toward increasing civic engagement.⁴⁸ The Arab world is further witnessing the transformation of the civil society sector: organizations are working toward being more transparent and accountable and are searching for the best practices in governance. Investments are stressing and focusing on development, change, and the importance of civic participation for creating a social change.⁴⁹ Due to cultural, political, and economic factors, civil society organizations are capable of functioning without the pressure of the authoritarian government. Governments are increasingly encouraging citizens and especially youth to become more engaged. In Lebanon, the minister of education issued a decree stating that in order for a high school student to receive the baccalaureate degree, he or she should serve at least 60 hours of volunteering and civic engagement.⁵⁰ Higher education institutions are also pushing to promote the idea of civic engagement among students. In this respect, over 40 universities across the Arab world met in 2014 in Jordan to discuss the ways and means to introduce and promote the idea of civic engagement among students.⁵¹ In 2012, Dubai Community Development Authority (CDA) launched the Dubai Volunteering Center, the first governmental center for voluntary work in the UAE.⁵² In this respect, and based on the political scientist paradigm, the institutionalization of philanthropy, the presence of public policies, and an active civil society should encourage citizens to participate and volunteer more and thus bring change to their societies. However, the major question raised is: To what extent are these national policies, international and national investments, as well as civil society reforms leading to an active society and bringing people back into politics?

PART IV: ANALYZING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT

Recent national and international efforts were made to study and measure the weight of civic engagement in the region, using surveys as a method for

data collection and situation analysis. Findings have shown that youth in the Arab world are less active than the rest of the world: only 19 percent of the youth in the Arab world have participated in civic groups.⁵³ When analyzing civic engagement in the Arab world, we find disparity between the different countries. A study conducted in 2010 showed that while in some countries the percentage is relatively fine,⁵⁴ such as Yemen and Palestine (Palestine, where 38 percent of the males and 14 percent of females volunteer; Yemen with 35 percent and 21 percent, respectively), we witness very low averages in Egypt (6 percent and 3 percent) and in Jordan (8 percent and 4 percent).

It is important to note that these general low levels of civic participation do not imply a lack of interest in democratic reform.⁵⁵ Findings of studies conducted between 2008 and 2010 show that when compared to the rest of the world, the Arab youth are politically more active than youth in any other part of the world; the rate of involvement in protesting reached 28.9 percent compared to 15.2 percent globally.⁵⁶ Many studies have shown that most of the Arab citizens, mainly 90 percent of those surveyed by the Arab Barometer in 2006, responded that they viewed democracy as the best type of governance.⁵⁷ A survey focusing on the belief in democracy showed that most of the Arab youth do believe in the democratic value: 93 percent of the youth in Jordan; 84 percent in Egypt; 85 percent in Morocco, 91 percent in Iraq; and 75 percent in the UAE.⁵⁸ Forty-eight percent of the Arab youth have participated in electoral actions compared to 59 percent globally.⁵⁹ (It is important to note that most of the people in the Arab world who participate in the electoral system do so to gain state resources.)⁶⁰ The level of civic engagement among the Arab youth remains low although youth agree on the importance of building a democratic society (around 33 percent of those surveyed believed in their political right of participation).⁶¹

Based on above, the major question that is raised is: Although youth in the Arab world do believe in democracy, what are the reasons that are leading them to disengage from their own community and society?

Based on a survey conducted in Qatar in 2010, Gengler and Tessler argued that engaging in society and participating in activities are not contributing to the democratic culture nor to a better understanding of the democratic values.⁶² Other studies have shown that civic engagement is not leading toward understanding democracy.⁶³ This civic engagement analysis in the Arab world cannot be separated from the social and economic environment in the region. Most of the youth in the region do believe in the need for greater participation as citizens; however, they are not pushed toward participation, and in addition they lack trust in the ruling regimes.⁶⁴ Their main concerns are to find jobs and advance in their careers.⁶⁵ Unemployment rates in the Arab world are the highest in the world: the ILO estimated the rate at 23.4 percent in 2010.⁶⁶ In a study conducted about the importance of civic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa in 2012, John Kurtz found that the socioeconomic status

plays a major role in the level of civic engagement. The groups that have the lowest levels of civic engagement are mainly the less educated young men and women, the unemployed, and those coming from rural areas. Kurtz notes that these groups are also the ones that are being underrepresented in the decision-making processes.⁶⁷ The ones who have the highest percentage of participation are the youth who show interest in politics and follow the news and are active on social media. The major findings in this study show that the high civic engagement of the latter group is neither cultivating political trust, tolerance, and diversity, nor nurturing the sense of shared identity among the youth. This is explained by the fact that these youth participate in the civil society as an expression of their disapproval of their governments' policies, especially when it comes to finding jobs.⁶⁸ This leads us to state that civic engagement in the Arab world is mainly the result of disbelief in the government and not leading to political trust, tolerance, respect for pluralism, and forging a common identity.⁶⁹

Analyzing Civic Engagement in the Region

When reviewing the literature on civic engagement in nondemocratic states, two major theories are presented: utilitarianism and modernization. Utilitarianism is based mainly on clientelism; it relates to the individual who is focused mainly on his personal interests, as opposed to modernization, which focuses more on the empowerment of citizens and human capital.⁷⁰

Amaney Jamal argues that the civil society in nondemocratic states is used as an instrument in the hands of the ruling regime. Thus it does not promote good citizenship, and consequently civic engagement would not lead citizens to hold their government accountable.⁷¹ In such cases, civic engagement will support the regime and will not gain values such as trust and democracy.⁷² The political framework of the society will directly affect the structure of civic participation in the Arab world and thus will strengthen the existing political structure as opposed to changing it.⁷³

This low level of volunteerism in the region is explained by Amani Kandil, who argues that there are three major challenges stopping the development and institutionalization of volunteerism in the region: the first one is absence of policies that encourage civic services. The second challenge is the lack of governmental support and funding for service programs. The third one is the lack of enthusiasm by the Arab youth to the idea of volunteering.⁷⁴ Youth in the Arab region do not have the participatory governance environment and tools to participate in policy making and influencing the government. The systems in Arab countries do not provide the tools and platforms for these young generations to claim their economic and social rights.⁷⁵ Another point that is worth noting is the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of most of the readymade solutions and civic engagement programs that were presented by development agencies

and international organizations. Such programs may not always be applicable since they are not taking into consideration the cultural and social practices in the region.⁷⁶ Most of these programs were criticized because they “promote a depoliticized citizenship, rather than an empowered citizenry.”⁷⁷

In order to promote the trend of civic engagement, governments should support the role of the civic society and provide conditions that contribute to higher levels of social capital among its citizens;⁷⁸ the public and private sector in addition to the civil society should cooperate in order to develop a comprehensive plan for civic engagement.⁷⁹ In addition, there is an urgent need to encourage young people in rural areas to become more involved in the community.

PART V: CONCLUSION

This article analyzed the historical, political, and cultural environment that would allow the philosophy of volunteering to develop in a society; it argued that there is a direct link between the development of civil society and the increasing level of volunteerism. Through reviewing the historical development of civil society in the Arab world, the article argued that although the historical development of the Arab states did not allow civil society to develop and hence did not create an environment for volunteering, the trend is changing: states are further opening up, and philanthropy is becoming more institutionalized; international development agencies are also encouraging civic engagement. However, all these programs are not leading to the positive outcome; the article concluded that states should increase awareness about the importance of volunteering and integrate it more in their national policies. Government and civil society organizations should work on channeling those civic engagement activities and movements into positive energy working toward building democratic societies. To be able to build a civic engaged society working toward democracy, governments should work together with international organizations, businesses, and civil society and focus on reducing inequalities and the development of rural areas. In this regard, this holistic approach will provide job opportunities and equal social opportunities for the youth in the region. In addition, this should also be accompanied with economic reform removing the approach of favoritism and clientelism from the culture. Governments should create the right environment for the youth to allow them to raise their voice and participate more in the decision-making processes in the political life. To gain a deeper understanding of the trend of volunteering in the Arab world, there is a need to conduct further research to understand the importance of volunteering through analyzing the role of civil society and civic engagement in different countries of the Arab world.

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