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Bimonthly newsletter issued by the Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform

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This issue is the first edition of ISLAH Network newsletter. A bimonthly publication released by the Secretariat of the Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform, the newsletter attempts to highlight the Network activities, documents, and program areas. Within this angle, this current issue identifies the Network mission, goals and programs, whilst also illustrating the activities accomplished during February to July 2006. Moreover, it provides an overview of forthcoming activities scheduled on the last quarter of 2006 agenda.

The Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform "ISLAH" Mission, Goals and Ongoing Activities

Overview:

The Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform (ISLAH) is an independent regional initiative that seeks to build alliances between civil society organizations and activists in the Arab World. ISLAH aims at enhancing civil society contribution to democratic development and reform, participation in political life, and founding modern democratic societies that enjoy freedom, justice, equality, rule of law, and good governance.

The Network was established in February 2006, upon initiative from the Civil Society Forum of the Arab World that was held in Amman, in December 2004, with the participation of representatives of Civil Society Organizations in 11 Arab countries.

ISLAH is an independent initiative that operates devoid of any intervention from governments or political parties. It is a non-profit entity that aims at bringing together the capacities of Civil Society Organizations engaged in democracy, reform, development, and good governance. It also aims at providing a joint platform that defines its activities and programs, exchanges experience and implements joint projects.

Mission:

ISLAH aims at enhancing the stand of Arab Civil Societies and their role as effective partners in the development process of the Arab world, through spreading values such as democracy, transparency, pluralism, equality, accountability, tolerance, and good governance.

The gate is open for all legally-operating organizations and activists that support democratic transformation in peaceful and legal means to engage in the Network. ISLAH supports activities and initiatives that strengthen people's participation, ensure fair representation of women and youth in various decision-making positions, build an independent and free media, and collaborate with patriots for freedom and democracy.

Goals:

ISLAH aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. Enhance the stand of Arab Civil Societies and their role as effective partners in the processes of development, democratic transformation, and good governance in the Arab world.
2. Strengthen people's participation in the democratic process and reform efforts.
3. Exchange experiences and best practices between organizations operating in the fields of democracy and reform on the local, regional, and international levels.
4. Monitor the democratic developments and work towards resolving obstacles faced by civil society organizations in the Arab world.
5. Provide a platform for exchanging expertise and building the capacities of the organizations working in this field.

Mechanisms:

1. Organizing joint activities and campaigns in the field of strengthening democracy and reform.
2. Work towards establishing a media podium specialized in civil society issues.
3. Developing communication means that would open up opportunities for free dialogue on various social and political issues in the region.
4. Holding regular meetings for Arab civil organizations to facilitate exchange of information and expertise.
5. Actively participate in regional and international conferences and symposiums.
6. Upgrading research and studies on democratic developments.
7. Hiring experienced trainers to build the capacities of staff working in democratic development.
8. Providing forums specialized in active areas, such as setting an Elections Monitor, designing working agendas for the media, women, youth, civic education, judiciary systems ... etc.

Membership:

Membership is open to all civil society organizations with legal status, operating in Arab or non-Arab countries, and working in one or more of the following fields: Democratic Development, Human Rights, Civic Education, Elections and Parliament, Media, Youth, Women, Democracy and Reform.

Programs and Activities:

ISLAH network implements its projects and activities in a cooperative and joint manner, with its founding organizations or with these centers that collaborate in executing its programs and activities.

Projects scheduled on ISLAH's 2006 agenda are as follows:

1) The Founding Meeting of the Network.

Organizing Partner: Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (UJRC)/ Jordan. ujrc@ujrc-jordan.org

This meeting was held on February 18-19, 2006, at the Dead Sea area in Jordan. 22 members attended the meeting, representing 18 organizations in 8 Arab countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen, Algeria, Tunisia, and Syria.

Amongst the participants were representatives from:



Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (UJRC)/ Jordan; The Jordanian Commission for Democratic Culture (JCDC); The Jordanian Society for Political Sciences; The Jordanian Center for Parliamentary Studies; The National Society for the Enhancement of Freedom and Democracy (JUND)/ Jordan; The Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (LFPCP); The Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA); The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections; Group for Democratic Development (GDD)/ Egypt; Al Mahrosa Studies and Information Center/ Egypt; Civic Forum Institute (CFI)/ Palestine; The Palestinian Institute for Studying Democracy (Muwatin); Center for Information and Rehabilitation of Human Rights/ Yemen; Algerian League for Human Rights, and the Arab Network for Civic Education. Three invited organizations were unable to attend the meeting: Center of Arab Women for Training and Research/ Tunisia; the Palestinian Civil Organizations Network/ Palestine; and Damascus Center for Human Rights/ Syria.

The meeting set the Network's key regulations and procedures, and a steering committee of 9 members was elected. The Network secretariat was appointed, with Mr. Hani Hourani, Director General of UJRC, as the Network Coordinator; Dr. Antoine Messarra, LFPCP Chairman, as the Network Secretary; and Mr. Aref Jaffal, Director of CFI, as the Treasurer. Participants arrived at a final statement on the Meeting procedures and outcomes, and stated the main mission of the Network.

2) Establishing the Arab World Elections Monitor.

Organizing Partner: Civic Forum Institute (CFI)/ Palestine. cfip@cfip.org

The Founding Meeting for the Arab World Elections Monitor, which emerged from the Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform, was held on June 21-22, 2006, in Amman. A total of 20 organizations, research centers and networks representing 10 countries (Jordan, Pales-

tine, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Syria) attended the meeting.

This Monitor deals with observing general elections and reforming the electoral systems and legislations in the Arab world. Participating organizations were: The Civic Forum Institute (CFI)/ Palestine; Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (UJRC)/ Jordan; The Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (LFPCP)/ Lebanon; Group for Democratic Development (GDD)/ Egypt; Al Mahrosa Studies and Information Center/ Egypt; The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections/ Lebanon; Algerian League for Human Rights/ Algeria; Iraqi Network for Human Rights Culture and Development/ Iraq; Center for Information and Rehabilitation of Human Rights/ Yemen; The Model Iraqi Society Organization/ Iraq; The Arab World Center for Democratic Development and Human Rights/ Jordan; Al Quds Political Studies Center/ Jordan; National Society for Enhancement of Freedom and Democracy (JUND)/ Jordan; The Jordanian Commission for Democratic Culture (JCDC)/ Jordan; Adaleh Center for Human Rights/ Jordan; Civil Committee for Monitoring Elections/ Palestine; Kuwaiti Society for Democratic Development/ Kuwait; Palestinian Civil Organizations Network/ Palestine; Damascus Center for Theoretical Research and Civil Rights/ Syria; Moroccan Organization for Human Rights/ Morocco; The Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform (ISLAH)/ Jordan.

Participants ratified a draft "Code of Ethics" to ensure that issues of respect, integrity, democracy and justice are being preserved throughout elections. They also decided to adopt a draft "Code of Conduct for free and honest Elections in the Arab Region", which was drafted upon initiative from the UNDP in March 2006. Participants also agreed to cooperate with the UNDP in upgrading the items of the Code of Conduct, whilst seeking to strengthen it and disseminate it across relevant parties.

The Founding Meeting was concluded by electing a

secretariat for the Monitor, composed of five organizations. Also formed were five committees to work on the following fields: Training and Rehabilitation; Research and Studies; Legal Assistance; Field monitoring; Media and Documentation.

The Monitor assigned two of its member organizations to draft its bylaws.

3) Arab Women and Political Participation (regional workshop):

Organizing Partner: The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR)/ Tunisia

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The workshop entitled "Arab Women and Political Participation: from concept to practice in local governance", was held in Algeria on June 23-24, 2006. It aimed at facilitating dialogue exchange between experts in the field of women's political participation, especially on the local governance level, whilst seeking to arrive at practical strategies and recommendations to empower Arab women in the political sphere.

The workshop was divided into four panels: the first was a brainstorming session; the second was a presentation of best practices in local governance; the third dealt with networking mechanisms; and the fourth panel focused on the media.

Seven working papers were presented on the first day. Topics covered were: Electoral Reforms and Women in Bahrain; Legislative framework and Women in local governance; Legislative Reforms in Algeria; Evaluating the fourth CAWTAR report on Arab women and decision making; Women in Local Governance; Electoral Framework and Women in Local Governance; Experiences in urban governance and development programs; and Dynamics of women participation in local governance.

The second day dealt with: Networking tools for ex-



changing best practices and mechanisms; Networking to enhance policy dialogue; Media scenario of women leadership; Mainstreaming media in local governance; and the Media and elections in Bahrain.

The workshop was concluded by discussing regional strategies to support the participation of Arab Women in the political process, especially on the local governance level. Participants crystallized a set of recommendations that covered the brainstorming session, best practices in local governance, and media panels. Taking part in the workshop was a group of experts, activists and media persons from: Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Algeria, Palestine, Morocco, Yemen, and Egypt.

4) Arab Youth and Political Participation (regional workshop):

Organizing Partner: The Jordanian Commission for Democratic Culture (JCDC)/ Jordan.

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This workshop was held on July 27-29, 2006, in Amman, with the participation of young leaders and activists from Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia.

The workshop was commenced by Mr. Hani Hourani, ISLAH Network coordinator, who defined the Network's mission, goals and programs.

The second day of the workshop discussed a number of working papers, on the prevailing legal and political framework for Arab youth, in addition to the structure of the Arab youth movements.

The third day was devoted to discussing the establishment of coalitions and networks amongst the Arab youth. Participants were divided into working groups,

and discussed the mission and aims of the proposed youth network, its working agenda and future plans. An agreement was reached on launching such a Network, and on naming it: " The Arab Youth Democracy Initiative" (AYDI).

The Network's goals, working mechanism and future projects were identified, and Amman was selected as its location. Participants elected a steering committee, and the Jordanian Commission for Democratic Culture was nominated as the general coordinator of the Network. The workshop was ended by distributing certificates to the young participating activists.

It is worth mentioning that a series of brainstorming sessions were held prior to this workshop, and were attended by male and female students in several Jordanian Universities, to assist in crystallizing a youth working agenda.

ISLAH Network: Upcoming Activities

1) The Role of Media in Enhancing Reform and Democracy.

Organizing Partner: Group for Democratic Development (GDD)/ Egypt. *gddfd2003@yahoo.com*

This regional workshop is scheduled to take place in Cairo, Egypt, in September 2006. The aim is to crystallize a joint working agenda for media persons in the Arab world, to activate their role in enhancing Reform and Democracy programs in the countries of the region.

Participating in this activity will be media persons representing 8 Arab countries, namely, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt.

The first phase of this activity will take the form of holding a series of brainstorming sessions, with the participation of the elite of Egyptian media and intellectuals, to help draw the overall outline of the media agenda.

The second phase is the main part, and constitutes holding a 2-day Regional Workshop. The set agenda will address: a reading into the political and legal environment of the Arab media; challenges facing the Arab media on the level of enhancing democratic reforms; exploring the possibility of establishing an Arab Media Network for Democracy; and finally, crystallizing an Arab media agenda on reform and democracy.

2) Developing a Research Agenda on Democracy and Reforms:

Organizing Partner: The Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (LFPCP)/ Lebanon.

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This project aims at covering the main gaps depicted in research on Democracy and Reform in the Arab World. The following is a list of research topics that will be implemented throughout 2006:

- a) Democracy Barometer: This study aims at initiating indicators for measuring democracy in the Arab world.
- b) Local Governance: an applied study on Democracy and Local Governance through citing live examples on the role of local communities.
- c) The Role of the Judiciary System in achieving justice and protecting freedoms: highlighting the clear-cut sentences that were issued by several Arab courts, and formed examples of best practices.
- d) Regulatory Procedures of establishing parties and non-governmental organizations: setting rules and standards for establishing organizations and managing them via democratic means that involve participation, fresh leadership, and efficiency.
- e) The Culture and Values of Civil Society in the Arab World: this study would aim at developing criteria for upgrading Civil Society Organizations' culture and practices.
- f) The Role of Civil Society Organizations in enhancing Corporate Social Responsibility culture and practices within the private sector.
- g) The Role of Business Associations in developing the reforms agenda of the Arab private sector.
- h) Civic Monitoring of Legislations: this study would aim at building connections and links between the civil society and the legislative authorities.

3) The Outcomes of Reform in the Arab World:

Organizing Partner: Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (UJRC)/ Jordan. *ujrc@ujrc-jordan.org*

This regional conference aims at providing an analytical and critical revision of the reform process in the Arab

world, through evaluating reform experiences in different Arab countries. The conference will pause on the motivating factors internally and externally, and will discuss networking and interrelations between different types of reform: political, economic, social and cultural.

The "partnership" issues existing between the main actors of reforms will be of utmost importance. Questions to be addressed are: Does a true partnership exist between governments, civil society and the private sector? Has civil society been adequately transformed into an active engine for reform and democratization? What are the means of strengthening the capabilities of civil society to play a bigger role? Is the civil society pursuing its role in monitoring the performance of governments and private sectors? What are the new structural changes in the civil societies, and what role is the "new generation" of Civil Society Organizations pursuing in achieving the desired reforms?

The conference will utilize the above-mentioned new Research Agenda, which is being implemented within the framework of the network, to present working papers devoted to develop a working agenda for Arab civil societies in order to sustain their contribution to the reform process.

This conference will be held in late 2006 in Amman, Jordan, with the participation of intellectuals, Civil Society leaders and activists, Business Associations and Governmental officials in the region.

4) The First Annual meeting of the Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform:

Organizing Partner: Al Urdun Al Jadid Research Center (UJRC)/ Jordan. *ujrc@ujrc-jordan.org*

This meeting will be held alongside the conference on: "The Outcomes of Reforms in the Arab World", with the participation of the Network's members in the 8 Arab Countries, in addition to new member organizations. On the discussion grounds will be the accomplishments of the Network since its establishment in February 2006, in addition to its proposed work plan for the next coming year.

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