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Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation in the Arab World:

The Work of Civil Society Organisations in Lebanon and Morocco

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1. Introduction

A tense relationship has marked decades of interaction between Arab regimes and their civil societies in the areas of human rights, democracy, governance reform, justice and reconciliation. While the role of civil society in development, humanitarian and environmental issues has generally been tolerated more easily by Arab governments, the same cannot be said for the areas just mentioned. The decade of the 1980s in particular was marked by open confrontations between interior ministries of a number of Arab regimes on one side and civil society associations and activists on the other. The confrontation eased in the late 1990s largely due to internal changes in regimes, as for example in Morocco, which manifested a desire of Arab rulers to open up to and benefit from a limited wave of globalisation or were due to moderate pressure exerted by the international community.

In recent years there has been greater awareness of the increasing importance of civil society in assisting governments to push forward the wheel of development. A spate of regional reform initiatives succeeded in producing declarations that at least legitimise the existence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and acknowledge the need for their efforts in complementing the process of reform and ensuring good governance and the rule of law. The desire for reform in the Arab world is bolstered by the desire of some Arab governments to introduce gradual but limited liberalisation, which necessitates the engagement of NGOs and civil society associations. There exists, though, no clear assessment of the role of civil society in reform movements or the degree and seriousness of their involvement to date.

This article aims to contribute to closing this gap by exploring crucial civil society functions – strengthening civic engagement and community-empowerment – in the specific context of the Arab world, and by introducing the work of a number of organisations in this region. The *next section* briefly discusses the role of Arab civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs and explains some of their functions. *Section three* reflects on traditional conflict resolution and reconciliation methods and their relation to the "Western field" of conflict resolution. *Section four* presents cases from Lebanon and Morocco, looking at concrete projects, objectives and achievements of organisations, while *section five* discusses common challenges. The *final section* identifies possible next steps in light of the current political developments in the region.

2. Arab Civil Society

The term civil society does not have the same meaning in every Arab state. In Morocco, for example, it is associated with a wave of liberalisation and openness; in Lebanon and Palestine it rings of a period of rebirth after long bouts of violence or civil war. The degrees of freedom and the range of specialization differ as well. In Lebanon, civil society gained strength and independence during the civil war which was characterized by a collapse of the central authority and the absence of state services, thus rendering NGOs indispensable to the survival of communities; the same can be said of Palestine. In Morocco, the reforms introduced by the late King Hassan II and continued by his successor King Mohammed VI paved the way for gradual liberalisation of the political system which in turn has led to the proliferation of NGOs and associational life. Lebanon and Morocco are considered to offer most public space to the potential thriving of NGOs. They count the highest number of NGOs compared to other Arab countries: Morocco and Lebanon register 103 and 100 NGOs per 100,000 inhabitants respectively, compared to 45.8 in Bahrain and 24.5 in Egypt (Nasr 2005, 9).

This is not to say that in other Arab countries civil society is nonexistent. The term civil society, however, remains somewhat elusive. UNDP defines civil society "as all associations or organizations that are private, voluntary, not-for-profit, at least partly independent or autonomous of the state and are pursuing a common interest, protecting a common value or advocating a common cause" (Nasr 2005, 9). It is widely accepted that civil society in the Arab world includes independent, non-profit organisations that are distinct from the private and public sectors. This includes family-based associations, social guilds, syndicates, religious charities, social clubs and service-oriented organisations. Hawthorne (2004, 8) classifies Arab NGOs along five broad categories: Islamic organisations dedicated to charity, education and medical care; service-oriented organisations, including development services; professional syndicates such as unions and organised member-based associations; solidarity organisations; and pro-democracy associations.[1]

While all of the above are active organs of civil life, the last two decades have seen the specific growth of democracy-promoting, rights-based NGOs in the region. Pro-democracy organisations are also the ones most involved in conflict resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). A number of labour unions – particularly in Morocco – have, for example, introduced an institutional practice of modern negotiation and mediation. Several leading political parties in Morocco and Yemen have furthermore engaged in systematic conflict resolution training programmes. In addition, there are some religious organisations that have shown interest in intercultural and inter-religious dialogue initiatives.

A number of democracy-promoting NGOs in the Arab world consider conflict resolution and reconciliation as one of the paths towards true and deep-rooted democracy. Utilising such tools as dialogue sessions, reconciliation processes, training and skill-building workshops among others, many of these NGOs have introduced to the Arab world the dynamic of win-win conflict management and, more recently, conflict transformation (for a definition of terms, see Austin et al. 2004, 464-466).

This article looks closely at cases of NGOs practicing conflict resolution in Lebanon and Morocco. It does not include NGOs that indirectly contribute to peace and conflict resolution such as

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1 For the purpose of this article, "civil society organisations" is used as the overarching term, and "non-governmental organisations" as a more narrowly defined and recent form of civic organisation (Fischer 2006 provides an in-depth discussion of terminology).

social justice organisations and charity associations. The focus is on organisations that take as their aim peacebuilding, conflict resolution, reconciliation and post-war reconstruction.

3. Traditional Mechanisms of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

Resolving conflict amicably is not an alien concept to the Arab World. While the history of the region abounds with tales of battles, conquests and tribal wars dating back to medieval times, there is also evidence of a long tradition of tribal customs and norms leading to peaceful, nonviolent mediation and arbitration. Most notably in Yemen, Jordan and, to a certain extent, Palestine and rural Lebanon, tribal norms and a blend of civil law with tribal codes have prevailed for decades as intrinsic parts of the justice system. In Yemen, for example, tribal chiefs are involved in business conflicts as mediators through the Chamber of Commerce also in such urban settings as the capital Sana'a. In Jordan, a number of court judges are trained as tribal reconciliation judges (*Qadi Al Sulh Al 'Ashaeri),* a function recognized as part of the justice system.[2]

Tribal codes are not formalised as official parts of the justice system in the Arab world, nor are they recognized as a coherent set of legal frameworks and legal provisions. In fact, most of the Arab tribal codes are unwritten rules bequeathed from one generation to another of tribal chiefs and mediators. These collections of norms and customs differ from one Arab country to another, but they do share some common elements and features.

There are only a few recorded successful examples of Arab NGOs trying to utilise tribal norms of conflict mediation as a core part of their methodology. In Yemen, two NGOs in particular, the House of Peace, based in Dar es Salaam, and the newly founded Yemen Organisation for Development and Social Peace (YODSP) are attempting to utilise tribal mediators and arbitrators in order to document and implement often esoteric tribal codes as widely acceptable processes of conflict transformation. The YODSP has also engaged in modern conflict resolution training to augment its tribal practices.

The work of House of Peace and YODSP has shattered myths and stereotypes about tribal conflict mediation being a backward practice restricted to rural areas, and has proven that the modernisation and urbanisation of such practice is possible and useful. Disputant parties are increasingly relying on tribal processes of conflict resolution as they consider them a more guaranteed conduit of swift justice than what they perceive as a slow and corrupt court system.[3] The efforts of the two Yemeni NGOs are thus increasingly gaining recognition within civil society though many obstacles remain, chief among them the absence of significant support from the state and donors to broaden this field and formalise its practice.

Though tribal conflict resolution is not as widely practiced in all Arab countries as it has been in Yemen, Jordan, Iraq and, to some extent, Palestine, tribal and sectarian thinking dominates practice and behaviour in larger circles of Arab societies – albeit not always in positive ways. In Lebanon, for example, the political institutionalisation of sectarianism has been responsible for many

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2 For more information on tribal sources of legal codes and informal conflict resolution see the following documents: *Al-Qadha' Wal Solh al- Asha'ri wa Atharahoma ala al Qadha' al- Nizami fi Falastine* [The Tribal Judicial Code and Reconciliation and their Impact on the Regular Judiciary in Palestine] 2003; *Informal Justice System: The Rule of Law and Dispute Settlement in Palestine. The National Report on the Results of the Field Research* (in Arabic) 2006; available at http://lawcenter.birzeit.edu/iol/ar/index. php?action_id=211.
3 The author learned this from interviews and conversations during training sessions during four consecutive trips to Yemen between 2004 and 2006.

of the country's woes and conflicts. Additionally, tribal codes have negatively affected significant parts of the Arab populations, in particular women. Honour killing and revenge is commonly accepted as a way to restore family honour and often tolerated by the legal system. In most instances, women are the victims in the retributive killings and perpetrators usually receive light sentences, if any.[4] The implications of these precedents for the role of NGOs have not been carefully scrutinised and remain a subject for further debate and study.

Proponents of tribal conflict resolution nevertheless contend that age-old rituals and traditions of settlement (*Sulh*) and reconciliation (*musalaha*) are very effective ways of dealing with conflicts, and are worth nurturing (Irani and Funk 2000). The existence of dual justice systems in Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen indicates that for now, tribal norms of conflict resolution are alive and well. It also is obvious that tribal codes are present and vibrant in states where tribal and communitarian life is strong, as in Jordan, and in countries where the justice system is very weak, in transition or mistrusted, as is the case in Iraq, Palestine and Yemen respectively. Yet further study and documentation of tribal practice need to be pursued to come to a more differentiated understanding.

4. Current Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Practice in Lebanon and Morocco

This section is going to shed light on the concrete experiences in two Arab countries: Lebanon and Morocco. Both are going through democratic transition, either after a severe conflict (Lebanon) or following a significant leadership change (Morocco). The aim is to present a selective overview of initiatives launched or adopted by civil society in response to internal changes and transformations. The objectives, projects and achievements of various organisations are introduced in some detail before, in section five, common challenges and ways of addressing them are discussed.

4.1 Lebanon

During the War. It is worth mentioning that prior to the end of the civil war in 1990, there have been some disparate civil society efforts in peacebuilding work which revolved around a popular response aiming to end violence. Since 1975, demonstrations by Lebanese belonging to different religions and regions called for an end to the fighting. These initiatives grew to form an organisation called the "Non-Violence Movement" that challenged sectarianism, lobbied for an end to the killing and argued for a mending of the religious divide in the country. The Movement organised demonstrations and petitions to illustrate that the people were against the war that was being fought by militias and political leaders.

On a different level, towards the end of the 1980s, a number of NGOs joined UNICEF in a project called "Education for Peace". The aim was to develop a team of youth leaders with skills based on principles of conflict resolution that could be taught to younger children, and at the same time to organise recreational camps for children from different regions in order to challenge the stark divisions of communal and religious segregation.

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4 See the International Campaign Against Honor Killing at www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid =1289.

While the Education for Peace project officially ceased to exist, several similar initiatives continue, such as the yearly youth summer camps organised by Secours Populaire, the Lebanese American University Summer Peace Building Institute and the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies' Summer Academy for Leadership and Conflict Transformation. Following the incidents of youth violence in Beirut in January 2007, talks of reviving summer peace camps between diverse Lebanese youths have intensified.

Post-war Initiatives. The Lebanese civil war ended in 1990 with a negotiated pact between the various Lebanese communities under the mediation of the Arab League in the Saudi resort city of Taif (thus the National Peace Accord acquired the name Taif Accord). This brought with it a comprehensive amnesty, officially pardoning all war crimes, and opted to forget the repercussions of war that had splintered the very thin social fabric that was holding together 18 officially recognized religious sects.

The 15-year chapter of bloodshed was ended with a system of power-sharing between most of the former warlords. Civil society inherited a heavy socio-economic burden that was only compounded by the passing of the general amnesty law. The authorities, along with the main political parties who had participated in the civil war, embarked on a process of collective amnesia. The Lebanese hoped that this would be a transition phase to ensure the end of hostilities and precede a more sustainable, long-term national peacebuilding process. But that hope has not yet materialised.

Following the cessation of hostilities and given the painful job of trying to put the country on track towards sustainable peace, civil society was faced with the monumental task of exploring and utilising alternative dispute resolution mechanisms with which to face the increasing demands for rebuilding cross-communal relations, particularly in areas hit hardest by violence. With the collapse of the central authorities during the war, civil society found itself at the helm of trying to cater to people's basic demands and provide for the needs of the population, replacing interrupted government services.

In the aftermath of the war, the preliminary challenge for civil society in Lebanon was to undertake conflict resolution and foster reconciliation between the various communities before embarking on the conflict *transformation* journey. The need to ensure a solid resolution of longstanding complex issues was evident: Suddenly, following Arab mediation and a top-level intervention by senior politicians, an unexplained but immediate cessation of hostilities was agreed. The Taif Accord concluded by Lebanese leaders did not trickle down to the public and the peace process was not the result of popular participation.

Reliance on civil society hence became necessary to undertake grassroots conflict resolution projects. In the following sections, four organisations and their work are introduced: the Lebanon Conflict Resolution Network, the Permanent Peace Movement, as well as initiatives for Christian-Muslim Dialogue and Dealing with the Past.

4.1.1 *The Lebanon Conflict Resolution Network*

Amidst the plethora of civil society groups emerging in the mid-1990s was the Lebanon Conflict Resolution Network (LCRN), which began as a loose network of civil society activists and volunteers from Lebanon interested in acquiring the necessary conflict resolution skills to implement them in their NGO milieux. LCRN began to undertake modest and small training initiatives in Lebanon which later on grew to encompass several Arab countries.

Over the years, LCRN trainers developed and tested a distinct training methodology consisting of an integrated, three-phased approach. The introductory phase serves to gain

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understanding of the recipients and their needs, and to make them familiar with the basic concepts of conflict resolution and transformation. The second phase consists of the actual training which uses entirely interactive and elicitive methodology. In the third phase, trainers meet the trainees and provide them with follow-up questionnaires and discuss how they have applied their newly acquired skills and what are the lessons learned.

This approach was a response to criticism against the field of conflict resolution training in general that stand-alone, one-off training events were ineffective and had very slim chances of being translated into practice (see, for example, Sprenger 2005). By following the three-phased methodology described above, LCRN provides a continuous cycle of feedback and communication with trainees to ensure that the skills acquired during the workshops are relevant and the usual difficulties in applying them can be surmounted.

LCRN launched two landmark projects in Lebanon in the late 1990s: one with a network of school youth clubs across the country originally set up by Save the Children; and another with two confessional groups in Mount Lebanon villages that had suffered from low intensity violence. The Youth Project included a pilot training phase in four Lebanese regions through a series of carefully crafted workshops to respond to the expectations of the young members. An important achievement was the development of a youth training manual in Arabic for basic conflict resolution skills.[5]

In the Mount Lebanon Project, the LCRN intervention constituted one of the first attempts in Lebanon at direct intervention by a local group in local conflict, which succeeded in overcoming suspicions and doubts about its objectivity. The project consisted of months of preparatory meetings with representatives of both communities which culminated in two training interventions, with special sessions devoted to facilitating joint projects between both groups and subsequently both villages. The workshops were implemented discreetly, with no coverage by the media. Only after implementation of the joint projects, which had been agreed upon in the workshops, did the initiative benefit from media coverage. By then the local authorities – the heads of municipalities from the two villages – had opened up and taken ownership of the project.

The goal of this intervention was to re-build the damaged relationships between residents of both villages. After peaceful coexistence prior to the war, communication and regular relationships were now totally disrupted. The intervention was geared to what Lederach (1997) calls the "grassroots actors". Participants were activists in youth clubs, environmental NGOs and scouts, and enjoyed the support and trust of their peers. These actors, who form the next generation and who are genuinely interested in re-building peace, had the most promising potential to become constructive agents of change in their own environment. The LCRN intervention generated a set of working relationships characterized by collaboration in several areas between both villages. In many ways, it filled the vacant space left by government.

In an effort to strengthen the field of conflict resolution in the Arab world in general, LCRN, with support of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), developed an Arabic conflict resolution manual along with an accompanying reader (Balian 1998). The manual is the first in the Arab world and includes original sections on negotiation, conflict analysis, mediation and facilitation, along with a section adapted from MCC's English conflict resolution manual. Around one thousand copies were subsequently distributed all over the Arab world.[6]

Since its inception, LCRN's target groups have grown from civil society activists and youth associations to journalists, political parties and rights groups. LCRN has also taken its training, capacity-building and intervention capability across the region to Morocco, Yemen, Jordan and Syria,

[5] The manual (Save the Children/LCRN 1999) is available through LCRN or Save the Children's office in Beirut.
[6] The manual and reader are disseminated free of charge through LCRN.

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Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, and beyond the Arab World to Montenegro and Armenia. Most notable is its work in Yemen and Jordan. In Yemen, after several training interventions with parliamentarians and political parties, organised by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), LCRN managed to conduct conflict resolution and negotiation training with tribal arbitrators and conciliators. The training was considered so relevant that recipients kept requesting follow-up and more advanced skills. This blend of modern techniques with centuries-old traditions promises to give the field of conflict resolution a new dimension in the region. In Jordan, following years of interventions and training with a variety of stakeholders including mainly civil society actors, a Jordan Conflict Resolution Program (JCRP) was established in partnership between LCRN and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, similar in structure and function to LCRN.

These examples of LCRN's work in Yemen and Jordan illustrate an inter-Arab collaboration where the capacity of one local civil society organisation is able to support and assist the creation of similar organisations in neighbouring countries. In tension-ridden, semi-tribal societies in the Arab world, it is not to be taken for granted that such a sensitive topic as conflict resolution can be introduced without extensive trust-building.

4.1.2 *The Permanent Peace Movement*

Formed in 1986 as a university peace group, the Permanent Peace Movement (PPM) grew to become an officially registered NGO following the war in 1991. PPM's work is described by its founder as having gone through three stages:[7]

1) *reactive*, when members reacted to violent events during the war by protesting and demanding peace, without appreciating the full value and requirements of peace;

2) *mobilising*, when PPM gave public lectures and organised meetings on the issue of peace and war denunciation, such as public rallies to foster rapprochement and peacebuilding; and

3) *skill-building*, when PPM developed its methodology of training in conflict resolution and peacebuilding and moved to implementing practical, skill-oriented sessions with specific target groups.

From 1997 to 2000, PPM initiated a wide and intensive training initiative in Mount Lebanon, targeting a total of 90 villages and including hundreds of trainees. The aim of this large undertaking was not only to impart to trainees – local civil society – necessary conflict transformation skills, but also to work indirectly with repatriated internally displaced persons (IDPs), create a new public space of constructive interaction between them, and assist the process of reconciliation. PPM's strategy consisted of grouping villages in clusters of 4-5 adjacent, confessionally-mixed localities. Each cluster participated at the outset in a one-day meeting to define what villagers perceived as conflict and to fill out a questionnaire on their vision for the future of coexistence. At a later stage, PPM grouped three village clusters each, drafted criteria for participants and selected a representative group of the entire geographic area in which they had engaged early on. This newly selected group participated in 4-day training workshops over two separate weekends focusing on basic conflict resolution skills.

PPM's overarching goal was to move beyond training to develop joint projects between the various target groups and to begin developing relationships which would form in the future the necessary basis for coexistence. The work in the villages is continuing to this day. Interest in conflict resolution grew so strong among participants that people started joining PPM. Today, the organisation includes four former trainees as members of its administrative board. Another indicator

7 Interview with the founder and director of PPM, Fadi Abi-Allam, 21 December 2005.

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of success for PPM is that initiatives are coming directly from participants and no longer have to wait for the implementation of PPM projects on the ground. PPM credits itself with having effected a rapprochement between two major political forces that were erstwhile enemies. PPM's work has reached out to political parties, municipalities and other entities in the villages.

In 2002, PPM adopted a project on small arms control and became the only Lebanese NGO working and active on this issue. More than once, PPM has broken a taboo by tackling the issue of small arms in Lebanon directly, even in rural areas where bearing arms is looked upon favourably. On this issue, PPM engages in awareness raising and lobbying – particularly against shooting for celebration, an age-old custom in Lebanon – with politicians and legislators. PPM also works on proposing legal amendments and modifications for existing laws and legal texts on the issue of small arms.

PPM's approach displays sensitivity to the political dynamics and, similar to LCRN, focuses on trust-building and incrementally strengthening the skills of the target groups. PPM invested heavily in building capacities of community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs in the belief that these form the best conduit to build sustainable peace and effect true transformation of realities and relationships on the ground.

4.1.3 *Islamic Christian Dialogue*

The Institute for Islamic-Christian Studies at Saint Joseph University in Beirut focuses on an area often neglected by NGOs: encouraging openness and pluralism among religious men. Through an integrated approach of training and lectures, the Institute targets teachers of religious studies and works with them on developing their skills and knowledge in religious pluralism, diversity and tolerance. Academics, civil society activists and religious people make up the teams of lecturers and trainers. The training and lecturing include such topics as conflict resolution and communication as well as understanding the important features of a multi-religious society and the richness it brings.[8]

The project encourages joint work and cooperation between teachers from various backgrounds and serves to break down stereotypes and prejudices. It also helps participants discover each others' values and what they hold in common. The project developed an interactive website through which people can chat and discuss issues of common concern as a continuation of the work started in the workshops.

The work of the Institute is an example of what a multi-confessional society like Lebanon can and should do to recognize the differences that characterize it and celebrate the richness they provide. The Institute's training is a microcosm of what could be done on a global scale to foster intercultural and inter-religious understanding.

4.1.4 *Permanent Civil Peace Observatory, Memory for the Future and Other Initiatives for Dealing with the Past*

An important post-war initiative in Lebanon is the establishment of the Permanent Civil Peace Observatory, which is a group of intellectuals and civil society activists engaged in monitoring the evolving situation of civil peace in Lebanon. The Observatory monitors and documents events that directly or indirectly affect the situation of peace in the country, and puts out a yearly report on the index of civil peace.[9] While the index is not fully developed and is hardly a scientific tool, it helps provide a platform for future recommendations for a permanent peace in the country.

8 Interview with the programme coordinator, Rita Ayoub, 19 November 2005. For more information, see www.hiwar.net.
9 *Fondation Libanaise pour la Paix Permanente* publishes Arabic summaries of its reports which can be ordered online (see www.lfpcp.org).

Moreover, in 2001 a group of activists, intellectuals and journalists tackled the issue of post-war memory and memorial culture in Lebanon by holding an international conference in Beirut entitled "Memory for the Future". Following this event a core group of proponents of post-war memory was formed. Work continued and culminated in the founding of a new NGO bearing the same name as the conference. This NGO has as part of its mission the commemoration of the war and the process of drawing out the necessary lessons and documenting them so that new generations are offered a useful memory. It has already published a book on this issue (Mémoire pour l'Avenir 2002). Similar initiatives have appeared in the country in the late 1990s, most notably the NGO Association of the Disappeared, seeking to find out the truth about what happened to 17,000 Lebanese who disappeared during the war and whose fate remains unknown.

Another notable event was a public apology announced by one former militia leader, in which he sought forgiveness from the "mothers whose sons he killed in the war". The letter of apology was published in the Lebanese Daily *Annahar*.[10] Soon after, other militiamen from other confessional denominations followed suit and the group is now working the lecture circuits in Lebanon and abroad, denouncing violence and admonishing youth to focus on peacebuilding. Their initiative, however, was not taken seriously enough by the state and other civil society associations and is practically unheard of in Lebanon.

The Memory for the Future as well as the Association of the Disappeared carry with them a painful reminder that the recent past of Lebanon has not yet been dealt with in a healthy and acceptable way. The fact remains that a long and arduous road needs to be taken to arrive at the truth and establish a narrative that would become a learning reference for future generations. Lebanon, it appears, can no longer delay this.

4.2 Morocco

Morocco presents a different and distinct case. As its rapid drive towards openness and democratisation went into top gear with the ascension to the throne of King Mohammed VI, civil society, media and political life in general began to enjoy larger degrees of freedom and more substantive interaction with international actors, chief among them international NGOs. Below, two initiatives aiming at capacity-building for conflict resolution and national reconciliation are introduced. While these initiatives cooperated closely with state authorities and/or international NGOs, the main interest here is how local civil society organisations became involved in the process.

4.2.1 *Amicales*

Morocco's civil society structure includes many layers. There exist NGOs and local associations or CBOs, more commonly known as *amicales*. The latter came into existence as loosely formed associations in urban slums to act as bridge-builders between the state and local residents of shanty towns. The *amicales*' role quickly became essential for the organisation of local community empowerment projects and other civic activities. Their closeness to the people and the issues rendered them an effective and preferred medium.

A major project, launched in 2002 by Holding d'Aménagement Al Omrane and Search for Common Ground with support from USAID[11], was aimed at strengthening the *amicales* of a poor shanty town called Sidi Yahia Al-Gharb (SYG), 70 kilometres northeast of the capital Rabat.

10 *"A'tazhir 'an Af'ali Bismi Lubnan"* ["I Apologize for my Deeds in the Name of Lebanon"], *Annahar Daily,* No. 20574, p.5, Column 7, 10 February 2000.
11 More information can be found at www.sfcg.org/programmes/morocco/morocco_shanty.html and www.tanmia.ma/article. php3?id_article=626.

SYG, similar to other impoverished townships in Morocco, witnessed increasing numbers of disaffected youth engaging in school truancy and prone to violent behaviour. SYG was also no stranger to the typical land ownership conflicts that have characterized most of the semi-urban communities across Morocco. Several forms of conflict existed over the scarcity of natural resources such as forests which provided a lucrative logging business for wood companies. Added to this is the fact that previous development projects have parachuted in and out of SYG with no significant effort toward sustainability. All of these factors have created an entrenched culture of cynicism that became deep-rooted as a result of years of unmet promises of infrastructure development. Confidence building with residents and local stakeholders became a must.

SYG includes seven *amicales* that became highly active throughout the implementation of a housing rehabilitation project sponsored by the government. Working with a federation of the seven *amicales*, the goal of the two-year project was to build the capacity of SYG youth and women in conflict resolution, collaborative planning, team-building, leadership and consensus-building. It included a series of facilitated town hall meetings, followed by collaborative, community-wide action, and a series of skill-building workshops. To ensure sustainability, a community resource centre was built in the heart of SYG.

The project's first challenge in addition to building confidence and overcoming cynicism, was to begin securing local ownership of community activities. The only way to do this was to adopt a collaborative approach that included mediation and structured facilitation as its main principles. The second challenge was in the use of the methodology itself and had to address the dilemma of carefully blending modern techniques with traditional local approaches to problem-solving that respect hierarchy and rely on the Islamic religion as a source of legitimacy and inspiration. The third challenge was to establish a project presence significant enough to make a difference in people's lives and also trigger an irreversible snowballing effect that would continue after project activities were officially over. At the heart of the project grew therefore the conviction that blending conflict prevention approaches with development activities was key to the success of any plan for the community.

At the outset, a stakeholder analysis was conducted to ensure that all major parties that had played and continued to play an active role in community life were represented in the project and had a chance to provide input into its activities. Previously ignored entities such as school principals were brought in and later contributed important ideas and efforts to help the project reach its intended objectives. The latter were constantly modified as the project progressed, remaining faithful to the collaborative, participatory methodology of community development.

This facilitated process of collaborative planning quickly produced consensus on community-wide activities, such as creating a public garden and launching a drawing competition between schools. The short-term aims of these activities were to involve as many community residents as possible in collaborative activities and to earn the confidence of disgruntled families and youth. Including the municipality, local governor, *amicales*, school principals, government representatives and local private sector – all working together – proved later to be highly productive to the *amicales* as they adopted it as their *modus operandi* for future community activities. The success of the creation of a green zone and the student competition increased residents' confidence in the project and removed the cynicism that had threatened its start.

Next, a series of interactive trainings in basic dispute resolution skills took place, followed by targeted workshops to equip participants with necessary skills to design, organise and deliver training to women and youth within the community and to other neighbouring communities in the future. The focus of their effort was to create teams of specialists and trainers in communication and

conflict resolution so as to trigger a transformation within the SYG community of 10,000 people. It was also designed to create a wider base for democratisation by engaging youth – particularly the disaffected among them – in meaningful activities for the benefit of the community. In the aftermath of the initial trainings, a series of workshops in mediation followed. Here, too, the focus was on mediation and interventions to resolve community disputes. The conflicts subjected to mediation ranged from small, mundane disputes to issues relating to wider community interests.

In general, the project succeeded in building new relationships between community leaders in SYG and in creating new groups of constructive social actors. In an independent project evaluation conducted at the end of the activities, the results – based on interviews with stakeholders and other research – indicated that project objectives have been met.[12] In a conservative, semi-illiterate community, conflict resolution skills were a very welcome addition to people's lives. "The *amicale* members noted a substantial change in their ability to communicate with other community leaders and the members particularly valued the contacts established with local authorities … With a few exceptions, the *amicale* leaders demonstrated consensus decision-making and collaborative planning, working together even on small projects such as the design of [their new] centre's garden."[13]

The SYG project proved its usefulness following the suicide bombings of 16 May 2003 when 14 young suicide bombers came from a shanty town with conditions similar to SYG. Following the bombings, the project received increased attention as the new government policy focused on investing in youth and in building their capacity for nonviolent conflict resolution. The project also proved that no contradictions existed between local, Islamic values and modern approaches to conflict resolution.

Conflict prevention is now officially a recognized and legitimate tool for planning, designing and implementing community-development projects. The community resource centre at SYG offers mediation and facilitation services in addition to training in these skills – the first among semi-urbanised townships in Morocco. Similar initiatives have multiplied in Morocco since 2004, mostly led by local civil society associations. While no official statistics are available on this issue, there have been a number of externally funded local initiatives in Casablanca. Two of these initiatives are taking place in the shanty towns of Sidi Moumen and Bouchkou and are led by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and Search for Common Ground (SFCG) respectively. The projects aim to train young leaders in communications skills, conflict resolution and mediation and prepare them for positive leadership roles in their communities.

Finally, the interest that Moroccan civil society organisations like labour unions, NGOs and political parties have shown in acquiring conflict resolution skills is also notable; some have even developed their own internal training capacities and are disseminating these skills to their cadres nationally. For example, the *Confédération Démocratique des Travailleurs* (CDT) has established a training unit focusing on communication skills, negotiation and mediation whose trainers have participated in training workshops with the author and other professional mediators.

4.2.2 Civil Society and Morocco's Equity and Reconciliation Commission

In January 2004, King Mohammed VI established a National Commission for Equity and Reconciliation (ERC) to look into the Kingdom's past abuses – including arbitrary detention, abduction and killing of regime opponents and opposition activists – and to determine material compensation for families of the victims. Tasked with documenting the truth and determining institutional responsibility for four decades (1956-1998) of human rights abuses by the *ancien régime*

12 Unpublished evaluation conducted by Fulbright Scholar Nicole Bennett, Rabat, 2003-2004, 8.
13 Ibid, 11.

of King Hassan II, providing compensation to victims, promoting reconciliation and recommending reforms, the Commission was headed by a human rights activist and a former political prisoner who had spent 17 years in secret detention. The ERC completed, and submitted to the King, its final report in November 2005 and then released its findings to the public shortly thereafter.[14]

The establishment of the ERC marked a turning point in the history of the Kingdom and established a precedent in the MENA region. It is arguably the only known commission of its kind to have been established by a state that decided to document its own abuses and, as a result of internal political dynamics, to deal with its past in a healthy and sustainable way. The ERC was the culmination of a process that started in 1990 with the establishment by the late King Hassan II of the Advisory Council on Human Rights (ACHR) which was followed in 1999 by an Indemnity Commission (Slyomovics 2005). The latter, along with the ACHR, was seen as an attempt to embellish the regime's image following severe criticism of the Kingdom's human rights record. In the interim period between 1999 and the establishment of the ERC in 2004, Moroccan civil society, notably the human rights movement led by the Moroccan Organisation for Human Rights, played an important role in ensuring that the ERC be established and that victims be given a chance to voice their grievances.

The ERC's mandate lacked any judicial or legal powers of subpoena or prosecution but benefited from the backing of the Royal Court.[15] The moral backing that the King's support accorded to it allowed the Commission to undertake a monumental effort to hold televised public hearings across the Kingdom and to entertain over 20,000 requests for compensation. The process took nearly two years to be completed, with payments recommended to 9,280 victims.[16]

Though backing the process in most instances, Moroccan civil society played a critical role in reminding the public of the need for transparency in the proceedings of the ERC, and for clear criteria and mechanisms to determine what kind of, and how much, compensation victims would receive, and according to which facts or historical interpretations. According to the Human Rights Association, the work of the ERC provided an unfinished process of justice since it did not provide for prosecutions and legal proceedings against the aggressors. Additionally, the figures of victims of abuse published by the ERC were severely criticised by civil society which was quick to counter them by different and opposing numbers.[17] Moroccan civil society went even further by organising parallel hearings with a number of victims and their family members who felt the Commission's version of the truth without punishment for the perpetrators fell short. As a direct result of these hearings, a number of victims are seeking compensation through the courts (Slyomovics 2005).

The relationship between the ERC and some NGOs – the Moroccan Human Rights Association, the Moroccan Human Rights Organisation and the Forum for Truth and Equity – was confrontational at the outset of the ERC's work. Criticism exchanged between the ERC's president and the NGOs managed to distance the two entities from each other and reduce their chances of collaboration to a bare minimum. The NGOs, along with others who joined later, formed a monitoring committee for the Commission's work and published their own detailed reports and accounts of the hearings they held with families of the victims. By the last months of the Commission's work, the relationship between the civil society grouping and the ERC improved considerably and cooperation

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14 The final report of the ERC was published on its official website www.ier.ma.
15 See the International Center for Transitional Justice Website for related press releases; e.g. "Morocco's Truth Commission Experience: One More Step toward Truth and Justice", 10 November 2005; "Moroccan King Orders Public Release of Truth Commission Final Report", 16 December 2005. All are available at www.ictj.org/en/where/region5/591.html.
16 See "Morocco Abuse Report Criticized", *BBC News Online,* 19 December 2005.
17 The final report of the ERC cited that 592 people were killed by the state between 1956 and 1999; the Moroccan Human Rights Association puts the number at 1,500 killed in its report on the preliminary evaluation of the work of the ERC in June 2005 (see Moroccan Human Rights Association 2005).

took place in workshops and conferences. Moroccan civil society apparently realized the seriousness of the Commission's work and acknowledges the fact that, though imperfect, the report of the ERC has become a historical landmark in transitional justice in the Arab world. While it is not the intention of this article to evaluate the work of the ERC here, its establishment process, interface with society and the role of the NGOs is a noteworthy development for reconciliation efforts in the MENA region. Other troubled societies in the region that are trying to deal with their past will have an Arab precedent to learn from.

To its credit, Moroccan civil society has brought the work of the ERC into the open and into public debate, thus obliging it to increase transparency in its proceedings. While it would have been preferable to undergo a dialogue with the ERC, the work of civil society raised awareness about glaring loopholes in the work of the Commission by pointing out, for example, that some of those who committed abuses still occupy senior positions in the state apparatus.

The Arabic title of the ERC is literally the National Commission for Truth, Equity and Reconciliation (*Al Hay'a Al Wataniyya lilhaqiqa walinsaf walmusalaha*). So far, the Commission has managed to document and archive the truth about what happened over four decades of regime suppression and has managed to be generally equitable in compensating victims. There remains the "reconciliation" part of its mandate which will necessitate the cooperation of civil society as well as those in power in order to finally turn the page on that dark era and guarantee that it will never happen again.

No doubt the Moroccan experience of truth seeking and giving reparations to victims is the right entry point to deal with a past of human rights abuses. The challenge remains for civil society and the state to move forward with genuine reconciliation efforts which will mean that approaches of conflict transformation, notably facilitated dialogue and consensus-building, will have to be adopted and utilised in this direction.

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5. Practical Challenges and Recommendations

The success of conflict resolution training and interventions – examples of which have been presented in the previous sections – has not been unchallenged. Challenges to the practice of conflict resolution and reconciliation arise specifically in three areas: ideology, the systemic environment and finances.

Certain sectors in the Arab World and even some conflict resolution activists consider the field of conflict resolution to be a Western invention and thus alien to the local culture. This draping of the field of conflict resolution with foreign flags produces two practical challenges for conflict resolution organisations in the Arab World. First, externally these organisations face political, cultural and sometimes even philosophical challenges and obstacles from various authorities, who at best dismiss the efforts of these organisations as culturally irrelevant or inapplicable in the Arab World, and in the worst case accuse them of being cultural or even political lackeys of the West. The second challenge is related to the first one but more internal in nature: it is created by the buy-in of some local conflict resolution activists into the above arguments and thus the creation of internal conflicts among activists, who experience a strong tension between their desire to be true to their culture and environment and the urge to enhance their practices with conflict resolution skills and techniques that can be learned abroad.

On the systemic level some sectors are unwilling or unable to translate the conflict resolution attitude and skills into new relational patterns encompassing the environment and context

in which they operate – this remains an obstacle despite the successful projects discussed in section four. Thus empowerment and relational changes are predominantly registered on the interpersonal levels. The task of sustaining these changes is left to individual effort and resolve with very little or no systemic support.

Financially, almost all conflict resolution organisations who engage in community outreach activities are constantly scrutinised by their partners or beneficiaries regarding the sources of their funding with some outside sources deemed politically sensitive and controversial to some target groups. In this context, Scandinavian and German donors in general have been found the least problematic for conflict resolution projects.[18]

In regard to these three main challenges, and based on regional training and intervention experiences, it would seem recommendable that Arab conflict resolution organisations should not join in the draping of the field of conflict resolution by any flag, be it Western or other. Pedagogically and politically, it is our view that conflict resolution is a field working systematically on issues of peace, harmony, collaboration and nonviolence. These are *human* endeavours which have been with us from the dawn of civilisation. The latest attempt to encapsulate them and systematise them into a science may be led by Western institutions and thinkers but the practice of these basic human endeavours continues to be present internationally with people who have not even heard the term "conflict resolution" as such. Conflict resolution and its underlying philosophy are not about flags or cultures; they are about people.

Moreover, Arab conflict resolution organisations must strive to go beyond personal empowerment efforts and bring forth systemic relational changes with their training and intervention efforts. This needs a closer and more in-depth study of the systems with which they operate, and the establishment of closer collaboration with the leadership of these systems to reduce their apprehension and secure their partnership in bringing about any systemic relational changes. This would also require a better targeting of the most strategic sectors within these systems for any planned training, intervention or capacity-building efforts, to secure the involvement of those individuals and layers with the highest multiplier effects.

6. Concluding Remarks and Next Steps

The Arab region, unlike other continents such as Africa, is a latecomer to the field of conflict resolution. Nonetheless, the successes that certain civil society associations have achieved in less than a decade are very encouraging. As evidenced by the continued high demand for training and interventions, the field is growing and enlisting an ever-increasing number of supporters. Groups such as LCRN, PPM and others have managed to carve out a local identity for the field of conflict resolution and have succeeded in "Arabizing" the approaches, thus winning stakeholders' hearts and minds.

In Lebanon, following the assassination in 2005 of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the political polarisation that it created, debate had re-surfaced about the need for genuine reconciliation and for dealing seriously with the past. Many Lebanese believe that in order to move forward, they must commemorate the war and learn from their not-so-distant past. Civil society groups are leading the efforts in the direction of genuine reconciliation; they will, however, need the assistance of other powerful actors, namely the state. Lebanon will have the recent Moroccan experience of truth seeking to learn from. If they want to effect social change the Lebanese cannot pretend to move forward without exploring a past that is still very present in people's lives.

18 This assessment has been made specifically with respect to the work of LCRN by its founding director.

Despite brief moments of joy in 2005, though, the Israeli attack on Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and the subsequent split between major political groups in the country have confirmed the fragility of the social peace that has prevailed following the end of the civil war in 1990. While during the civil war the conflict was largely fought along inter-religious (Christian-Muslim) lines, the current tensions in Lebanon are highest along inter-sectarian (Sunni-Shiite) divides. The Iranian-backed Shiites of Lebanon are aiming to topple the US-backed, Sunni-led government and hence have mobilized their supporters based on alarmingly high sectarian sensitivities. This led, in January 2007, to the first violent confrontations since the end of the civil war when Sunni and Shiite youth from opposed political camps clashed in the streets of Beirut and the northern city of Tripoli, resulting in three deaths and 21 injuries. The street clashes conjured up images of the civil war and re-awakened sectarian sensitivities by heightening calls for revenge and retributions – a serious setback for the seemingly reversible peacebuilding efforts in Lebanon.

What the January 2007 events have shown is that in Lebanon reconciliation is shelved for now. More importantly, no lessons seem to have been learned from the not-so-distant violent past that had gripped the country. Lebanese youth, who have displayed a knack for inheriting old hatreds and stereotypes, remain the prime engine for today's violence. The violent events have also underscored the sore absence of a genuine memorialisation and reconciliation process through which the Lebanese remember their past but reconcile for the future.

While there has not been a comprehensive, systematic evaluation of the peacebuilding and conflict resolution work of Arab civil society, a few lessons are beginning to emerge. It is clear that working with the grassroots actors and organisations has yielded encouraging and promising results that allow the conclusion that these actors remain worthy of further investment in terms of training and interventions. Arab civil society seems comfortable with its role as a third-party conveyor of skills and processes; it is not yet clear how it would fare if it were a party to a conflict.

In 2005, the Arab Partnership for Conflict Prevention and Human Security (APCPHS) was founded. The APCPHS[19] is a regional group of civil society associations and activists engaged in conflict resolution and interested in sharing experiences and developing this field in the region. The Partnership has managed to put the Arab dispute resolution scene on the global radar screen and has laid the groundwork for a far-reaching network that promotes conflict resolution, reconciliation and peacebuilding in the region.

The future of Arab civil society's engagement with conflict resolution seems promising as regards the development of technical capacities and specializations. Gone are the days where this type of work was vulnerable to destructive attacks and accused of foreign conspiracy. Other challenges remain, however, particularly if the region is to move up to the next level of blending modern approaches with local traditions of mediation and dispute resolution. Still more serious challenges linger on the political and institutional level. Politically, the situation of Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon and other violent hotspots in the region overshadows the modest efforts of conflict resolution professionals and peacebuilders in the region and exposes their credibility to serious detractions and attacks. The absence of an Arabic body of literature that would foster the growth of the field and provide locally anchored approaches is also a hindrance to the "normalization" of the field of conflict resolution in the Arab World.[20] Finally, conflict resolution and peace studies cannot remain within the training and civil society domains if they are to thrive. Just like human rights, conflict resolution and peace studies must be integrated into civic education curricula in schools in the region to assure the growth of this field across generations and the formation of new minds well-versed in and convinced of these concepts.

19 More information and the regional action agenda can be found at www.gppac.net, Region "Middle East and North Africa".
20 Save the Children/LCRN 1999 and Balian 1998 are first steps in this area (see *section 4.1.1*).

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Association Collaboration pour le Développement:
www.tanmia.ma

Fondation Libanaise pour la Paix Permanente:
www.lfpcp.org

Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, Regional Process Middle East and North Africa:
www.gppac.net

Human Rights Watch:
www.hrw.org

Institute for Islamic-Christian Studies:
www.ieic.usj.edu.lb/

Institute of Law, Birzeit University:
http://lawcenter.birzeit.edu/iol/ar/index.php?action_id=211

International Campaign Against Honour Killing:
www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1289

International Centre for Transitional Justice:
www.ictj.org

Islamic Christian Dialogue in Lebanon:
www.hiwar.net

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www.kleudge.com/flpcp/default.htm

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www.amdh.org.ma/index.htm

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www.sfcg.org/programmes/morocco/morocco_shanty.html

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