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Artists and the Arab Uprisings

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*Cover photo: In this March 13, 2012, photo, a boy watches a female Egyptian artist and activist at work on the "No Walls Street" in downtown Cairo, part of a graffiti campaign to paint on concrete block walls a reproduction of the streets behind them. The colorful graffiti splashed over buildings is a reminder of the fervor that was centered in Tahrir Square.
(AP Photo/Nasser Nasser)*

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Summary

After decades of authoritarianism, a wave of political change and unrest began to sweep across the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011. After some initial hesitation, the United States embraced these changes, recognizing that successful transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic societies will not be easy and will require change along multiple vectors. This report focuses on one vector whose power and importance is often underestimated and neglected: the cultural and artistic arena.

Any consideration of the cultural sphere following the Arab uprisings must take into account a major trend across the region: the rise of Islamist parties that have outperformed more secular factions in the early stages of political transitions. Islamist groups are not uniform; they encompass a continuum of actors ranging from nonviolent groups with deep roots in society, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to hardline Salafists and even organizations that previously used violence against the state. The inclusion of Islamists in formal politics makes political systems more representative and adds legitimacy to governing institutions. On the other hand, it also presents challenges for artistic freedom insofar as some of these groups embrace policies that run counter to such values as religious freedom and gender equality.

The rise of Islamist parties thus plays an increasingly important role in contests among governing authorities, extremist movements, and reformist voices. In the cultural sphere, regional artists are often squeezed between the bounds of acceptable discourse set by rulers who fear freedom of expression and conservative religious groups that

oppose the liberalization of social values. Thus, governments and some Islamist groups have worked to limit artistic freedom out of concern that artists will challenge their roles as the gatekeepers of information and moral propriety. That said, regional artists who favor tolerance, democracy, and nonviolence come from both secular and religious backgrounds. Consequently, support for regional artists does not suggest support only for artists with secular orientations or opposition to more religiously inspired art. In some instances, art drawing on religious themes may resonate more strongly with people in conservative societies and prove more effective in advocating such principles as tolerance and nonviolence than secular material.

This report seeks to identify the challenges that regional artists have faced from both the state and society in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and, most importantly, how policies need to shift to better support these artists in overcoming barriers to the production and dissemination of their work. We suggest new strategies for doing so in which regional actors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) take the leading role. We recognize that greater freedom of expression across the region can also empower extremist voices that reject alternative viewpoints. But opening up space for greater artistic freedom can also allow voices that support pluralism and democratic reform to reach broader audiences than is currently the case, leveling the playing field in countries undergoing fundamental political transitions and those still under authoritarian rule.

U.S. Policies and the Cultural Arena in the Middle East

In light of the unprecedented uprisings in the Arab world, the United States has adjusted its policies in several ways that could have an impact on cultural policies toward the Middle East. The first shift has been to embrace the spirit of change by declaring that it is “the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region and to support

transitions to democracy.”¹ In countries where political changes have occurred, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, U.S. policy has focused on achieving a stable and nonviolent transition to democratic civilian rule. Part of this effort has been to reach out to new (or newly empowered) political actors as they emerge from long-standing periods of authoritarian rule.

The second major shift in U.S. policy has been an emphasis on broadening engagement beyond government-to-government interactions. The U.S. Department of State and other U.S. government agencies are seeking to expand and strengthen people-to-people relationships. In parallel, the State Department has embraced public-private partnerships as part of its engagement strategy. U.S. policymakers view such partnerships as advantageous because they add resources and capacity, and they are able to establish a presence in places that U.S. diplomacy normally cannot access. They also provide an ability to work with organizations and individuals overseas who might be concerned about being connected to activities directly sponsored by the U.S. government. In addition, through the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative, the U.S. government has increased its government-to-NGO support across the region.

U.S. cultural policies, if properly directed and coordinated, could play an important role in supporting these broader shifts in U.S. foreign policy. Ultimately, democratic transitions can take root only if the culture and ideology of these states accept them. Regional artists and the creative work they produce can play an important role in shaping societal views in ways that reinforce a democratic society. U.S. policy can support this process, but only indirectly by broadening engagement beyond government-to-government interaction. The U.S. government cannot and should not take a leading role in such efforts. However, supporting artists and cultural freedom through nongovernmental channels can be a vital component of the larger process of building the civil society necessary to support peaceful and democratic transition.

¹ Barack Obama, President of the United States, “Remarks by the President on Middle East and North Africa,” transcript of a speech at the U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 19, 2011.

Artistic Freedom After the Arab Uprisings

An important step in determining the best ways to support artistic and cultural freedom is exploring the barriers that regional artists continue to face in the broad dissemination of their work. While the Arab uprisings have lifted some prior restrictions in the cultural sphere, they have also introduced a new set of challenges. A review of the new environment in Egypt after the January 25 revolution illustrates the countervailing dynamics that have erased red lines on a number of topics previously considered off limits while also introducing a new set of restrictions and constraints. Egyptian artists remain squeezed between government authorities and conservative religious forces that seek to limit the bounds of artistic freedom.

Since the January 25 revolution, little has changed in the legal framework used by Egyptian authorities to censor artistic works. Politics, religion, and sexuality are the three main content areas subject to official censorship. The standards for censorship are ambiguous enough to afford broad discretion to government censors. The current director-general of the censorship office, himself a holdover from the Mubarak era, said that his office has granted more leeway to the airing of political opposition since the revolution. However, he expected no change in the censorship standards applied to sexual or religious content.²

In parallel to government censorship and bureaucratic mechanisms of control, artistic freedom is also constrained by societal pressures. Artists must comport with conservative values or risk public backlash that can include organized campaigns by conservative religious activists. For example, every Egyptian writer is aware of the infamous 1994 attack on Naguib Mahfouz, who was stabbed in the neck by religious extremists who viewed his work as un-Islamic. Although that stabbing occurred almost two decades ago and Mahfouz has since passed away, Egypt's most celebrated author is still the target of vitriol from conservative Islamists. Attacks on artists whose work diverges

² Interview with the director-general of the Office of Censorship of Artistic Works, Cairo, Egypt, April 11, 2012.

from conservative interpretations of Islamic values also extend to other media, including cinema.

Societal pressure on Egyptian artists extends far beyond Islamists who are hostile to the arts; family pressure can also play a role in preventing aspiring artists from pursuing their interests, because “art” is still not viewed across the region as a profession with stature. Young Egyptians also lack financial incentives to pursue the arts. The crux of the problem is weak consumer demand for cultural production, a dynamic that is particularly pronounced in the publishing field. Financial difficulties in the creative industries are compounded by a lack of protection for intellectual property. Laws designed to protect intellectual property of artists are either absent or not enforced.

Egypt’s new political authorities have sent mixed signals regarding their positions on artistic freedom. In the early months of the country’s transition away from military rule, the Muslim Brotherhood made a concerted effort to dispel the Islamist bogeyman, reaching out to constituencies traditionally skeptical of the organization, including the artistic community. The group’s most visible effort was a January 2012 meeting between the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, General Guide Muhammad Badi’, and the head of Egypt’s Filmmakers Syndicate. The Brotherhood attempted to use this outreach to dispel fears that it would use its newfound power to limit cultural freedom. However, the Brotherhood’s gesture failed to win over many of the rank-and-file members of the Filmmakers Syndicate.

While the Brotherhood has sought to position itself as a moderate force on cultural issues, many Salafist groups are openly hostile to artistic freedom. In a series of interviews conducted by *Al-Shurouq* newspaper with leaders of the Salafist movement in Egypt, some of these religious conservatives went as far as to advocate complete segregation of male and female actors in dramatic productions or restricting artists to only representing factual events while prohibiting fictional scenarios.³ These positions have fanned fears that Salafists will push the

³ “Fann lil Mar’a wa Fann lil Rajul” [“Female Art and Male Art”], *Al-Shurouq* (Egypt), June 17, 2011.

Brotherhood—or the Brotherhood will use the Salafists as cover—to restrict cultural expression.

In the midst of this tug of war between state authorities and conservative religious forces is a vibrant—if underfunded—community of Egyptian artists. Cairo has long been a cultural capital of the Arab world and still boasts some of the region's most prominent writers, filmmakers, and playwrights. The artists interviewed for this project were energized by the January 25 revolution while also mindful of the challenges ahead. Many had used their talents to document the uprising—for example, shooting film of street protests or sketching scenes of police brutality. Others were openly critical of government institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, and the professional syndicates that they viewed as tools of state control. Some, but not all, were fearful of Islamists moving to limit artistic freedom, although most differentiated between the Muslim Brotherhood—whom they saw as relative moderates—and the Salafist trend, which they considered a genuine threat.

Current U.S. Government and Nongovernmental Efforts to Support Artistic Freedom

The U.S. government has a variety of programs that support cultural and artistic freedom. These programs and policies fall into three general categories: cultural diplomacy through artistic exchanges, financial or technical assistance and training or educational opportunities for Middle Eastern artists, and U.S. pressure on Middle Eastern governments to protect artistic expression and curb censorship.

Despite consistent recognition of the importance of enhancing the outreach and impact of regional artists, U.S. government programs remain relatively limited and haphazard. While multiple U.S. government departments and agencies are engaged in these efforts, there is a lack of strategic guidance and coordination. In addition, U.S. embassies in the Middle East and the State Department have been notably quiet on the defense of artistic expression, especially compared with their more robust defenses of religious and political freedom. And, as

they do in other parts of the world, many U.S. government programs focus more on the promotion of American culture in the region than support for local artistic talent.

While U.S. government activity remains minimal, a wide array of nongovernmental activities and programs to engage and support Arab artists has emerged in recent years. These include mentorship programs and artistic exchanges, the establishment of new film schools in the region and Arab film festivals, NGOs that promote Arab artists and better understanding of Arab culture in the United States, Hollywood filmmakers and companies that partner with local talent, and private-sector models to help Middle Eastern artists make a living from their work. Collectively, these nonprofit and for-profit efforts serve important roles, including improving the skills of emerging young talent, helping to promote creative work emanating from the region, and investing financially in regional artists.

Despite these important contributions, the nongovernmental landscape remains uncoordinated, and critical gaps impede artistic production, particularly the continued scarcity of sound funding models. The lack of copyright laws and pervasive pirating across the region also make it difficult for regional artists to make a living from their work. Marketing and distribution of creative content is also a continued challenge, as is the lack of arts infrastructure and arts education in Arab societies.

Drawing on lessons and examples of programs that appear to be working, we offer a set of recommendations to better leverage existing efforts to improve support for regional artists, recognizing that U.S. government efforts in this area should not be central. Instead, bolstering nongovernmental support for regional artists will prove far more effective and should be the lynchpin of any future strategy.

Recommendations for U.S. Government Efforts

- Balance the current focus of public diplomacy and cultural programs that promote U.S. culture in the Middle East with some recognition that support for regional artists is also an important

objective, even if it will need to be channeled through partnerships with NGOs.

- Focus on helping the region's artists and institutions in making the creative industries a source of growth and employment. The region's artists already produce world-class cultural products; U.S. engagement should be about developing the business infrastructure necessary to make being an artist a financially viable career path.
- Make more-vocal efforts to include cultural freedom as a critical component of promoting reform and countering extremism across the region. Treat cultural expression as a universal human right, as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion already are.
- Provide training programs for lawyers, policymakers, and politicians about the importance of allowing and protecting freedom of expression.
- Concentrate on capacity-building for regional artists, finding ways to help them open up space for cultural expression (e.g., through greater Internet access or cultural exchange programs, preferably run by regional NGOs).
- Have artists assist the U.S. government in the selection process for culturally related proposals.
- Prioritize support for nongovernmental efforts to promote cultural expression.

Recommendations for Nongovernmental Efforts

- Encourage market-based companies that help distribute and fund work by regional artists.
- Develop local boards to assist in identifying the challenges artists face in creating and distributing their work. Connect these local boards with partners in the West who have the expertise to help artists overcome these challenges.
- Facilitate exchanges between regional artists and organizers of established international arts festivals. The exchanges should be

designed to help artists gain the practical skills necessary to organize arts festivals that raise their profile and attract tourism revenue.

- Develop metrics for NGOs engaged in regional training (e.g., in media or film production) to determine the success of trainees in maintaining jobs in their fields; such metrics may increase incentives to put more focus on creating sustainable models to support regional talent, not just one-off training sessions.
- Help support the creation of more entertainment distribution companies dedicated to promoting and selling Middle Eastern artistic works globally to support art as a viable industry in this region.
- Leverage multinational companies (i.e., the oil industry) operating in the region to support the arts, with the incentive being a means to improve their image regionally and globally. For example, an oil company could start a program modeled on the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative designed to support mentors and artists specifically from the Middle East.
- Encourage philanthropists or major companies looking to invest in philanthropy to establish an “Ashoka” model for the arts. The Ashoka program supports regional entrepreneurs by providing them with a stipend so they can focus on innovation. A similar program could be designed to fund regional artists so they can focus on creative output.
- Increase partnerships between public and private institutions working in the Middle East art arena to strengthen the efforts of each; the successful public-private partnership between the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Hollywood Bowl offers a potential model.

A New Model for Supporting the Arts

Although these recommendations suggest ways to better leverage ongoing government and nongovernmental programs to support the arts, new models may be necessary to fundamentally restructure support for

the arts in this region. Some of the most successful models recognize the importance of tapping into the large-scale resources and convening power that only governments can provide and marrying them with private institutions and individuals to form public-private partnerships.

One potential approach would be to adapt a model like the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to a Middle East context. While the NEA accepts government funding, it maintains its independence and draws on panels of respected artists to help select and award grants for creative work and programs. One way to adapt the NEA model to the Middle East would be to draw on *regional* funds, starting with foundations in the wealthier Gulf Arab states or Arab expatriates, and use this initial investment to attract funding from other regional foundations and private philanthropists across the region and internationally (particularly Arab expatriates in Europe and North America). The Qatar Foundation, for example, has already demonstrated an interest in investing in the arts and arts education. While Gulf funding may raise concerns about constraints on artistic freedom, foundations and individuals associated with these governments have also demonstrated an understanding, that to build their human capital, independent and critical-thinking skills, including artistic expression, are an essential part of their countries' education curriculum.

But to maintain independence in terms of what type of work is funded and to avoid government donors dictating the artistic agenda, this model would also require a board of well-respected regional artists to run the fund, similar to how the NEA operates. Regional artists and institutions could be eligible to apply to the fund as a regular source of support for artistic work. This type of public-private initiative is certainly not the only way forward, but such a model would enhance enduring support for the arts in this region during a period of transformative change.