



Telebriefing:
Recent Events in the MENA Region:
Catch-up Call for all Ariadne and IHRFG Members
July 18, 2013

Co-sponsored by Ariadne-European Human Rights Funders Network

Speakers:

- [Filiz Bikmen](#), Social Investment and Philanthropy Adviser (former Director of Programs and International Relations, Sabanci Foundation)
- [Barbara Ibrahim](#), Director, John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, American University in Cairo
- [Nurcan Kaya](#), Director, Strategic Fund for Turkey

Moderator:

- Jo Andrews, Director, Ariadne - European Network of Human Rights Funders

This peer-to-peer telebriefing offered eyewitness accounts of recent developments in the MENA region and discussed how they might affect funding. The conversation provided an opportunity to hear from colleagues on new strategies and program threads, review new knowledge tools and resources to assist funders working in this region, and more generally to raise issues of concern with colleagues.

Barbara Ibrahim, Director, John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy, American University in Cairo

Barbara provided an overview of recent, constantly changing developments in Egypt. Both sides in the conflict claim to champion democracy: the Islamists who have been removed from power felt the ballot box granted them legitimacy to rule as they wished, while secular groups called for increased inclusion, transparency and effective governance.

Barbara credited human rights actors for remaining objective and calling for investigations of rights violations on both sides. The broader civil society community has been dismayed by repression of their activities, including restrictions on foreign funding. More informal non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and youth groups have emerged as the movement grows.

Barbara pointed to transitional justice as a key issue moving forward. Partnering with donors in Egypt who have an understanding of conditions on the ground is a good avenue of engagement for foreign funders. The government has recently approved foreign observers, so there is reason for optimism.

Nurcan Kaya, Director, Strategic Fund for Turkey

Nurcan provided background on the recent movement in Taksim Square, reviewing protesters' concerns with proposed development plans. She noted the harsh reaction of police to peaceful, non-violent

protesters, including the use of pepper spray and harsh detention tactics. Most Turkish government officials characterized the protesters as “marauders” and dismissed the legitimacy of public concerns. Protesters were given no option for engagement aside from awaiting the next round of elections.

Filiz Bikmen, Social Investment and Philanthropy Adviser (former Director of Programs and International Relations, Sabanci Foundation)

Filiz highlighted the legal and operational threats to civil society. On the legal side, there is an immediate threat to the right to assembly. A number of NGOs involved in protests have been subjected to random audits, and the parliament has proposed stricter fundraising laws. On an operational level, many NGOs have seen their relationships with schools and communities severed. NGOs working with foreign partners have faced heightened scrutiny of their activities.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have begun to self-censor in response to government scrutiny of their work. A portion of the public believes the government characterization of protests, which paints civil society in a negative light.

Filiz noted similar anti-foreign rhetoric to that in Egypt, where the government has blamed foreign funders for instigating public movements. Barbara agreed that governments (including Islamists and secular) find it easy to blame their problems on the outside world rather than acknowledging legitimate public concerns.

Filiz noted that increased scrutiny has hindered civil society’s work but noted that civil society has remained strong and perseverant. The movement towards democratization has democratized philanthropy as well: domestic funding, crowd-sourcing and community support are ways forward. Funders can also continue to support models for participatory democracy and issue-based campaigns and communications to develop an informed voter base and ensure inclusion.

Barbara expanded on these suggestions as they relate to informal coalitions emerging in Egypt. She pointed to several opportunities for funders, including building advocacy, lobbying, and communications skills. Funders can support these avenues of civic communication as an alternative to direct political engagement.

Question-and-Answer Session

Filiz confirmed that foreign organizations are able to fund in Turkey, but recipients must explain how foreign funds will be used. Nurcan confirmed that the Strategic Fund for Turkey has not had trouble getting money to grantees.

In response to a question about supporting LGBT groups, Nurcan said that funding is easier given the law allowing such groups to organize in Turkey. She noted that LGBT groups attended recent protests, but neither they nor other NGOs organized them: they grew from the people on the ground. Barbara mentioned the difficulty of funding LGBT groups in Egypt, but looked to groups engaged in related fields, such as sexual and reproductive rights, as possible points of entry.

A participant raised a question about the NGO registration law in Egypt, asking how Egyptian NGOs will respond to increased restrictions. Barbara noted that registration requirements were eased in the most recent draft of the law, but restrictions on international organizations were increased. Barbara is optimistic for Egyptian NGOs to push forward with this law.

Another question looked at the difficulties of funding family planning in Egypt. Barbara explained that the Muslim Brotherhood government had stopped funding family planning services, an approach which raised major concerns within Egypt. Barbara expects a stark reversal under the new, secular government.

A participant asked for recommendations for supporting transitional justice in Egypt. Barbara noted that the both sides characterize the other as lacking basic humanity, and transitional justice provides an opportunity to move past such characterizations. Universities, public figures, and op-ed writers could be good partners for developing ways forward.

Resources for the transitional justice movement include:

- International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), which is looking for local leadership
- Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights
- Ibn Khaldoun Center, which has a project on transitional justice
- El Nadim Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
- Women in Memory Forum
- Khaled Fahmy, history professor at the American University in Cairo, has begun developing an memorialization archive.
- No Peace without Justice (an Italian NGO that has worked on transitional justice in North Africa)

One participant raised concerns about violations of women's rights, including violence and exclusion from political activities. Barbara explained that many of the attacks on women in public arenas were organized specifically and aren't representative of society's views at large. Though views differ on the appropriate role of women in politics, moderate parties agree on many aspects of women's rights. Funders should look to build on these shared views.

Nurcan noted that over half the protesters in Turkey were women and that feminist groups were strong presences. Filiz highlighted positive steps by the Turkish government towards creating a gender-equitable society, but noted conflicting, conservative messages.

To listen to the full telebriefing:

Visit [IHREFG's website](#) and enter the password: "humanrights"

Background Resources:

- Judy Barsalou and Barry Knight: [Delayed or Denied: Egyptian Expectations About Justice in Post-Mubarak Egypt](#) (Draft)

- R. Kent Weaver and Judy Barsalou: [Barriers to Democratization: A Behavioural Perspective](#) (Draft)
- The [Third Sector Foundation of Turkey](#) provides information about Civil Society Law Reform in Turkey and the state of Turkish civil society more generally